

The Menelik Conquest from the Perspective of the Boorana

by Chikage OBA-SMIDT¹

Abstract

The Menelik Conquest of southern Ethiopia was a major historical event for almost all ethnic groups in Ethiopia. It caused social crisis and forced them to reconstruct their world views. There is much historical research which seeks to reconstruct how the conquest really happened in marginal regions. However, such research tends to ignore how the local people perceive this event and how they try to construct their own history in their own way. This paper discusses an example of a regional interpretation of “The Menelik Conquest” by analyzing oral traditions of the Oromo-Boorana.

Keywords: Menelik Conquest – southern Ethiopia – Oromo – Boorana – oral traditions

1. Introduction

In this paper, I would like to show an example of a regional interpretation of “The Menelik Conquest” by analyzing oral traditions in the case of the Oromo-Boorana. The Menelik Conquest was a major historical event for almost all ethnic groups in Ethiopia. It caused social crisis and forced them to reconstruct their world views. There is much historical research which seeks to reconstruct how the conquest really happened in marginal regions (ex. James et al. 1986; Miyawaki 2006). However, such research tends to ignore how the local people perceive this event and how they try to construct their own history in their own way.

Traditionally, historians tend to use oral traditions mainly as a sort of historical record for the reconstruction of the past of societies whose history cannot be reconstructed through documentary evidences. In the 1960s, Hudson defined history reconstructed “by outsiders” as “ethno-history”. On the other hand, he called historical accounts remembered by local people “folk-history”. He suggested that historians should focus more on folk-history,

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which is the way history is created and preserved by local people themselves (Hudson 1966). Critically it could perhaps be remarked that despite our focus on and perception of folk-history, nonetheless the way we deal with a particular history still follows an outsider's point of view, i.e. the Western tradition of reconstructing an objective history, different from the more dynamic and fluid traditions in many non-Western societies.

Rosaldo also pointed out that we should treat oral tradition mainly as a cultural record, showing the perception of the past from a local perspective (Rosaldo 1980). Rosaldo argued that history represents the past from a present viewpoint which is confined by cultural world views. We can learn about people's world views, ways of thinking, and perceptions of their history through the analysis of oral traditions.

Following this perspective, I would like to use oral traditions not to reconstruct history but to understand the cultural interpretation of historical events from the viewpoint of the Boorana. In this paper, I wish to focus on the local perspective, how the Boorana have interpreted, narrated and integrated the Menelik conquest into their history.

2. The Menelik conquest

2.1. The Menelik conquest and the *raaga*

The Boorana are agro-pastoralists who live in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. They speak one of the dialects of the Oromo language. Although they belong to the Oromo ethnic groups, they identify themselves specifically as Boorana, not as Oromo.

According to oral traditions of Boorana which I collected, the Boorana emigrated in the mid-17th century from the Baale region to the land which they inhabit now. They had been a totally independent society based on a clan-system and a generation-grade system, until the Menelik conquest took place.

Their generation-grade system is called *gadaa* (ex. Asmarom 1973; Schlee 1989; Tagawa 2000; Baxter 2005). The *gadaa* is the political institution which makes consensus of the Boorana beyond clan level. This institution has also helped to maintain the Boorana identity and common historical memories among the Boorana.

The Boorana have oral chronicles based on *gadaa*. The Boorana chose their leader from 6th generation-grade called *gadaa* generation-set group. The leader is called *abbaa gadaa*. *Abbaa gadaa* is chosen for 8 years at a time. He bears the main responsibilities for politics and religious ceremonies of the Boorana society during these 8 years. The Boorana refer to each 8-year period by the name of the respective *abbaa gadaa*. Until now, there have been 70 *abbaa gadaa*. The Boorana have memorized the genealogy of *abbaa gadaa* (see Annex). Thus, when the Boorana narrate oral histories, they refer to a specific time by the *abbaa gadaa*'s name. According to the Boorana oral chronicles, the 'Menelik

conquest' took place during the period of the 55th *abbaa gadaa*, Liiban Jaldeessa (c. 1888-1896).

The so-called 'Menelik conquest' was indeed carried out by Menelik II, who was emperor of Ethiopia from 1889 until 1913. In the latter half of the 19th century, there were many kingdoms in the area of today's Ethiopia. Among those kingdoms, the Ethiopian Empire, which was dominated by Amhara and Tigray people, stretched from the Northern to the Central Highlands. Within the Empire, there were local governors, princes and sometimes kings under the emperor, ruling in Tigray, Begémdir, Gojjam, Wollo, and Shewa. Among those kings, Menelik II of Shewa, already before becoming emperor himself, had formed especially strong connections with European and Arab traders, and acquired significant amounts of weaponry by trading with them. Since the 1860's, Menelik II gradually conquered the Southern and Eastern peoples, kingdoms and sultanates to get land for his feudal followers, and continued after he became emperor in 1889. The Boorana territory was finally conquered in 1897.

When I asked informants about the conquest, some of them suggested that the Menelik conquest had been foreseen by the *raaga* (prophets)². One can assume that the *raaga* have historically had great power over and influence on the Boorana society. Indeed, there are many poetic prophecies of *raaga* and oral histories regarding the *raaga*. The Boorana have narrated how the *raaga* dealt with historical events, such as issues in Boorana politics, ecological disasters, or conflicts with the Boorana's neighboring ethnic groups, including the Arsi, Gujji, Gabra, Garri, and Somali (see Annex).

It is said that the *raaga* looked beyond historical events, criticized society, advised people to organize ceremonies, and engaged in discourse in order to overcome social problems. Their stories and discourses continue to be told by people while being reinterpreted under present contexts (Oba-Smidt 2012).

In this paper, I wish to show which of the *raaga*'s stories exist on the Menelik conquest.

2.2. The prophecies of Areero Boosaroo and Boruu Jiloo Walee

I have documented five stories of the *raaga* on the Menelik conquest. Here I will describe one of them. This text is about the night before the conquest.

² We may translate *raaga* as prophet. Marco Bassi and Boku Tache have indeed translated *raaga* in this way. But I do not use the term in this article. The term "prophet" is implicitly related with the Christian-Jewish-Muslim tradition. Of course, we can find similarity between *raaga* and prophets. For example, through revelations from *waqa* or God, *raaga* and prophets in ancient Israel warned people not to disobey their customs. However, it is good to use local terms for understanding phenomena within the local context.

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Areero Boosaroo gaafa Abamaarti dhuftu. Ado isiin bin dhufni nyaaphatti dhuftu, dibbee kurikuruutti liiban goromti harree qalaa, yoo isan goromti harree sun qaltan sidaanitti bin dhuftuu, lafa tana ni banqatti jedbe, duratti hime, irratti dhaarefatan, himan akkana hima, didan akkan badanii jedhe taa'e, yoo taani sidaanitti dhuftu guyya kan fardaan qaqqabatan lalu dhafan, isiin goromti harree taan qa'uuttii jirti, jaralee raagi warra la hime, amaan tan deebitan bin dabsatan beena jedhe lakkeise innilee achuman lafa tana qabate taa'u jalqabde.

Areero Boosaroo had already foretold that an enemy would come, before their actual coming and that the Boorana should sacrifice a female donkey at Dibbee Kurikuruu in Liiban region³. He said that if we do so, the enemy would not come. But the Boorana did not believe him. He told the Boorana that if the Boorana rejected his suggestion, the Boorana would disappear. The Amhara came. The Boorana went to the Amhara on horse to see a situation. The Boorana saw that the Amhara sacrificed a female donkey. The *raaga* in the Amhara had also ordered the Amhara to do so. Areero Boosaroo had said that if the Amhara would so, then the Boorana could not win over the Amhara. Then the Amhara invaded the land of Boorana and conquered the Boorana. (Narration by Dhenge Gayyoo, translated by Chikage Oba-Smidt).

Areero Boosaroo is one of the famous *raaga* who lived in the 19th to early 20th century. It is said that he died between 1904 and 1912 and was buried in Diida Baallii. Marco Bassi and Boku Tache reported his prophetic poem⁴. In another

³ In this story, it is an interesting point that Areero Boosaroo advised the Boorana to sacrifice a female donkey to overcome the Amhara aggressors. Elsewhere, however, we cannot observe the sacrifice of a female donkey in the Boorana and the Amhara society. It is a strange and unusual practice for them, at least at present. How can we therefore understand this strange oral tradition? I suggest 3 approaches for explanation. One is the pure imagination of what Amhara custom could look like from a Boorana perspective. Thus, when it is said that an Amhara prophet ordered the sacrifice of a female donkey, this would appear as a strange custom for the Boorana. This is perhaps rooted in the Boorana imagination of the Amhara as a mysterious enemy. Indeed the story of sacrificing a donkey could express this idea. The second possibility is that the Boorana really witnessed that the Amhara did something with a donkey during the conquest. Some Boorana then would have tried to interpret this activity in order to understand it. The explanation was then transmitted among the people and then became the basis for the oral tradition. The third possibility is that a ritual related with an unusual donkey sacrifice was connected with the interpretation of the present event and then re-used to construct the story. In fact, when people want to get over a crisis, they carry out unusual activities, in order to encounter something unusual or impossible with something else, which is also unusual or impossible. The ceremony of sacrificing livestock in an unusual way is a good example. The more unusual the activity is, the more possible it is to overcome a big problem. This logic would be connected to a mythical old oral tradition.

⁴ See the article of Bassi, Marco, Boku Tache, 'The Oromo Eschatology: The prophecy of Areeroo Boosaroo narrated by Borbor Bulee and Guyyoo Danbii', *Journal of Oromo Studies*, vol. 13 (1 and 2), 2005.

story, a *raaga*, Boru Jiloo Wale also foresaw the coming of an enemy stronger than the Boorana, two days before the conquest. Boru Jiloo Ware told his premonition to members of *ya'a* village (*olla-ya'a*) which is a center of the Boorana politics. But people did not believe him except for one old man. Boru Jiloo Wale used a magic spell to help the old man. Then the empire attacked and destroyed the *ya'a* village. The old man and his family who had believed the *raaga* survived.

Both stories of Areero Boosaroo and Boru Jiloo Wale have similar plot and consequence. Both of them imply that if the Boorana had believed their prophecies, they would not have been conquered by the Empire. Here, I would argue that the narrators constructed the Boorana's historical memory by integrating the conquest into the stories of the *raaga*. We can observe the construction of historical memory by the establishment of a relation to the prophecies of the *raaga*.

2.3. The prophecies of Waariyoo Uudate and Boru Jiloo Wale

According to the narrators, these prophecies, which I described above, were foretold just before the coming of an army of the Empire. The next prophecy which I will show dates back to the 1880's.

Axe minilke duratti, Boorani huqqatte cite dhiphate, Gurrachaa fi Amsa dargee walitti aana, gaafa kan duuba dhiphatle, Boorana kora jedhani, Elddallotti koran jedha Abba (Huqqa Abitanoo), raaga 8 guura jedhani, raagi 8 cufiti dhufe jedha, gaafasi raasatti lafa jira kuno Boorani huqqatte, dhiphate, waan Boorana dubbadha jedhani, jedha raga kaaniin, raagi 7, bullee 8 dhiqaatatti qala jedbe, jedbe bullee hoora 8, bullee looni 8, dhiqaatti qala jedbe, jedbe, dhiqaatuma soodda kana beetama, dhiqadhaa, koraayyu gala, kombola gala, tullu namaduri galaa, karaa kaarra qiiqicha, ka dbeeka bofa gaafa, karaa kana galaa, hayyu marmare, booku dadutti dhaaba jireenyaa jiru malee omma hin haamne jedhanii, nagee jedhanii. Raagi kun 8 waariyo uudati ofuma ciisa, kaan walii gale jedha, bulee 8 galaa walii gale amma isiitti akkana, akkana jedbe, jbedhe wario uudati yoo taate jbedhe, . . . Jari jireenya fagee jiru fage, wagga tanaan 4 qeenca loon cofa hin dhabne, farbaafi harree hin nyaane, beeta waariyo uudati, cinaa tittee gurracha hima durana jira, qara hin dhufne. Waagga suniin 7 jari buuda gurracha dhufee lafaan waliin hin boojine, jari jireenna fagee, jiru fagee tana argee jedbe jedbe. Beeta Amsa Daargee hima . . .

Before the time of Menelik and the appearance of a great number of black flies (*cinaa tiitte gurraacha*), many Boorana suffered and died. The Boorana opened meeting in Eldallo. According to Huqqa Abitaano, people called 8 *raaga* to this meeting. The *raaga* existed at this time. The Boorana asked the *raaga* how to solve their problems. 7 *raaga* asked the Boorana to sacrifice 8 gray cattle (*bulee*) and 8 gray sheep in Dhiqaata, to purify

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ourselves in this place and to emigrate to Koraayyu, Kombola, Tullu-nama-duri, Kaarra-qiiqicha, and Dheeka-bofa-gaafa. They said that if we would do so, the trouble of the Boorana would disappear and peace would come to Boorana. Only Waariyoo Uudate was silent. Other *raaga* said the same thing. . . . Waariyoo Uudate said “Is it true?” He said that although 7 *raaga* foresaw peace for the Boorana in the future, he foresaw that almost all livestock of Boorana would die 4 years later; people would have to eat horse and donkey. Then Black Horn (*buuda gurraacha*) would come and conquer Boorana 7 years later. (Narrated by Duuba Kaarruu, translated by Chikage Oba-Smidt).

This text is about the *raaga* Waariyoo Uudate. He lived in the latter half of the 19th century. His lineage continues until now. But it is said that his descendants do not have prophetic abilities. His story is long, divided into three episodes, and covers a timespan from the 1880`s to the 1910`s. Here, I reviewed its first episode. The second and third episodes are a dialogue between Waariyoo Uudate and Abitano Guyyoo. After the events foreseen by Waariyoo Uudate happened, one of the knowledgeable Boorana, Abitaano Guyyoo believed that Waariyoo Uudate was a genuine *raaga* and went to ask Waariyoo Uudate about his and Boorana`s future.

The great number of black flies (*cinaa tittee gurraacha*) at the beginning of the text refers to the big famine caused by tsetse flies and smallpox from 1888 to 1892. It is narrated that the Boorana opened a big meeting before the famine and asked the *raaga* about the future of Boorana. Waariyoo Uudate foresaw the great famine⁵ and the Menelik conquest in this story.

There is another story which has similar plot of the above story. One of grandsons of Boru Jiloo Wale narrated Boru Jiloo Wale foresaw the arrival of the Empire at the period of *abbaa gadaa* Diida Bitata (c. 1874 – c. 1882). But people did not believe his prophecy as same as people did not believe prophecy of Waariyoo Uudate.

Through such stories, we can observe how people compose their history not only about what happened after the conquest but also what happened before it. This is similar to historians who try to write history by naming the causes of events, which predate them. However, the Boorana have no memory of contacts with the Ethiopian Empire before the conquest, and therefore cannot relate to, or make sense of what happened to them during the event of being conquered by the Ethiopian Empire. I suggest that the period of the big famine and the conquest were so shocking to the Boorana that they created a historical memory based on reinterpretations of stories of the *raaga*. By

⁵ It is narrated that a prophet of Nuer also foretold about the spreading tsetse flies and smallpox from Ethiopia at the same period (Johnson 1994).

connecting the *raaga's* stories with the Menelik conquest, the Boorana people today can accept these events as part of their destined history.

2.4. From *xiloo waraaba* to the Menelik conquest

The last *raaga* story is about Ali Bode. It deals with a major political conflict within the Boorana during the time of *abbaa gadaa* Diida Bitataa, from 1872 to 1880 (see Annex). The Boorana call this conflict *xiloo waraaba*⁶, in which the Boorana killed each other during a big meeting.

The conflict was initially sparked by a preceding conflict between *qaalluu* Odituu and *qaalluu* Karayyuu. The *qaalluu* are religious leaders of the Boorana. They belong to the Odituu clan in the Goona group and to the Karayyuu clan in the Sabbo group. So great was their political influence at the time that a conflict between them spread among all the Boorana.

In this story, the members of the Karayyuu clan asked a *raaga*, Alii Boddee how they could win against the members of the Odituu clan. But Alii Boddee did not inform them how they could win. Instead, he warned them about bad fortunes which the conflict would cause.

yoo isanii kenne hin baddani, lakkisa, irгаа diimessati isani baafata, nyaaphati kuyiisaa kessa isaniti baafata, kuyyisi manaa biyye, lakkisaa, maanyaa muruqoti isatti baafatte namii durii lafanaa hin jirre, aabayi isantti meexame eerereen isantti cite, aaddan tessan taa durii cufti baddi, lakkisaa jedhe, Alii Boddee. Lakkisii nuu kenni, deemi kateebuu galaanatti nagii, fiincaan kateebuu galaana jalaa hin hamne, malti itti dhubee baraa cinna kaa inni sun keessa jiran Sidaamti miniliki Amsaadaaarge itti eergani, achiin aadaa isaa taan cufaa gadii dhisisanii, aadaa Boorana cufaa ballehani. Oromoo Booranaa malee kaan cufaa aadaa isaa gadi dhisisan.

Alii Boddee said, “If I tell you how to win over the Odituu clan, the Boorana will nonetheless disappear. So stop it. Another ethnic group will live in the Boorana land. An enemy who lives in soil-houses will come. *Maanyyaa muruqo* (lack of social relationship) will come. *Eerereen* (crisis) will follow like floods of the Abbay River. *Aadaa Boorana* (customs of the Boorana) will disappear. So stop it.” But people never gave up. So Alii Boddee said “Go and put *Kateebuu* (100 calves) into a river.”

What happened later? The crisis came. Menelik sent Amsa Darge (It seems Asfaw Daarge who was a commander) to the Boorana. All *aadaa Borana* broke down after the conquest. *Aadaa Boorana* started to disappear. (Narrated by Gurraacha Godaanaa, translated by Chikage Oba-Smidt).

⁶ The narrator insisted on the tradition that *xiloo waraaba* itself was an unavoidable destiny. He suggested that this event relates to *maqa-baasa*, which is another important historical concept of Boorana society. The Boorana believe that an event happens according to an inevitable cycle (Asmarom 1973; Gemetchu and Aneesa 2005; Oba-Smidt 2011).

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The narrator who told this story interpreted the conflict as portending the coming of the Conquest. It was because people did not heed the advice of the *raaga* and made use of strong magic that the Menelik conquest happened. Indeed, such an interpretation of the conquest was incorporated into and forms part of the Boorana's view of history.

3. Conclusion

I chose oral traditions about the *raaga* and their prophecies as examples for regional interpretations of the Menelik conquest. The stories of the *raaga* have become a basis for constructing the Boorana's historical memory. In the cases which I showed, the narrators connected a great historical event to a prophecy of the *raaga* in order to explain the conquest. I suggest that the *raaga*'s stories are one of the ways for constructing the Boorana's history. When the Boorana construct their history, they explain the cause of the conquest by reinterpreting prophecies of the *raaga* and by putting together different elements of different prophecies.

The Ethiopian Empire was a completely unexpected enemy and brought a major crisis and catastrophe to the Boorana. The Boorana therefore needed to refer to their own historical context to understand these events. Of course, as they did not have any context of their own for this trouble, they created a historically contextualized logic for themselves on the basis of their oral traditions. As I showed, they perceive history as a realization of prophecies and thus explain accidental events as being directly connected with their socio-political life. In this sense, the *raaga* stories are an important factor in the historical re-interpretation of the conquest from the Boorana's perspective.

Annex: Raaga stories related with historical events

The Genealogy of Abbaa-Gadaa	Oral Chronicle	Raaga stories related with events
1, c.1456–1464	Gadayoo Galgaloo	
2, c.1464–1472	Yaayyaa Fulleellee	
3, c.1472–1480	Jaarsoo Babboo	
4, c.1480–1488	Daawwaa Borbor	
5, c.1488–1496	Diida Nama Duri	
6, c.1496–1504	Areeroo Boruu	
7, c.1504–1512	Tittilee Dullachaa	Beginning of marriage system
8, c.1512–1520	Lukkuu Jaarsoo	
9, c.1520–1528	Daadoo Hidoo	
10, c.1528–1536	Kuraa Dhaalaa	
11, c.1536–1544	Dagalee Yaayyaa	
12, c.1544–1552	Osoosoo Tiittilee	Conflict
13, c.1552–1560	Booroo Lukkuu	raaga and conflict
14, c.1560–1568	Abbayi Horoo	
15, c.1568–1576	Biduu Dhoqqee	The heavy rain
16, c.1576–1584	Haroo Daddachaa	raaga and rain
17, c.1584–1592	Yaayyaa Hoolee	
18, c.1592–1600	Dooyyoo Booroo	Beginning of conflict among the Oromo
19, c.1600–1608	Bachoo Nadhoo	
20, c.1608–1616	Urgumeessa Higguu	
21, c.1616–1624	Baabboo Horoo	
22, c.1624–1632	Baabboo Sibuu	
23, c.1632–1640	Hindhalee Dooyyoo	
24, c.1640–1648	Acuu Abbiyyuu	
25, c.1648–1656	Abbuu Lakkuu	Conflict with the Gabra and Beginning of the buxe ceremony
26, c.1656–1664	Abbayi Baabboo	Migration from Baale
27, c.1664–1672	Haallee Kuraa	Conflict
28, c.1672–1680	Waayyuu Uruu	raaga and migration
29, c.1680–1688	Morowwa Abbayi	raaga and conflict
30, c.1688–1696	Gobbaa Allaa	political conflict ownership of water wells
31, c.1696–1704	Daawwee Goobboo	Establishment of law and territory
32, c.1704–1712	Jaarsoo Hiddoo	Conflict with the Aris
33, c.1712–1720	Walee Waaccuu	Conflict with the Sambulu Political conflict
34, c.1720–1728	Soraa Dhaddachaa	raaga and political conflict
35, c.1728–1736	Dhaddacha Rooblee	

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36, c.1736–1744	Halakee Dooyyoo	Political conflict	
37, c.1744–1752	Guyyoo Geedoo		
38, c.1752–1760	Madha Boruu	Political conflict	
39, c.1760–1768	Soraa Diidaa	Conflict with the Somali and Arsi	Raaga and Conflict
40, c.1768–1776	Soraa Dhaddachaa	Droughts	
41, c.1776–1784	Liiban Waataa		
42, c.1784–1792	Waayyuu Raallee	Peace	Raaga and Peace
43, c.1792–1800	Boruu Madhaa		
44, c.1800–1808	Ungulee Halakee	Heavy rain	Raaga and Rain
45, c.1808–1816	Saaqqoo Dhaddachaa	Droughts	
46, c.1816–1824	Jiloo Nyeencoo	Conflict with the Arsi, Guji, Gabra, Kiblya	
47, c. 1824–1832	Sokoree Annaa	Conflict with Gujji	Raaga and Conflict
48, c.1832–1840	Madha Boruu		
49, c.1840–1848	Liiban Jiloo		
50, c.1848–1856	Jaldeessa Guyyoo	Political conflict	Raaga and Conflict
51, c.1856–1864	Dooyyoo Jiloo	Political conflict and Conflict	
52, c.1864–1872	Haroo Adii	Spread of cholera	Raaga and Cholera
53, c.1872–1880	Diida Bittaataa	Political conflict	Raaga and political conflict Prophecy on Menelik Conquest
54, c.1880–1888	Guyyoo Boruu		Prophecy on Menelik Conquest and famine
55, c.1888–1896	Liiban Jaldeessa	Invasion of the empire and disaster	Prophecy on Menelik Conquest
56, c.1896–1904	Adii Dooyyoo	Peace	
57, c.1904–1912	Boruu Galma	Spread of disease of livestock	Raaga and Abbaa gadaa
58, c.1912–1920	Liiban Kusee	The Amhara robbers	
59, c.1920–1928	Areeroo Geedoo		
60, c.1928–1936	Bulee Dabbasaa	Invasion of Italy	
61, c.1936–1944	Aagaa Adii	Conflict with the Somali and Guji	
62, c.1944–1952	Guyyoo Boruu	Big droughts	
63, c.1952–1960	Madha Galma	Beginning of spirits possession	
64, c.1960–1968	Jaldeessa Liiban	Conflict with the Somali and Guji	
65, c.1968–1976	Gobbaa Bulee	Droughts	
66, c.1976–1984	Jiloo Aagaa	Conflict with the Somali	
67, c.1984–1992	Boruu Guyyoo	Abbaa gadaa killed by murder	
68, c.1992–2000	Boruu Madha	Conflict with the Somali, Garri, Guji Droughts	
69, c.2000–2008	Liiban Jaldeessa	Conflicts	
70, c.2008–2016	Guyyoo Gobbaa		

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