From Weak Social Capital to Exclusionary Ethnofederalism: A Root of Majang-Highlander Conflicts and Rights Violations in Gambella Region

Desalegn Amsalu and Seyoum Mesfin [1]

Abstract

The Majang Nationality Zone (MNZ) is an administrative unit in Gambella Region of Ethiopia having communities that are identified as indigenous (who are mainly Majang) and Highlanders (also known as settlers). This article aims to investigate into a structural underpinning of tensions and violent conflicts between these two communities, as well as ensuing rights violations. The article argues that prior to the implementation of ethnic federalism in 1991, the Majang and settler communities already exhibited low levels of social capital. Cultural and physical differences between the groups resulted in minimal integration and limited mutual trust. The introduction of ethnic federalism further deepened these divisions by institutionalizing a dichotomy between "indigenous" Majang and "Highlanders" (also called "settlers"), thereby entrenching identity boundaries. This structural separation not only reinforced existing social fragmentation but also laid the groundwork for intercommunal conflict. The article employs the concept of social capital as an analytical framework, suggesting that its presence can foster peaceful coexistence, while its absence or erosion may contribute to conflict. The study's data were drawn from both literature review and fieldwork primarily conducted in 2011, with follow-up investigations in 2023 to assess changes relative to the original findings.

Keywords: Indigenous-settler dichotomy, social capital deficit, ethnic federalism, conflict, Majang.

[1] Dr Desalegn Amsalu is based at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University and Dr Seyoum Mesfin is an independent consultant.

Introduction

For many decades, the Majang Nationality Zone (MNZ) in Ethiopia's Gambella Region became a focal point of interethnic tension, shaped by broader patterns of conflict across the region and the country. Among others, Gambella has been marked by recurring violence between indigenous groups such as the Anywaa, Nuer, and Majang, and already existing or incoming highlander populations, often driven by competition over land, resources, and political representation (Ojulu 2025; Jal 2018).

MNZ consists of two *woredas* (districts), i.e., Godere and Mengesh, with Meti town serving as the zonal administrative capital. It has thirty-one localities known as *kebeles*. The Zone is home to various ethnic groups but predominantly inhabited by Majang – referred to as indigenous – and the Highlanders constituting the non-indigenous ethnic groups. Pursuant to Article 47(1) of the 2002-revised constitution of Gambella Peoples' Regional State, the founding ethnic groups of the region are Anywaa, Nuer, Majang, Opo and Komo.

The term "Highlanders" refers to people from the highland part of Ethiopia, including from the north. Gambella is a lowland region that contrasts the neighboring western highlands. These people are also known as "settlers" because – though the contact between the Majang and the Highlanders dates to the second half of the 19th century (Seyoum 2015)– they moved through government sponsored resettlement in the 1980s or self-initiated migration from Amhara, Tigray, Oromia and southern Ethiopia. Although Majang are the indigenous inhabitants in MNZ, they are not the majority. According to the latest census of the country, the Highlanders constitute 80 per cent and the Majang are only 20 percent of MNZ population (CSA 2008)[2].

[2] By deducing 12,277 totals Majang number from the total Zonal population number, the number of Highlanders in MNZ is 46,950.

Since 1991, collective violence has frequently erupted between Majang and Highlanders due to seemingly minor triggering factors, often escalating into full-fledged inter-group conflict (Seyoum 2014b, 86). Disputes over farmland and coffee plantations have intensified, with Majang communities perceiving Highlander settlement as a threat to their cultural survival and territorial rights (Abate 2025). In fact, these localized grievances mirror the wider Gambella conflict landscape, where state policies, weak governance, and militarized responses have exacerbated ethnic divisions and undermined coexistence (Tadesse 2023; Teshome 2020).

The purpose of this article is to explain such conflicts within the framework of social capital deficit – which is also referred to as "weak" or "low" social capital referring to a condition in which individuals or communities lack the networks, relationships, and shared norms necessary to access resources, coordinate actions, or foster mutual trust (Claridge 2023). The Majang and Highlanders had already weak social capital developed ever since the contact between the two communities and within this context, the ethnic politics formally introduced since 1991 has exacerbated the problem.

Several scholars have conceived "social capital" in a related way. Putnam (1993, 35), defines it as "properties of social institutions, such as networks, norms, and trust that allow action and collaboration for mutual gain." Social capital increases the amount (or probability) of mutually beneficial cooperative behavior by accumulating "different sorts of social, psychological, cognitive, institutional, and associated assets" (Uphoff 2000, 188). It is a "glue that holds society together" (Sergeldin 1996, 196). As a result, the density of social networks and interactions, as well as the degree to which people associate regularly with one another in diverse situations based on relative equality, trust, reciprocity, and group specific values, define the level of social capital (Hall 2002, 22).

Some academics use the concept of social capital as an indicator to determine how cohesive a society is in a variety of forms and levels ranging from the individual to communities, regions, or states (Tzanakis 2013, 2). The preceding concepts suggest that social capital is of paramount significance in terms of peace building among diverse societies. Local associations and networks have favorable impacts on social cohesiveness and the promotion of institutional frameworks for conflict resolution. As Genge (2001, 14-15) argues, insufficient social cohesion increases the likelihood with which social institutions collapse, minorities get excluded, disorganized, and violent conflict erupt for human rights violations to occur.

As a result, the level of social cohesiveness and tolerance is dependent on social capital and is extremely important especially in a diverse society. Putnam (1993a, 63) highlights the importance of a full and lively associational life for long-term relationships. According to Uphoff (2000), the higher the extent to which vertical linking and horizontal bridging occur, the more a sense of integration and cohesion is generated, leading to inclusive mediation procedures and reducing the possibility for violent confrontations, and vice versa.

In addition to the social capital deficit theory, various explanations are put forward to explain what really causes the violence in MNZ. From the point of view of the Majang themselves, the conflicts are caused by the intent of the government and Highlanders to evict the "indigenous" people from their fertile tropical forest land (Obong 2014). Many Majang key informants believed that the federal government ignored their petition since it had a vested interest in facilitating highlander occupation of their land. A foreign-based Nilotic people opposition party racializes the issue: "the indigenous Nilotes are not enjoying freedom and equality as they continue to suffer discrimination because of their color and race" (GNUM 2014; cited in Seyoum 2014b, 89). The party argued that "They

[Indigenous Peoples in Gambella] are seen as inferior, low-grade citizens and sub-humans who do not deserve any right to own properties and show prosperity as other citizens- even on their own lands".

In contrast, the Highlanders explain the root cause of the conflict being the Majang's illegal claim of Highlanders' long-held land in MNZ and their chauvinist attitude. From the government's side, the officials during the 2011 fieldwork attributed the cause of the conflict to "rent-seekers", "agents of foreign enemies", "terrorists", "messengers of *Genibot 7*[3]", and "narrow-minded forces" (MOFA Report 2014; cited in Seyoum 2015). Tesfaselassie Mezgebe, Director of Conflict Early Warning and Early Response Directorate in the Ministry of Federal Affairs (MoFA), in Feb 2015, related the root cause with sabotages by G*inbot 7* and a few rent-seekers.

Scholarly works in their own have extensively documented case-based research within frameworks such as ethnic federalism, cross-border conflicts, and identity politics. However, few works have explicitly engaged with the intersection of ethnic federalism and social capital. While scholars like Desalegn (2016) have examined intergroup relations – particularly between Gumuz communities and Highlanders – their analyses seldom foreground social capital as a central conceptual lens. As such, the integration of social capital into studies of ethnic federalism remains underexplored and presents a valuable analytical gap.

This article draws upon a combination of fieldwork and a review of existing literature. The initial phase of field research was conducted in 2011, with further visits to the study site in 2023 to enrich and update the findings. The fieldwork took place in the MNZ, where interviews were conducted with men and women

[3] "Ginbot 7" movement for Unity and Democracy is a political party outlawed by the government as a "terrorist organization", which is now engaged in a guerrilla struggle from its base in Eritrea.

from both the Majang community and Highlander groups, from the different sections of the community and government officials. The article begins by presenting the social capital deficit between Majang and Highlanders – first by investigating socio-cultural lines and then economic dimensions. It then examines how Ethiopia's ethnic federalism has contributed to deepening the social divide, particularly by undermining social capital and communal cohesion. The article concludes by synthesizing these insights and offering reflections on the broader implications for intergroup relations, as well as academic and policy discourse.

1. Majang and Highlanders: Social Capital Deficit

As mentioned briefly earlier, a social capital deficit occurs when a community lacks sufficient norms of reciprocity, trust, and inclusive networks to enable members to collaborate toward shared goals. In conflict-affected or divided societies, such a deficit undermines peace building by eroding the very relationships and mutual confidence needed for dialogue, reconciliation, and joint problem-solving (Cox 2008). When bridging social capital between opposing groups is weak, mistrust deepens, civic participation dwindles, and negotiated settlements lose legitimacy, it perpetuates cycles of violence and segregation (Kilroy 2021). Research from Ethiopia (e.g. Berhutesfa 2018) demonstrates that inadequate inter-ethnic ties and limited platforms for cross-community interaction hinder efforts to forge a resilient national identity and peaceful coexistence, making purposeful social cohesion initiatives indispensable.

1.1. Socio-cultural Aspect

The socio-cultural domain of inter-ethnic relations has many aspects. It is difficult to examine all of them in this section. In this article, therefore, we examine the salient features in the context of the communities in question such as religion, language, skin color, dining, lifestyle and settlement pattern. To begin with, there was a less powerful – during the time of the fieldwork – but significant

religious difference between the two-groups. The overwhelming majority of the indigenous Majang are protestant Christians while the Highlanders are fundamentally Muslims and Orthodox Christians. Though religion is not a key divider that caused conflict in the study area, it significantly affected other social sites such as traditional institutions due to the absence of cross religious cleavage. Given that almost all the Majang are followers of Protestant (born again Christians), they did not attend in the same traditional institutions such as *mahiber* and *senbete* with the Highlanders. These religious institutions provide important avenues for socialization among the Highlanders.

Majang do not use informal saving institutions called *iquib* and *idir* (both in Amharic). While *iquib* functions as a cash-pooling mechanism that offers access to cash outside the formal financial sector, *idir* is a community-based institution primarily established to support bereavement rituals and offset burial expenses for its members. When members gather to make regular contributions for *iquib* and select recipients through a rotational draw, or attend funerals and bereavement gatherings following the loss of a family member of an *idir* participant, they engage in social activities such as coffee ceremony or sharing local food and drinks. These interactions foster familiarity, strengthen friendship ties, and enhance trust and tolerance within the group. However, the Majang people do not participate in these institutions. Informants suggested that this is partly due to the absence of saving culture among the Majang. One informant told the authors, "Majang people who have modern bank account are very few. They have neither traditional nor modern saving culture".[4] Moreover, Highlanders are perceived as distrusting of the Majang and often exclude them from traditional saving institutions, claiming that the Majang are "extravagant" in their spending habits.[5] This distinction also carries economic consequences.

[4] Interview with Alemseged Hailemariam, Goshene, 13 May 2013.
[5] FGD with Highlanders, Gelishi, June 2014.

Highlanders tap into *iquib* as a financial source, allowing them to build capital and launch small-scale investments. As a result, they enjoy a clear economic edge over the Majang community.

The Majang and Highlanders also significantly differ in drink and dietary traditions. In Ethiopia, both in rural and urban areas, coffee (*bunna* in Amharic) ceremony is an important way of life for socialization. It serves as the main platform for sharing of ideas, knowing and informing each other. In MNZ, coffee ceremony is an integral part of Highlanders' social, cultural and spiritual life. Informants have similarly indicated that attending coffee ceremony is considered as a means of strong bondage among people of blood relations as well as among neighbors. Apart from such socialization in the neighborhoods, Highlanders – either mainly Orthodox Christians or Muslims – socialize and meet their friends, co-workers, and family in a coffee shop. In this regard as well, Majang and Highlanders have a distinct culture and practice. According to the researchers' observations and interview results, the Highlanders used coffee bean .

On the other hand, Majang prefer using wild coffee to drink, but they use leaves rather than the beans. They prepare a daily traditional drink called *chemo* or *kari* (in Majang language) from the infused scorched leaves of coffee trees flavored with other spices such as red pepper, ginger and herbs. The Majang consider the wild coffee tree as scared. On the other hand, most of the highlander informants do not drink *chemo*, for it is considered to have very hot and spicy content. The Highlanders prefer to drink their traditional *bunna* made from the coffee beans served with either sugar/salt and/or butter.

As to the dietary habits, there is also difference between the Highlander and Majang communities. While *injera* (in Amharic) is a staple food for the Highlanders, porridge is a staple food for the Majang, which is especially visible in rural areas. *Injera* – a flatbread with distinctive spongy texture made out of *teff* flour –

is a traditional dish eaten nearly in every household of the Highlanders. Porridge made of maize and sorghum flour is on the other hands common among the Majang and eaten daily in virtually every household. On top of this, wild edible plants and animals are part of the regular meal of the Majang (Asseffa and Tadese 2010, cited in Pact Ethiopia, *Socio-economic*, and 2012, 14). They use wild fruits, vegetables and nuts such as *gamiak* tree (nut), *aime* (fruit), mushrooms, yam (*kawun*), *jongee* (spinach-like greens) for food (Stauder 1971, 24). For the Majang, "with the exception of a few kinds of creatures…any animal is regarded as edible…" (Ibd, 14-15). Highlanders consider wild animals as "unclean foods" due to religious conviction and dietary restrictions. They eat "clean foods" which appears to have been influenced by the Old Testament dietary laws (Leviticus 11, the New King James Version)[6]. Hence, the possibility for both groups to visit each other for coffee drinking and dining together is very low. These make it very exigent to establish friendly relationship with each other.

The language barrier between the two groups is also substantial. In urban areas, some of the Majang speak Highlanders' language such as Amharic, Afan Oromo, and Shekicho. However, the Highlanders both in rural and urban areas do not speak the language of the Majang.

Majang in rural areas especially in Mengesh *woreda* can barely communicate in Highlanders' language either. In Mengesh *woreda* where the Majang are a majority, few Highlanders speak the Majang language well. This is largely due to lack of interest for the Highlanders to learn the local language because they see it as an inferior language, as indicated by informants (Seyoum 2015, 208). Second, Amharic is the working language of the region as well as in the zone.

[6] The Bible designates an animal that has a divided and that chews the cud (such as cow, sheep) as clean food and pig, camel, etc. designated as unclean food.

Amharic language skill is often used as a measure of modernization, literacy and opportunity for work and appointment. This gives the Highlanders the advantage to communicate in their language while creating a disincentive to learn Majang. The Majang, however, have the interest to study Amharic since it is a working language of the regional state government and is the lingua franca. Hence, the indigenes are under pressure to study Amharic to conform linguistically. Yet, in private settings, the Majang communicate in their own mother tongue, which belongs to a Nilo-Saharan language of the Surmic cluster.

Social distance is also displayed in their segregated pattern of settlement. The previously mentioned issues are also further solidified by the existing segmented settlement pattern. When the researchers asked them why they do not socialize, often informants would cite segmented settlement pattern in addition to dietary differences. Generally, the Highlanders are concentrated in the east of MNZ whereas the Majang in the west. Majang and Highlanders settlement pattern is also different not only in rural areas but also in towns. They settled in mutually separate places in every *kebele*. In terms of population distribution, while the Highlanders are largely concentrated in Godere district constituting 82 per cent of the total population of the zone, the Majang resides in Mengeshi district constituting 78 per cent of the population. Within the district, they have also segregated neighborhoods across *kebeles.*

In Godere, the Highlanders inhabited 9 *kebeles* in the east of the district where as the Majang concentrated in 5 *kebeles* located in the west of the district. Likewise, in Mengeshi district, while the Highlanders dwell in 5 *kebeles* in the east of the *woreda*, the Majang live in the west in the rest of the *kebeles*. Furthermore, even in the zone capital, Meti, most of the local people are mainly concentrated in a place called Stadium, while the highlanders reside in the rest of the town. The researchers asked informants

why the settlements are isolated.

A Majang informant responded, "We have different culture". A Highlander (cited in Seyoum 2015) on the other hand said, "It is because Majang do not want to live in a mixed settlement with Highlanders. They are the ones who distance themselves from us. Whenever we approached them, they would go and settle in another place." Consequently, even in public and workplaces, they have a limited social relationship. This separate settlement made both groups easy target during the violence.

Skin color is the most visible boundary of the two groups. The Highlanders are referred to as "red people", as opposed to the indigenous "black" due to their skin colors. This makes it easy for everyone to distinguish between Highlanders and Majang in everyday life and social encounter. In addition to skin color, physically the Majang are relatively short coiled hair, and have flat noses whereas the highlanders have looser hair textures, straight noses and are taller . This influences people to develop a biased judgment in their day-to-day relationship. This skin color boundary has significant implications. The Highlanders look down the Majang as darker-skinned people. This racialization of social relations has an implication in a wider political and social context i.e., the parameters of Ethiopian national identity – too black to be Ethiopian[7]. The Majang specifically call the highlanders "*galen*" (in Majang language). According to our informants, *galen* means "red people" who have a cunning behavior. The Majang believed that the *galen* used to trick and swindle them since their first contact. *Habesha* is a self-description used by Highlanders. The Highlanders also call the Majang people as "*tikurochi*' (blacks in Amharic). The Majang were also known by their neighbors by the various names "Mesango", "Masongo", "Mesengo", "Ujang" and

[7] A similar discourse on color is made socially relevant in the neighboring Benshangul-Gumuz regional state. See Wold-selassie Abbute, 2002.

"Tama" (Stauder 1971, 1). The "Majangir" call themselves- "Majang"[8] in the singular or adjectival (Ibid). Sato (1997) too mentioned that "Majangir" means a plural noun ("the people of our kind") while "Majang" a singular ("a person").

The two groups are also different in their livelihoods. While the Majang are hunter-gatherer and prefer mobile lifestyle, the Highlanders have a settled agricultural way of life. Livestock rearing, which doesn't include poultry, is not the mainstay of the economic activities of the Majang except for few Highlanders (Pact Ethiopia 2012, 132-133, cited in Seyoum 2015). The Majang believe that their culture, attachment with their forest and modes of livelihood is determined in the "mythical past". Their life is associated with the lot of the Majang "to cultivate, hunt and keep bees; but not to keep cattle or goats or sheep" as they are ordered by the *ler*, the father of all men (Stauder 1971, 14).

As a result, the Majang do not own livestock. They are shifting cultivators, for the most part, farming is based on hand tools. The Majang grow crops such as *makale* (maize), *ngiding* (sorghum) by the method of shifting cultivation that anthropologists call 'slush and burn'. They had "…a never ending cycle of slush and burn, staying in one place for a few years, abandoning it to grow over again, and moving into a newly cleared site" (Ibid).

Apiculture is one of the major activities, means of livelihoods

[8] The Majangir Zone National Council has formally changed the name of the ethnic group from Majanjir to Majang. The Regional council also after deliberation ratified the proposed change of the name of the ethnic group in the July 2011 (Seyoum 2015). Hence, they have changed the name implies some other meaning. According to the nationality council, the rationales behind changing the name are basically three. First, the name or the term Majangir does not have any meaning in the Majang language. The letter to the regional council states" we have reached that the term Majangir does not have any meaning in the language of the nationality". Second, thus, the term or the naming Majangir does not fully describe and represent the identity of the people. Thirdly, it is a derogatory name given by our neighboring people such as the Oromo.

and cultural practice for the Majang given that honey is one of the most valued products of the Majang people. Hence, they make an extensive use of honey from the wild bees in the forest. A single Majang may have as many as a hundred hives placed high in the trees" Stauder (1971, 204). Honey has a spiritual and material benefit to the local community. It is their only 'cash crop'. Stauder (1971, 18) observed, "The interest and efforts that Majangir put into hunting and fishing is greatly surpassed by that they put into producing honey (*etet*)".

In contrast, the Highlanders are engaged in sedentary livestock, coffee and cereal production. Largely, almost all the Highlanders' livelihood sources are crop production by clearing the forest. They practice highland system of agriculture, i.e., oxen as means of production. Some Highlanders are also using mechanized farming (tractors) as a means of production.

The issue is not only differing lifestyle and means of livelihood but associated stereotypes. The Highlanders especially referred the mobile lifestyle of the Majang as "backward". Informants also stressed that Highlanders considered themselves superior to the local population in terms of literacy, culture, language, and way of life. In this regard, a Majang informant, 72, who lived in Kumi, is stronger in his comments, "The Highlanders do not see the local people as equal. They undermine our culture and way of life. They consider, for example, our forest-based culture as backward"[9]. Corroborating this, Sommer (2005 22, 23) wrote that the Highlanders have a tradition that is not free from the concept of supremacy in relation to the local population (indigenous people). This has further inflamed the Majang-Highlanders relations. In view of the above background, one of the key tools for social integration is missing in Majang-

[9] Actually, the view of the government and key political elites is also the same. In this regard, we can cite the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's speech in 2011 pastoralist day, he said, "…pastoralists no more remain research sample to showcase primitive lifestyle."

Highlanders relation.

Lastly yet importantly, social distance is also observed in marriage institutions which is one of imperative institutions to create peaceful relationship among diverse people. It is an indispensable instrument to avoid violent conflictual relations between various groups during conflict situation. In sociology, inter-marriage is expected to increase social cohesion in a given society and reduce the likelihood of violent conflicts among those groups (see for example, Blau and Schwartz 1984; Merton 1941).

Many informants alike indicated that intermarriage between the indigenes Majang and the migrant Highlanders is a rare practice. Informants estimated that in MNZ there were only 12 couples between the two communities. In these marriages, the Majang were male-givers while the Highlanders were female givers. It was only one Majang woman who was wedded to a Highlander. Most of the Majang who were married with Highlanders were also political elites, zone and regional level higher officials, who resided in the towns. In addition, these Majang officials had other Majang wives, mostly in the rural areas. In contrast, most of the Highlanders were from the low profile of the community. Majang-Highlanders marriage in rural areas is nearly nonexistent.

When asked why inter-marriage between the two communities is uncommon, informants provided various factors. For the most part, the Majang want to preserve their ethnic purity and ownership of the zone, and hence, discourage inter-marriage with Highlanders. Interview findings indicated that a Majang woman marrying a Highlander man would be disowned by her family and would constantly be harassed and scolded within Majang community. A Majang woman informant told her own story related to this. There was one Majang female – named Tihut Beniam – who was married to a Highlander teacher in

Meti. She faced a serious criticism from her family and community. Tihut told to the authors that, "Most members of my family did not accept our marriage. The social sanction is very harsh, but I do not care as long as I love my husband". Nevertheless, she faced rejection and isolation owing to the mere fact of marrying a Highlander.

Many Highlander women interviewed were also not willing to marry Majang men for "racial" reason (Seyoum 2015). Highlander men informants indicated that dowry was very expensive in Majang community, which could cost up to 15,000 ET Birr. The amount of payment was growing year after year. Highlanders were required to pay an exorbitant bride price to Majang families.

A Majang man could easily marry a Highlander woman because of little bride wealth obligation. That means there is an incentive for Majang men to marry Highlander women. Conversation with Highlanders also revealed that the Highlander men were also afraid of the Majang officials to marry Majang women. They said that the leadership is extremely unhappy and may harm them in different ways. A Highlander informant remarked, "In the past there was no marriage between individuals from the two groups. We as Highlanders were especially scared of the Majang that they could kill us when they get drunk. In the past, they used to kill each other when they get drunk".[10] Moreover, the Highlanders emphasized that HIV/AIDS is rampant among the Majang (Seyoum 2015)[11].

1.2. Economic Aspect

In addition to socio-cultural boundaries as discussed above, there is a visible economic gap between the two groups which

[10] Interview M, 35, Goshene, 19 May 2013.

[11] According to data obtained from the zone HIV Secretariat (2014) while the national and regional average of HIV/AIDS prevalence is 1.5 % and 6.5 % respectively, the MNZ is more than 13 %.

partly arises from differing means of production. The Majang are economically impoverished both in relative terms as compared to the Highlanders and in absolute terms owing to a meagre land ownership and loss of access to forest-based livelihoods such as honey production (Seyoum 2015). An educated Majang told (cited in Seyoum 2015), "While a native person has 1-4 hectares of farmland, the Highlander has up to 30 hectares of farmland". The Highlanders dominated the economic sector in MNZ[12]. For instance, according to data obtained from the Godere *woreda* Trade and Industry Office (2013), 99 percent of the traders and those engaged in business activity were Highlanders. All coffee exporters were Highlanders too. This exclusion of Majang from the economy forced some of the Majang to commit crimes and held grudge against Highlanders (Seyoum 2015, 230). As a result, "the indigenes regard the economic success of the Highlanders with consternation" (Dereje 2009, 651).

Above all, the continued large influx of Highlanders into MNZ further enhanced the social distance between the two groups. The indigenous people openly and strongly resented the Highlanders' unprecedented movement to their territory. The Majang believed that this inexorable migration threatened their survival. Consequently, they tried to expel 12,000 Highlanders in 2010 though not successful (Seyoum 2015). The Majang people's attitudes were also reflected in their speech across various occasions. During fieldwork, informants described a newly adopted expression that had recently gained popularity: "Let Highlanders be returned to where they came from in the same foot they came to our areas" and "Highlanders did not come here carrying a land, let them leave from our land".

According to the charge file submitted by the federal prosecutor to the Federal Higher Court's 19th Criminal Bench on December

[12] They also provide 50 per cent of the skilled work force of the region government (Dereje, 2008: 64).

31, 2014, the suspected Majang convened around an agenda titled: "The Highlanders should share the farmland and coffee plantations in the Majang Zone with the Majang ethnic group. And if they are not willing to do so, they should leave the area"[13]. As mentioned in the introduction section, the extreme form of this hatred was manifested in the 2014 deadly conflict. This violent incident has seriously strained the already complicated difference of the two communities.

2. How Ethnic Federalism Exacerbated the Social Capital Deficit

Following the fall of the Derg regime in 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) initiated a major restructuring of the Ethiopian state, transitioning from a centralized system to an ethnic-based federal arrangement. Ethnicity became the central organizing principle for this transformation, aimed at constructing a multicultural federal polity. As a result, Ethiopia was reorganized in 1995 into nine regional states—three of which are multi-ethnic (Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, and the former Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State [SNNPRS])—and six largely ethnically homogenous regions (Afar, Amhara, Tigray, Oromia, Somali, and Harari), along with two chartered city administrations (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa).

In line with this federal framework, the Gambella Regional State Constitution (Article 47[1]) formally recognizes five indigenous ethnic groups – the Nuer, Anywaa, Majang, Opo, and Komo—as the "owner nationalities" of the region. Based on their territorial presence and demographic weight, the region was subdivided into three administrative zones (Anywaa, Nuer, and Majang) and one special woreda known as Itang aimed at accommodating Opo and Komo. The designation of the Majang

[13] The Reporter, "Gambella's Commander of Special Police force along with other high ranking officials is charged with". Addis Ababa: 04/01/2015.

Zone reflects the status of the Majang as one of the region's "owner nationalities." The concept of "owner nationality" implies a deep-rooted attachment to a specific territory, from which political and resource-based rights are derived. As Clapham (2002, 29) notes, "a political unit owned by one group could not be owned by another." This notion facilitates privileged access to power and resources. Being an "owner nationality" confers a dominant position to indigenous groups, prompting efforts to recalibrate the balance of power in their favor.

Interviews in the MNZ revealed that this designation has sparked local tensions between indigenous and non-indigenous residents. Although marginalized minorities have gained formal recognition as "owner nationalities," non-titular groups – particularly the Highlanders – believe that they have become politically disenfranchised. Scholars also attest to this argument. Asnake (2012, 100), for example, observes, "The Highlanders are, for all practical purposes, removed from the region's politics" (see also Assefa 2008, 277–278). Seyoum (2015) also argues that the policy has contributed to political exclusion and growing social distance. Indigenous groups are granted political legitimacy as "owners," while Highlanders are left without meaningful representation.

The Majang, for their part, perceive the Highlanders as a demographic and political threat. Although the Majang hold formal political majority status, they fear that the numerical dominance of Highlanders – who now constitute approximately 80% of the MNZ population – could undermine their leadership (Seyoum 2014b). This demographic imbalance, exacerbated by continued Highlander migration, has generated anxiety among Majang political elites.

To preserve their dominance, Majang leaders have staffed key government positions almost exclusively with members of their

own ethnic group. In cases where qualified Majang candidates are unavailable, they have recruited Majang or Sheko individuals from neighboring zones in SNNPRS (Sheka and Bench-Maji Zones), rather than appointing Highlanders. This solidarity-driven strategy – such as the "importation" of educated Majang and Sheko from neighboring Teppi – aims to counterbalance Highlander demographic growth.

Political party affiliation in MNZ is also ethnically segmented. The Majang are organized under the Gambella Peoples Liberation Movement (GPLM), the regional party for indigenous groups, while Highlanders tend to affiliate with national parties such as the EPRDF or other opposition groups. Although some Highlanders hold seats in zonal, *woreda*, and *kebele* councils, they typically represent the ruling party rather than their own communities.

This dynamic illustrates how Ethiopia's ethnofederal system has become a divisive force at the local level. As Odoemene (2008, 237) argues, the distinction between "settlers" and "indigenous" groups is fundamentally a question of citizenship – an inherently exclusionary and contested domain. Indigenous groups often seek to exclude those labeled as settlers, while settlers resist exclusion by asserting long-term residency and national citizenship. Abbink (2006, 391) similarly notes that the Ethiopian Constitution and its implementation foster "boundary thinking" between ethnic groups. Preferential treatment of certain ethnicities can reinforce or create new social divisions (Nagel 1994, 157). Assefa (2008, 277–278) contends that the federal system has produced exclusionary currents by privileging "mother state" nationalities. Tsegaye (2010, 64) adds that federal arrangements can trigger conflict by heightening group self-awareness and encouraging vertical and horizontal claims to power and resources.

In Gambella, these dynamics have manifested in various forms of ethnic conflict and rights violations, including indigenous–settler tensions, intra-indigenous disputes, indigenous–investor clashes, and society–state confrontations (Dereje 2009; Medhane 2007). The region has become "volatile" (Monika 2005), with inter-group relations increasingly defined by conflict (Dereje 2009, 641). Violence has often erupted due to both objective grievances and subjective ethnic animosities, resulting in displacement, insecurity, and loss of life.

One of the most devastating conflict events occurred already in 1991 following the withdrawal of Derg forces. Anywaa villagers attacked Highlanders with rifles and spears (Regassa 2010; Medhane 2007, 16). In 1992, armed Anywaa reportedly massacred around 200 Highlanders in Ukuna hamlet (Kurimote 1997, cited in Dereje 2009, 644). In retaliation, Highlanders indiscriminately killed indigenous residents. A major conflict in 2003 claimed approximately 200 lives (Dereje 2009; Regassa 2010; Medhane 2007). On December 13, 2003, a deadly ambush in Gambella town triggered a three-day rampage.

On September 11, 2014, violent clashes erupted between Majang and Highlanders in MNZ – a region previously known for relative calm. The conflict, rooted in long-standing land disputes, escalated into brutal violence. Armed groups from both sides used spears, machetes, and AK-47s. The discovery of a burned pregnant woman's body intensified the violence, leading to retaliatory attacks. Eyewitnesses reported at least 20 deaths in Meti town, with some estimates reaching 30. Official figures indicate 79 deaths in Mengesh and Godere woredas, 27 injuries, 273 homes destroyed, and 13,034 people displaced (The Reporter 2015). According to the U.S. State Department, 600 households were relocated in September alone.

Since 2018, Ethiopia has witnessed a dramatic escalation in ethnic and regional conflicts, marking a turbulent chapter in its

political history. In Gambella Region and its Majang Zone too, the national crisis has exacerbated existing tensions between indigenous communities and settler populations, deepening mistrust and social fragmentation. The Majang–Highlander conflict is also affected in this broader climate of instability, underscoring the fragility of Ethiopia's ethno federal experiment and the urgent need for inclusive peace building mechanisms. ACLED's EPO database shows that 215 political violence events have been reported in various areas of Gambella throughout the years from 2000 to 2023. However, most of the conflicts occurred after 2018. From 2015 violent conflict events, 122 (58%) of them occurred since 2018. For NNZ, the same database has recorded, conflicts such as the following:

> *On 6 September 2023, and for a third day, unidentified gunmen (likely ethnic Majang/Majangir militias due to the location and similar attacks by the group) shot and killed 9 civilians (likely ethnic Amhara farmers due to their settlement) in Akashi kebele, Godere woreda (Mejenger, Gambela), and in Gelesha kebele over land disputes. The armed group also attacked and killed four civilians in Goshene kebele during the same period and nine fatalities split between 2 locations during three days (4 - 6 September)*[14].

3. Conclusion

The Majang–Highlander relationship in the Majang Zone exemplifies the deep-rooted social fragmentation and political exclusion that can emerge under an ethnically defined federal system. The absence of meaningful socio-economic and political engagement between the two groups has fostered minimal social interaction, entrenched ethnic boundaries, and widened social distance. These divisions – manifested in marriage practices, residence patterns, language use, and cultural norms – have eroded trust, undermined social capital, and fueled mutual stereotyping and resentment.

[14] See https://epo.acleddata.com/, accessed 07 March 2025

The lack of crosscutting institutions and inclusive local governance structures has further exacerbated tensions, transforming latent grievances into violent conflict. Cultural incompatibility and the absence of structural and cognitive dimensions of social cohesion are evident in the Majang–Highlander context. Ethnic labeling practices – such as "*galen*" and "*bariyawochi*" – symbolize the lack of mutual respect and cooperation, reinforcing in-group/out-group boundaries and obstructing peaceful coexistence. While ethnic federalism is not the sole driver of conflict, it has undeniably contributed to the crystallization of group identities and the institutionalization of exclusion.

The Majang Zone case challenges the assumption that ethnofederalism is a suitable governance model for managing complex diversity at the local level at least in its current model. Without deliberate efforts to foster inclusive governance, build trust, and promote inter-group engagement, the region risks further polarization and recurrent violence. The article suggests the importance of deliberate efforts to cultivate social capital as a foundation for peaceful coexistence. Such efforts must be complemented by targeted interventions to dismantle legal and political barriers that hinder inclusive governance and equitable inter-group relations.

References

Abate, Gutema Gizachew. 2025. "Land Transactions between Majang People and 'Highlanders' in the Majang Forest Zone." *Africa* 95 (1): 42–61.

Abbink, Jon. 2006. "Ethnicity and Conflict Generation in Ethiopia: Some Problems and Prospects of Ethno-Regional Federalism." *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 24 (3). Routledge.

Andreas, Eshete. 2003. "Ethnic Federalism: New Frontiers in

Ethiopian Politics." Paper delivered at 1st National Conference on Federalism, Conflict and Peace Building, Addis Ababa, 5–7 May 2003.

Asnake, Kefale. 2012. *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia: A Comparative Regional Study*. Routledge Series in Federal Studies. London: Routledge.

Assefa, Fiseha. 2008. *Federalism and the Accommodation of Diversity in Ethiopia: A Comparative Study*. Nijmegen: Wolf Legal Publisher.

Berhutesfa, Costantinos. 2018. "Harnessing Social Capital for Nation Building and Inter-Citizen Group Peaceful Coexistence in Ethiopia: A Clarion Call for a Resilient Ethiopianism." *Respublica Literaria* 12 (375).

Blau, Peter, and Joseph Schwartz. 1984. *Crosscutting Social Circles*. New York: Academic Press.

Christopher, Van der Beken. 2008. "Ethiopia: Constitutional Protection of Ethnic Minorities at the Regional Level." In Eva and Beken, eds., *Federalism and the Protection of Human Rights in Ethiopia*, 125–261.

Claridge, Tristan. 2023. "What Is High and Low, and Positive and Negative Social Capital?" Accessed from ; https://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/what-is-high-and-low-and-positive-and-negative-social-capital/.Accessed August 1, 2025.

Coleman, James. 1988. "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital." *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (Supplement): S94–S120.

Cox, Michaelene, ed. 2008. *Social Capital and Peace-Building: Creating and Resolving Conflict with Trust and Social Networks*. London: Routledge.

Dereje, Feyissa. 2006. "The Experience of Gambella Regional

State." In David Turton, *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective*, 208–230. Oxford: James Currey Ltd.

———. 2007. "The Interface between National and Regional Level Decisions and Local Conflicts in the Gambella Region." Research report submitted to Pact Ethiopia.

———. 2008. "The Ethnic Self and the National Other: Anywaa Identity Politics in Reference to the Ethiopian State System." In Bahru Zewde, ed., *Society, State and Identity in African History*, 123–154. Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies.

———. 2009. "A National Perspective on the Conflict in Gambella." In *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*. Trondheim. 641–653

———. 2011. *Playing Different Games: The Paradox of Anywaa and Nuer Identification Strategies in the Gambella Region, Ethiopia*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Desalegn, Amsalu. 2016. "Awi-Gumuz Interethnic Relations: From Integrative Traditional Institutions to Exclusionary Ethnic Federalism." Movements in Ethiopia, Ethiopia in Movement. Volume 2, edited by Éloi Ficquet et al., Centre français des études éthiopiennes, 2016, https://doi.org/10.4000/books.cfee.1837.

Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Constitution. 1995. Addis Ababa.

Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Population Census Commission. 2008. *The 2007 Population and Housing Census Results of Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Central Statistics Agency.

Furnivall, J.S. 1954. "Some Problem of Tropical Economy." In Rita Hinden, ed., *Fabian Colonial Essays*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Gambella Nilotes United Movement (GNUM). 2014. "Stop Killing Majengers as Means to Acquire Their God-Given Land."

Ethiomedia.com.

Gambella Regional State Constitution. 2003. Gambella.

Interpeace. n.d. "What Is Peacebuilding? The Concept of Social Capital." Accessed July 28, 2025. https://www.interpeace.org/resource/what-is-peacebuilding-the-concept-of-social-capital-english/.

Jal, Gatluak Ruon. 2018. "Ethnic Groups' Conflict in Majang Zone, Gambella/Ethiopia." *Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 38. 38-46.

Kilroy, Walt. 2021. "Social Capital and Peace." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Positive Peace*, 1–19. Cham: Springer.

Markakis, John. 1998. *Resource Conflict in the Horn of Africa*. London: Sage Publications.

———. 2011. *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*. Oxford: James Currey.

Medhane, Tadesse. 2007. *Gambella: The Impact of Local Conflict on Regional Security*. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies.

———. 2023. "The Impact of Local Conflict on Regional Security." ISS CPRD Paper.

Merera, Gudina. 2003. *Ethiopia: Competing Ethnic Nationalisms and the Quest for Democracy, 1960–2000*. Addis Ababa: N.P Shaker Publishing.

Merton, Robert. 1941. "Intermarriage and Social Structure." *Psychiatry* 4: 361–374.

Odoemene, Akachi. 2008. "The Context of Colonialism and Ethnicity in Indigene-Settler Relations: Comparative Historical Evidence from Social (Dis)Order in Two Nigerian Cities." In Bahru Zewde, ed., *Society, State and Identity in African History*,. Addis Ababa: Forum for Social Studies.217–230.

Ojulu, Ojot Miru. 2025. "Conflict Trends in Gambella State (2018–2024)." Rift Valley Institute; Peace Research Facility: London.

Sato, Rie. 1997. "Christianization through Villagization: Experiences of Social Change Among the Majangir." In *Papers of the 13th International Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. 2,. Kyoto: Kyoto University Museum.

Serageldin, Ismail. 1996. "Sustainability as Opportunity and the Problem of Social Capital." *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 3: 187–203. 574–575

Seyoum, Mesfin. 2014a. "Indigenous Majang People at Risk in Gambella Region, Ethiopia: The Time to Take Action on Land Acquisition Is Now." In Samuel Kale Ewusi and Jean Bosco Butera, eds., *Democracy, Security and Socio-economic Issues in Africa: Policy Options*, Vol. 1, No. 2,. Addis Ababa: Upeace Africa Policy Series. 89–100

———. 2014b. "The Inter-Regional Migration Phenomenon: Response of the Indigenes of Majang Nationality Zone in Gambella Region, Ethiopia." *Ethiopian Journal of Federal Studies* 2 (1): 67–94.

———. 2015. "Federalism at the Margins of the Ethiopian State: The Lived Experience of the Majang People." PhD diss., Addis Ababa University.

Shiferaw, Bekele. 1988. *An Empirical Account of Resettlement in Ethiopia (1975–1985)*. Moscow: Nauka Publishers.

Tadesse, Gizachew. 2020. *Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding in Gambella Regional State, Ethiopia*. PhD diss., Addis Ababa University.

Tsegaye, Regassa. 2010. "Learning to Live with Conflicts: Federalism as a Tool of Conflict Management in Ethiopia."

Mizan Law Review 4 (1): 52–102.

Turton, David, ed. 2006. *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Perspective*. Eastern African Studies. Oxford/Athens/Addis Ababa: James Currey/Ohio University Press/Addis Ababa University.

The Reporter. 2015. "Gambella's Commander of Special Police Forces along with Other High Ranking Officials Are Charged With." Issue date: 04/01/2015.

Uphoff, Norman. 2000. "Understanding Social Capital: Learning from the Analysis and Experiences of Participation." In Partha Dasgupta and Ismail Seragedin Ed *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective, . Sociological Perspectives on Development* . World Bank; Washington Dc 215-252.

Woldesilassie Abute. 2002. *Gumuz and Highlander Resettlers: Differing Strategies of Livelihood and ethic Relations in Metekel, North-western Ethiopia* (Goettingen: University of Goettingen. .