

# Ethnic Tension Among Students and the Role of Leaders in Ethiopian Public Universities: Experiences and Reflections

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## Summary

Ethnic tension in this paper is used to discuss about the disagreements, the hatred, the conflicts, the distrusts, the fears and tensions which are there among University students who are gathered together for education purpose from different ethnic groups/nations and nationalities during their academic life. The practices are undertaken in Ethiopian Public Universities. Having about a nine-year experience of staying within different universities as a student and mostly as a university Instructor, I have experienced different challenges and practices during this long time stay in Universities regarding these ethnic based tensions, hatred and conflicts. Generally, from personal experiences and observations these tensions are caused by historical, political, economic, social, cultural, environmental and institutional related problems. Some among the many outputs of these tensions/conflicts are like loss of life, destruction of resources, disturbance of educational programmes and practices. It is believed that Human Resource managers have a lion share in stabilizing and preventing these devastating issues that deteriorates the generations' national integrity, unity, love and affection. It is also assumed that it is up to the parents, teachers, managers and government who are supposed to develop good citizen, tolerance and mutual understanding, free and fair thinking and democratic culture among these students. Beside to this the Human resource managers are the frontier in educational institutions is solving these problems and producing standard manpower for companies and for the nation in addition to their business strategies.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Tension, Ethnic Conflict, Organizational Leaders, Experiences and reflections

## Introduction

Ethnic tension is a term referring to tension between different ethnic groups. It is a tension between two or more groups of population classified according to their identity/origin, culture, language and geographical locations. Many scholars defined ethnic tensions in terms of inequalities in economic and educational achievement and opportunity and access to political influence and other positions of leadership. Ethnic tension refers to conflicts of interest among various ethnic groups within a society. By tension we mean different scale between enmity and hatred (lead to racism). According to Wikipedia encyclopedia, (accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> Of February, 2015), Ethnic hatred, inter-ethnic hatred, racial hatred, or ethnic tension refers to feelings and acts of prejudice and hostility towards an ethnic group in various degrees. This can be caused by many different social inequalities, ranging from a lack of wealth to intentional hatred and some time because of historical pragmatisms.

Most literature depicts that there are multiple origins for ethnic tension and resulting ethnic conflicts. In some societies it is rooted in tribalism, while in others it originates from a history of non-peaceful co-existence and the resulting actual disputed issues. Moreover, often ethnic conflict is enhanced by nationalism and feeling of national superiority. For which reason inter-ethnic hatred borders with racism and often the two terms are conflated. On the opposite side, ethnic conflict may stem from the feeling of real or perceived discrimination by another ethnic group. In fact, ethnic hatred has often been exploited and even fueled by some political leaders to serve their agenda of seeking to consolidate the nation or gain electorate by calling for a united struggle against a common enemy (real or imaginary). In many countries incitement to ethnic or racial hatred is a criminal offense. If left untreated it may start an ethnic war and lead to segregation or discrimination if one of the group in the minority.

Scholars are arguing that now days nation of the world are facing ethnic tensions caused by various factors. One among many is that there has been an increase in intensity of ethnic conflict that nearly half the countries of the world have been troubled by some degree of ethnically inspired dissonance. Basically, the word ethnicity is however only of recent origin. According to some scholars, it was initially used to denote a minority group but now used to describe several wide-ranging affiliations, race, language, religion, kinship, sect, caste etc. The recent increase of use of the word ethnicity and the expansion of affiliations encompassed by the term "ethnic group" has come along with a rapid rise in ethnic tensions. These developments necessitate a nuanced understanding of whether the contemporary conditions have fostered a rise in ethnic tensions or the term itself has been used to explain various tensions as ethnic tensions.

Similarly, Ethiopia societies were extremely suffering from these ethnic conflicts/tensions in general and students' in public university in particular. The cause and factors for these Ethnic tensions among students were varies at time and place/universities/. Many consequences have been followed including loss of life and resource damage. For this matter, this paper analyze the experiences of ethnic tension among the university students and

theoretical debates related to inter-ethnic clash with in the university. It also intends to show some causes, consequences and roles of human resource managers in minimizing the tensions/ conflicts. Specifically, the objective of this paper is to analysis why tensions among students before and in the recent times often take on an ethnic dimension. It seeks to pinpoint what causes ethnic tensions and the succeeding damages.

### **Theoretical Concepts of Ethnic Tension**

Ethnic tension is one of the internationally recognized major social conflicts. To properly address this problem and contribute to its solution, there must be a clear understanding of the concepts and theories that deal with ethnic tensions which leads to conflict and the issues associated with it. The main debates revolve around concepts such as causes of ethnic tension/ ethnic conflict and theoretical issues including consequences and resolutions of inter-ethnic clash, particularly violent conflict. The causes of ethnic conflict are debated by political scientists and sociologists who generally fall into one of three schools of thought: primordialist, instrumentalist, and constructivist. The concepts of these approaches are discussed below.

Proponents of primordialist approach of ethnic conflict argue that ethnic groups and nationalities exist because there are traditions of belief and action towards primordial objects such as biological features and especially territorial location. The approach relies on a concept of kinship between members of an ethnic group. Donald L., 1985 argues that this kinship makes it possible for ethnic groups to think in terms of family resemblances. There are a number of political scientists who refer to the concept of ethnic wars as a myth because they argue that the root causes of ethnic conflict do not involve ethnicity but rather institutional, political, and economic factors. These political scientists argue that the concept of ethnic war is misleading because it leads to an essentialist conclusion that certain groups are doomed to fight each other when in fact the wars between them are the result of political decisions. Opposing groups may substitute ethnicity for the underlying factors to simplify identification of friend and enemy. This implies that societal difference in terms of whether it be kinship, political and economic by itself could lead to ethnic tension because of in this difference many variables exist.

The second school of thought is instrumental approach. According to Anthony Smith, 2001, this approach came to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, in the debate about white ethnic persistence in what was supposed to have been an effective melting pot. This new approach sought to explain such persistence as the result of the actions of community leaders, who used their cultural groups as sites of mass mobilization and as constituencies in their competition for power and resources, because they found them more effective than social classes. In this approach of ethnic identification, ethnicity and race are viewed as instrumental identities, organized as means to particular ends. Moreover, the scholars of this school do generally not oppose neither that ethnic difference is a part of many conflicts nor that a lot of belligerent human beings believe that they are fighting over such difference. Instrumentalists simply claim that ethnic difference is not sufficient to explain conflicts. By implication this approach state that beyond the ethnic differences there are many more factors leading to conflict and used for explaining conflict. Most of the front people use this ethnicity as an instrument approach to achieve their mass support and ultimate goals.

The Swiss scientist and philosopher Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a pioneer in studying cognitive development in children and articulated mechanisms by which knowledge is internalized by learners. He suggested that through processes of accommodation and assimilation, individuals construct new knowledge from their experiences. When individuals assimilate, they incorporate the new experience into an already existing framework without changing that framework. This may occur when individuals' experiences are aligned with their internal representations of the world, but may also occur as a failure to change a faulty understanding; for example, they may not notice events, may misunderstand input from others, or may decide that an event is a fluke and is therefore unimportant as information about the world.

According to Jean Piaget (1896-1980), when individuals' experiences contradict their internal representations, they may change their perceptions of the experiences to fit their internal representations. According to the theory, accommodation is the process of reframing one's mental representation of the external world to fit new experiences. Accommodation can be understood as the mechanism by which failure leads to learning. When we act on the expectation that the world operates in one way and it violates our expectations, we often fail, but by accommodating this new experience and reframing our model of the way the world works, we learn from the experience of failure, or others' failure. In line with this the approach stresses that the importance of the socially constructed nature of ethnic groups and humans generate knowledge and meaning from an interaction between their experiences and their ideas. Proponents of this approach point to Rwanda as an example since the Tutsi/Hutu distinction was codified by the Belgian colonial power in the 1930s on the basis of cattle ownership, physical measurements and church records. Identity cards were issued on this basis, and these documents played a key role in the genocide of 1994.

Globally, scholars describe that, although the study of ethnic conflict has a long history, genuine interest in ethnic conflict beyond the comparative political science subfield dates from the collapse of the Soviet Union and

Yugoslavia, both of which were followed by ethnic conflicts that escalated to violence and civil war. The end of the Cold War thus sparked interest in two important questions about ethnic conflict: was ethnic conflict on the rise; and given that some ethnic conflicts had escalated into serious violence, what if anything could scholars of large-scale violence (security studies, strategic studies, interstate politics) offer by way of explanation. Literatures deals that the post-cold War period has witnessed a number of ethnically informed secessionist movements, predominantly within the former communist states. Conflicts have involved secessionist movements in the former Yugoslavia, Transnistria in Moldova, Armenians in Azerbaijan, Abkhaz and Ossetians in Georgia.

However, some theorists contend that this does not represent a rise in the incidence of ethnic conflict, since many of the proxy wars fought during the Cold War were in fact ethnic conflicts masked as hot spots of the Cold War. Research shows that the fall of Communism and the increase in the number of capitalist states were accompanied by a decline in total warfare, interstate wars, ethnic wars, revolutionary wars, and the number of refugees and displaced persons. Indeed, some scholars have questioned whether the concept of ethnic conflict is useful at all.

On the question of whether scholars deeply invested in theories of interstate violence could adapt their theories to explain or predict large-scale ethnic violence, a key issue proved to be whether ethnic groups could be considered "rational" actors. Prior to the end of the Cold War, the consensus among students of large-scale violence was that ethnic groups should be considered irrational actors, or semi-rational at best. If true, general explanations of ethnic violence would be impossible. In the years since, however, scholarly consensus has shifted to consider that ethnic groups may in fact be counted as rational actors, and the puzzle of their apparently irrational actions (for example, fighting over territory of little or no intrinsic worth) must therefore be explained some other way. As a result, the possibility of a general explanation of ethnic violence has grown, and collaboration between comparativist and international relations subfields has resulted in increasingly useful theories of ethnic conflict.

### **Ethnic Conflict Regulation**

A number of scholars have attempted to synthesize the methods available for the resolution, management or transformation their ethnic conflict. John Coakley, 1992 for example, has developed a typology of the methods of conflict resolution that have been employed by states, which he lists as: indigenization, accommodation, assimilation, acculturation, population transfer, boundary alteration, genocide and ethnic suicide. John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, 1993 have developed taxonomy of eight macro-political ethnic conflict regulation methods, which they note are often employed by states in combination with each other. They include a number of methods that they note is clearly morally unacceptable.

### **Ethnic Tension and the Situation of University Students in Ethiopia**

Normally, federal system of government can be used by many countries with various features depending on different socio-economic, historical, political, cultural as well as religious contexts. Regardless of this fact Ethiopia is one among the many countries governed by federal system. In this case, the states were delimited on the basis of settlement pattern, language, identity and consent of the people concerned. General speaking mostly ethnicity became the most criterions for federal structure since 1991. For this matter, a greater focus on ethnicity was needed to fulfill hopes of people who fought against the previous regime and answered many of their questions. However, according to Asnake Kefeale, 2013 one of the significant problems of today's Ethiopian federal system of government is actually lack of genuine decentralization which is usually associated with federalism. Asnake stated that in Ethiopia what rather exists is centralized form of federal rule where policy decisions come from the centre and the sub-units are responsible for its implementation. In other words, there is a visible dependency of regions on the center where an absolute power of ruling Ethiopian is possessed (or monopolized) by Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

Further, as to the author, various regions of the country witness and experience many levels of local and regional conflicts (even with international dimension). Federal composition of the country in its current shape and ethnic identity being the number one principle of this version of federalism also generate or at least transform various local, regional or trans-border conflicts along identity lines. According to Asnake, the most significant examples is the Silte-Gurage identity dispute. In addition to these identity conflicts the author distinguishes between intra-federal boundary conflicts, intra-regional conflicts in multi-ethnic regions and conflicts between titular and non-titular groups which were happening in Benishangul Gumuz and Somali regional states.

According to the author, a significant level of inter-state conflicts which mostly derive from the fact that the boundaries are ill-defined and do not respect local realities. In the case of the Somali regional state, major conflict obviously take place along with Oromia and Afar borders having historical roots going back to the Imperial times. One of those most visible places of conflict lies in the town of Moyale, on Ethio-Kenyan borders where both Oromia and Somali regional states' claims are evident since the early 1990s. The dispute has brought

severe challenges to Oromo and Somali groups with dual identities as ethnic identity at this place has become an instrument of inclusion and exclusion.

When we back to the case of ethnic conflict among University students according to Tesfaye Kebede , 2009, historically Ethiopian higher education institutions have been the main source of leaders for both the ruling and opposition parties. Since early 1960s, the time when most of the current party leaders were higher education students, Ethiopian higher education has been the breeding ground for the would be leaders of the country. In those days, it is in university campuses that the most contentious issues of the time like *meret le arashu* and *equality of nations and nationalities* came to the forefront. At this time their agenda were not limited to ethnic identity rather it was mainly national agenda. But since installation of this federal government structure which answered basic questions of different nation nationalities of the country, another head ache is followed. That is ethnic based conflicts and tension in almost all universities.

These days it has become common news to hear that a student of one ethnic group being attacked by the other. It is hard to find a university which finishes its academic year without such horrendous incidences and interruption special. When critically observed sometimes not always university students demonstrate the carbon copy of the societies practices. If there is conflict/tension between two or more than two ethnic groups within the society, the same thing also happens among the students in the university from same ethnic group societies. For more than fifteen years these practices were there in the universities. Their expansions were mainly starts from the most senior university and disseminated to the newly established university. For instance, the development of this ethnic conflict among university students is similarly expands with the expansion of universities in the count.

Especially since 1991, ethnic conflict/tension among university students was expanding from First Generation University to second and third generation year to year or sometimes semester to semester. Though the ethnic conflict could not be the immediate cause for the tension of the students' the situation which was there between each ethnic group are basic causes. Therefore, it is possible to say that in almost all public university there are ethnic conflicts and ethnic tension among the students. It is due to almost all students coming from all corners of the country come to the university with some spoiled information that they may get from primary education /history/ or they come with local politics ideology.

Among the many features of these ethnic tensions, the intensity is high among first year students when compared with second, third and above batch students. This means the higher the level of batch the lower the possibility of ethnic conflict to happen within the university. Other typical feature of the conflict is once it happens in one university then the possibility to expand to the other universities is also high. Mostly a single cause for conflict could be a cause for all universities. The speed and the nature of the flow of the conflict are too fast and difficult for prevention. The immediate causes of such conflict vary from a simple personal disagreement between students who just happen to belong to different ethnic group that would then be translated into a full-blown inter-ethnic conflict to the ones instigated by organized attacks of certain ethnic group. This scenario leads the university students to live in a suspicious situation throughout their academic life in the university. Even the way they organize themselves, cooperate, study and enjoy is according to their ethnic back ground. The reflection of this condition even comes in to the classroom level and they are clustered on the basis of their ethnic background in classroom setting.

According to Tesfaye K. 2009, the spillover effect of an outbreak of a conflict is so great that people living in nearby areas have in many occasions threatened to storm campuses in support of their ethnic groups. The surrounding people are on the verge of invading the outside students. Simply imagine yourself as a particular ethnic group student or, for that matter, any other student with similar story who happen to be studying in other ethnic group or somewhere else, but threatened to be attacked for the death of a student hundreds of miles away, which has nothing to do with this particular student. This implies even parents sometimes are knowingly or unknowingly they are part of the conflict. They support their students when the conflict arises rather than mediating them.

### **Causes of Ethnic Tension among the Students**

Promoting unfair historical events, inequalities, partiality, lack of good governance and resentment about variations of treatment could easily aggravate the situation of ethnic tension among students. It could also be raised because of competition among different ethnic groups over control of resources, particularly for rural people competition for grazing land, water points, and cultivable lands. With a similar fashion, when we look into the situation of our country Ethiopia, factors leading to ethnic tension are not much unique from other society. For instance, according to Sisay G., 2007 some of the factors boosting ethnic conflicts are: -

*Historically, all the imperials that means Emperor Menilik, (1844-1913), Haile Sillassie I (1930-1974) and the military regime (1974-1991) have been criticized for monopolizing state power and economic resources in technocratic form by few or one ethnic group and for excluding other ethnic groups access to state power. Later on Ethno-Centric Federalism and Ethno-Centric Politics in which since 1991 ethnic based regional boundaries and non-clarity resulted in the separation of ethnic groups from their traditional resource bases, political*

*monopolization of some group and competition for economic resources and asset building are the major factor creating ethnic tension.*

*In addition, according to the author the policies pursued by successive government in the country have tended not only to neglect the needs of certain social groups mainly pastoralists but also often to run directly counter to these marginalized social groups by using ethnicity for political mobilization which gives enough ground for new local elites to compete for power on the basis of ethnicity. The system also created dissatisfactions with in the country as a result of absence of public accountability, economic inequality and non-observance of the rule of law by government officials resulting grievances that eventually lead to conflict situations. Finally, lack of security (a psychological fear of political uncertainty), lack of social values, weakening and undermining of traditional system of conflict prevention and management, unchecked proliferation of small arms and light weapons and the deliberate arming of certain communities without due regard to the security of others are some important points indicated for ethnic tensions.*

For the past twenty years' university students also have an intension to question the above stated issues when they are joining to the university and engaging in ethnic conflict. The issues are the reflections of the societal realities and difference among students. These things agitate students of one ethnic group towards the other to be terrorized and develop sense of hatred. Having this concept in mind generally the major causes of these ethnic tensions are summarized as institutional, environmental, political, societal/parental and historical factors. There integration and relationship could be condensed according to the following diagrams.



**Fig. 1. Consequences of Ethnic tension/Conflict among the University Students**

Some of the commonly observed consequences of ethnic tensions among university students are as follows. These are mainly educational, societal, political and economic damages.



**Fig.2. Consequences of ethnic tensions in Higher Education Institutions**

**Summary of the Role of Organizational leaders in Ethnic Tension Remedies**

Basically in conflict some party is right and some is wrong. Different perceptions smash together to create disagreement. It is natural and it's up to the Organizational leaders to respond to conflicting situations quickly and professionally. Especially the inter and intra conflicts which happen among the workers, managers, trade unions and government within the organization are natural. Nevertheless, there are misperceptions and controversies among scholars in the field in treating this complex and politically sensitive issue. Human resource managers play a pivotal role in crystallizing this conflict. Conflict can be positively perceived by the organizational managers considering it openly; they can strengthen their work unit by correcting problems. It is one ways of collecting gaps and even feedbacks from the anger workers. Conflicting views give them a chance to learn more about themselves, explore views of others, and develop productive relationships. But group conflict like ethnic conflict which happens because of lack of neutrality and impartiality is neither positive nor productive. These are mainly caused by different tensions among the parts and destructive by its nature. If tensions exist in an institution among the students no doubt it also probably exists in the larger community too. Therefore, the key Organizational leaders' responsibility assumed here is to make HR role effective and constantly engaging in the prevention of activities and malpractices which are leading to ethnic tensions. In this regard there are mandatory activities to be taken care of in institutions that could be an integral part of HR Function and then answerable to variety of expectations that the institution has from Human Resource managers and the team that works as HR partners. Generally, the Organizational leaders have role in solving these tensions in the following major cases: -

Political system and practices of the country can have impact on the existence of ethnic tensions among university students. In fact, once ethnic tensions happened, it will not be eased and will not be reduced until the country's political and organizational leadership looks like fair for all. Things won't change until we establish leadership that looks more diverse. Human resource managers are supposed to work in partnership with government, especially at institutional level, promote democratic practices, the establishment of integrated education systems, appropriate rules and regulations and making it available for students. They are also expected to initiate conflict handling strategies and advocating for the students. Organizational leaders should also hold forums for educators, students, parents and community members and issue regular updates about the incident, describing what happened, why the incident was distractive and how the institutions have to responded. They should also seek input about ways the institution, students, parents and community can work together to resolve the underlying problems.

Another most important factor leading students to feel ethnic tension is economic inequalities. If there is unfair economy/ resource sharing among different ethnic groups and if this is agenda for the larger community, students could reflect these economic inequalities question when they join universities. If there is suspicion that this issue could create problems, it is up to the Organizational leaders and institution in collaboration should establish a dialogue Centre and Centre for tolerance to promote dialogue between conflicting parties and unity in diversity and reach on consensus. The Organizational leaders can also initiate conflict-sensitive development interventions, designed to improve peace and security. Reducing bias incident connoting racial lynching has its own impact for peace and tolerance among the students. It is due to bias incidents intend to demean or instill fear in those targeted and institutions must address them quickly, consistently and effectively. Educating people is possible to solve any kinds of problems including ethnic conflicts and tensions because these problems most of the time happens when there is misunderstanding of each other and the realities. Education by itself is a tool for reducing inequality and empowers people. Therefore, the Organizational leaders and institutions should focus on educating people; give reliable and fair information for the students. Together with this many scholars argued that investments in education at any level could make tremendous strides for racial integration if we targeted them right. Educating youth and children so as to enable them to recognize the societal value of peaceful coexistence and receive an education conducive to the realization of their material and social desires. HR Department can also organize training for students on crisis prevention and conflict management in order to systematically handle conflicts and address ethnic tensions before they reached the level of conflict and organize institution-wide events to help students cross the boundaries that may divide them and learn about respectful behavior. Teaching tolerance's Mix It Up program whether through structured dialogue programs or other social legal programs, like the association, and unions it is possible to discussed what divides these students and what can unite them.

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