

Ethiopia: Abegar Indigenous Conflict Resolution System —Community Based Reconciliation

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Abstract: Reconciliation is inevitable for restoring harmony among a society and making peaceful interaction between those who are at variance. The main objective of this study is to investigate the Abegar indigenous conflict resolution system based on community reconciliation in Haberu Woreda, North Wollo. This study employs a qualitative research design and descriptive nature. The study collected primary data from different informants by employing such qualitative data collection techniques as the interview, focus group discussions and observation. The finding of the study revealed that Abegars indigenous conflict resolution system aims at the restoration of order and harmony of the community. The types of conflicts presented and resolved in the community are inter-personal, homicide, inter-group in nature which stemmed from abduction of girls and women, violation of social values, theft, conflict over claims of a girl, competition over ownership of land, and drunkenness. The findings further show that family reconciliation, blood reconciliation (demmaderk) and compensation performance are the major community reconciliation procedures (methods) of conflict management used by the studied community depending on the nature and types of conflicts. Moreover, the ritual ceremony has symbolic and practical significance to established trust between conflicting parties that their relationship is restored.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Indigenous, Reconciliation, Community.

Introduction

Conflict is two or more parties enter into disputes by their goal or values when there are interacting to each other (Fisher *et al.*, 2000). Similarly, Mesfin (1999) stated that conflict is a practice of disagreement on public issues that affect the lives of groups, essentially about means and ends regarding their mutual relationships, their diverse interests, their different val-

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ues, their institutions and organizations. Generally, based on the above arguments, conflict could be conceptualized as contradiction or disagreement between two or more parties arising from misunderstandings, competition for resource, power and prestige.

Communities, as well as individuals, were passing through conflicts for different reasons in a human being's life (Burtone, 1996). Currently, the main issue is not about the causes or happenings of conflict, but how to prevent the conflict and resolve it (Bokari, 2013). Pankhurstand Getachew (2008) noted the importance for societies to arrive at a solution for the conflicts, by using different conflict resolution management methods.

Indigenous conflict resolution methods

Indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms are solving a conflict depending on society's norms, neighbour relationship or organizational practice (Mapara, 2009). An ethnic group in Ethiopia has its own way of resolving conflicts. Pankhurstand Getachew (2008) results shows that in Ethiopia indigenous conflict resolution management are the main methods of preventing and resolving conflict in their locality, rather than the justice system in the country. The habitual practice of a society is the main sources for indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, and it is tying the societies for a long period time, accepted by communities administration system, to imply their social reaction (Dagne & Bapu, 2013).

In the Ethiopian context as well, Mellese (2008) states that as a multicultural society, there are various social groups that live together in harmony, cooperation and sometimes in conflict. On the circumstance, when a conflict arises within or between social groups, Abera (2000) notes that various types of conflict resolution methods were applied in different parts of the country and among different sections of the population. According to Enyew (2014), his study shows that Ethiopia has different ethnic groupsand, because of this, the indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms were vary among each group. For instance, *Gadaa* is a traditional system of governance used by the Oromo people in Ethiopia. The system regulates political, economic, social and religious activities of the community dealing with issues such as conflict resolution, reparation and protecting women's rights. It serves as a mechanism for enforcing moral conduct, building social cohesion, and expressing forms of community culture. *Shimagelle* is another conflict resolution method in Ethiopia, practiced by the Amhara people; it uses people appointed on an ad-hoc basis, to settle particular disputes that have arisen either in matrimonial cases or between communities (Gowok, 2008) and *Abegar* conflict resolution mechanisms around Northern Wollo (Uthman, 2008).

Community based reconciliation

Community-based approaches seek to empower local community groups and institutions by giving the community direct control over investment decisions, project

planning, execution and monitoring, through a process that emphasizes inclusive participation and management. The community-based approach has been adopted in fragile and conflict-affected societies. It can be an effective approach to peace building, defined as the range of measures necessary to transform conflict towards sustainable, peaceful relations and outcomes (Lederach, 1995).

Traditional approaches to justice and reconciliation are one of the community based approaches for peace building; it focuses on the psycho-social and spiritual dimensions of violent conflicts. Traditional approaches are also often inclusive, with the aim of reintegrating parties on both sides of the conflict into the community. An important component is public cleansing ceremonies, undertaken as an integral step in healing community relationships.

Reconciliation is central to the creation of a healthier society, one which values all its members as equally deserving of life, dignity, liberty and opportunity. As people begin to reach out to one another, getting to know each other better and laying the groundwork to resolve bitterness, prejudices, misconceptions and disagreements of the past, the future will be cleared for new relationships and partnerships.

Conceptual framework

Reconciliation is a complex concept because of its multidimensional nature: one can approach it through a variety of disciplines (Torrent, 2011). Reconciliation as an outcome is a state in which parties have changed their relationship and are mutually recognizing each other's goals and interests in a peaceful environment.

Conceived as a process, reconciliation places weight not only on ending violence or conflict, but also on the steps that lead to the construction of new relationships in which both victims and perpetrators benefit from the new environment. The process takes place in efforts and activities that are deliberately meant to address unresolved conflict. Our understanding is that as long as people previously involved in conflict do not undergo this process, the conflict persists and the potential for relapse is ever present. The objective of this process, then, is to understand the context in order to encourage people to get together in conditions that encourage long-term peace. If such long-term peace based on mutual assurance for living together is indeed attained, it becomes the outcome of a successful process. Treating reconciliation as both a process and an outcome entails that building relationships is key, since conflicts occur when relationships are disrupted, and they end when relationships are mended.

Reconciliation has not received the special attention it deserves in Ethiopia's political transition. The experienced political divisions necessitate healing that result from genuine national dialogue on inclusive platforms. Otherwise, efforts of democratic consolidation and socioeconomic progress will fail to be adequately addressed (Gadisa, 2021).

Ethiopia remains politically and socially unstable; reconciliation, in my view, is a specific area of inquiry which urgently needs to be further investigated in order to turn the country into a place where citizens live in conditions of peace. Currently, so much division, suspicion and alienation exists between and within most every group in Ethiopia that it has created a huge barrier to the new Ethiopia for which most of us hope and dream. Genuine reconciliation, that is embraced and promoted by top Ethiopian leadership and which penetrates through Ethiopian institutions into the everyday life of people at the grass roots level, will be necessary if the country is to survive and flourish as a people and as a society.

The North Wollo people have also developed different institutions to manipulate the day to day activities of its members. Among these institutions, *Abegar* conflict resolution mechanisms are employed by the society in order to resolve conflicts based on reconciliation. *Abegar* indigenous dispute settlement among the North Wollo is a crucial research theme that requires thorough investigation. Moreover, indigenous conflict management of Ethiopian ethnic groups was not documented; it is mostly oral and not systematically organized to be used in the development process. Hence, the current study will be of significance to fill the limitation of the above studies, to investigate the *Abegar* indigenous mechanisms of conflict management in terms of community-based reconciliation system.

General objective

The general objective of this research is to investigate the *Abegar* indigenous mechanisms of conflict management based on community reconciliation system in North Wollo.

Specific objectives

- To identify the root causes of conflict among Haberu Woreda, North Wollo community.
- To explore the types of conflict mostly arising within Haberu Woreda, North Wollo community members.
- Explore community based reconciliation procedures and processes to resolve conflicts.
- To investigate the relationship between *Abegar* indigenous mechanisms of conflict management and the formal court system.

Method

The study employed qualitative design and descriptive nature. Qualitative inquiry is best suited for a type of question which is best understood through a detailed account of several individual common or shared experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009).

The present study was conducted in Haberu Woreda North Wollo, Ethiopia. Purposive sampling technique was used for selecting elders, religious leaders and influential people as participants of the study. To secure the objective of the study, the data were collected by using semi-structured in-depth interview, focus-group discussions and observation. The primary data were collected from 11 selected key informants (community elders, religious leaders, formal court judges, Police officers and *Abegar* judge members) from semi-structured in-depth interviews. A focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with two groups of community elders, religious leaders, formal court judges, Police officers and *Abegar* judge members. Each FGD comprised six participants. The focus group discussion (FGD) was employed to cross check and supplement the information that was collected through interviews regarding conflict and its management within the community.

In order to get reliable data for the successful accomplishment of the research, observation was another major method of data gathering system to get valuable information because what peoples say and do may sometimes contradict with each other. Thus, direct observation was the best solution. By using this method, the researcher observed the place where conflict resolution processes were taking place in different parts of the district, what is called *Meres*. Besides, during the process, the researcher observed how indigenous mechanisms play a role in maintaining peace and security based on their customs, traditions and worldview of the people under study.

All the interviews were tape recorded and field notes were taken during the interviews. Then the data were classified as per the research question of the study. After that, the data were transcribed and translated into English as the interviews and FGD conducted in Amharic. The data were categorized or coded into manageable and meaningful sets of themes based on the objectives of the study. Finally, responses were categorized as sources and types of conflicts, conflict handling mechanisms, procedures of conflict management, and the relationship of the 'indigenous system' with the formal state law.

Ethical considerations are as essential as other aspects in the process of conducting research, for they significantly affect the success of the study. In this regard, a researcher needs to consider ethical standards of the host community on which the research will be conducted. Therefore, I considered the social and cultural norms of the host community on whom the research was carried out. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured and therefore it was impossible to know who said what. The interest of participants was given due place in the process and the participants were not harmed physically, socially or psychologically.

Result and discussion

Nature and Structure of Abegar Conflict Resolution System

The Haberu *Woreda* is part of the Zonal administration of North Wollo, within the Amhara Regional State of Ethiopia. Habru is located 491 Km from Addis Abeba to North, it is bordered on the South by the Mille River, which separates it from the South Wollo Zone, on the West by Guba Lafto, on the North by the Alewuha River which separates it from Kobo, and on the East by the Afar Region.

The Abegar conflict resolution mechanism is the most known in North East parts of Ethiopia. *Abegar* is commonly practiced in North and South Wollo Zone, Ethiopia. The people living here are called *Abegars*. *Abegars* always care about the security of the society. They teach about peace and love for their people and they pray for the good of the society. Based on this, they are considered as the fathers of peace, the ears and eyes of God. The community does not want to interrupt the *Abegar* conflict resolution system. Everybody is subject to *Abegar* rule and the rule is strictly respected, because they believe that if the people interrupt the system, something bad will happen in the community. If somebody disappointed *Abegar*, God will curse the people. For these reasons, no one object the proposal of *Abegar*, as well as because they are supposed to be fair.

Their jurisdiction comes from generation to generation, and the people respect them. *Abegars* have their own territory jurisdiction to adjudicate their law. In Northern Wollo, in Haberu Worda, there are four well known *Abegars* hierarchical structure, i.e. the main *Abegar*, secretariat, *Dereta* (messenger) and *Kadami* (servants at the ceremony). When the system made the conflict resolution process, it uses religious institutions (mosque), shadow of a big tree and green field. It is the symbolization of purity, justice and truth. This helps the negotiation process and trustworthiness.

Causes and types of conflicts

The participants of this study have viewed conflict as inevitable and natural which prevails in any society. The main causes of the conflict in the study area are abduction of girls and women, violation of social values (insult), theft, conflict over claims of a girl, competition over ownership of land, and extramarital relationship with married woman and unmarried girls. Moreover, drunkenness is also the most potent sources of conflict, especially for youths.

In relation to the types of conflicts, according to the informants, the majority of the conflicts that have been observed among the community of Haberu Worda are inter-personal and inter-group (family). Similarly, a research carried out by Uthman (2008) indicated that the *Abegar* institutions utilize a great variety of schemes and approaches for inter-personal or inter-group compromise for sustainable solutions. *Abegars* are

most effective in resolving violent and hidden conflicts, restoration of disputants' relationships, marriage and divorce, stilling, preventing future revenge actions and ensuring peace and security of the local community. The highly observed conflict is homicide; the killing of one person by another, whether premeditated or unintentional. That means homicide is killing or murder a person in the cause of previous conflict with that person, and families, for example, a person who kills someone, on the reason of the previous revenge (i.e. that person killed his brother previously). There are two major causes for the action of homicide: first, *Key dem* (red blood)—murder causes by sudden event of conflict—a fight for example that was sparked suddenly by an insult. This type of conflict is easy to resolve with the *Abegar* system because the conflict parties do not rise to revenge. The second is *Tekurdem* (black blood): vengeful murder, motivated by revenge of previous conflicts. The action is planned by the killer—when, how and where attack the victim. Because of this, black bloodshed is difficult to resolve.

Community based reconciliation processes and procedures on Abegar conflict management system

The participants of the study described that the call for negotiation done for three times with greater patience and understanding the emotion of the victim's family. The executive (*dereta*) sent a message to the victim's family for calling of to resolve the conflict. It is symbolically done by pivoting a spire on the get of the victim's family. If the family accepts the call, they put butter on the spire of the *dereta*. In return, it is believed that they get blessing from the *Abegar* sprite.

Abegars have a meeting place in religious institutions (mosque), shadow of a big tree and green field, when they are requested to do so. *Abegars* have a symbolic sitting arrangement too. The *Abegars* set on a higher place in between the victim's family and the perpetrator's family. This is meant to symbolize their authority and charisma. On the right stands the victim, and perpetrators are set to the left to symbolize the wrong, their shame and their badness. The preparatory family up to three generations needs to demonize them. All of the family of perpetrator needs to wear old clothes; they carry a stone until the family of the victim is willing to forgive the perpetrator family. All is done to control and reduce the emotional feeling of the victim's family. The participants on reconciliation processes might be praying for God and singing religious song (*Menzuma*), and even begging for mercy. In this arrangement the negotiation continues.

Conflict resolution management begins by a free conversation between the two parties. Dialogue and negotiations are important to get the facts and reasons of conflicts, and to make a decision about the truth. After negotiation, the offender has to apologize and the victim will forgive.

The *Abegars* collecting the data from disputing parties, society members and police, is essential for managing the discussion between conflicting parties. Hence, the *Abegars*

are bringing back order and harmony in the community. Reconciliation is inevitable for restoring harmony among a society and making peaceful interaction between those who are at variance. Reconciliation will not be easy. It requires taking a risk in being the first to extend oneself to another.

What is needed to stop the pain and bleeding? Forgiveness and apology are, both of which are different from formalized methods of justice and can provide healing and the freedom to move on, both for the victim and for the offender, even when justice is flawed or incomplete. Forgiveness and apology is not the same as forgetting, but it can re-frame past offenses and our own failures in such a way that it takes the negative power from the past that can consume and control us and transforms it into new understandings, motivation for change and in some cases, the ability to enter into new mutually beneficial relationships.

When a perpetrator genuinely asks for forgiveness for what he or she has done, it can profoundly relieve the victim or the families of the victims from being swallowed up in anger, resentment or retaliation, finally providing closure to painful events. Apologies will make us more accountable to be different in the future. Only then can we put in place workable relational or societal structures that will best protect us as people who will sometimes fail each other; however, we cannot establish such new safeguards if we refuse to admit we even need them. Yet, we must also learn to forgive when offenders lack remorse or deny responsibility; for otherwise, we give control of our futures to such offenders.

Based on the data obtained from FGD participants, interview, there are three major conflict resolution procedures within *Abegar* indigenous conflict resolution system: the case of the homicide *Key dem* (red blood) or *Tikur dem* (black blood).

Family reconciliation

When a person kills/murder/ someone, he and his family would be going far from your home to another place because of the fear of the revenge from a relative of the deceased. After a time, the perpetrator relatives go to *Abegar* and they want to resolve the conflict peacefully with a relative of the deceased. Then, *Abegar* send a message by executive (*dereta*) to relatives of the deceased that says “the perpetrators families want to reconcile with you. Therefore, in this time, come and resolve the conflict with us peacefully”. Mostly, the perpetrator’s family accepted the message because they do not want to interrupt with the *Abegar* system and society. If the family accepts the call, they put butter on the spire of the *dereta* (the messenger). In that time family reconciliation process is made with both families, without the presence of the perpetrator.

Blood reconciliation (Dem Maderk)

Participants on focus group discussion explained that when a perpetrator who absconds from the locality or is after under arrest legally wants to return and to live peacefully within their community, he is afraid the revenge of the relatives of the deceased. Therefore, he will ask *Abegar* to make a peace with relatives of the deceased. *Abegar* would be resolving the conflict between the perpetrator and relatives of the deceased. This reconciliation system is known as blood reconciliation. To support family reconciliation process, it is important to minimize or remove the revenges from the relatives of the deceased. The processes have some participants like community elders, religious fathers, the perpetrator's relatives and relatives of the deceased, communities and religious materials. Ritual ceremony is the last step in resolving process after the two conflicting parties were building consensus. Mellese (2008) noted how ritual performance at the end of conflict resolution has a significant symbol, mainly in homicide case. The ritual process of conflict resolution is made with the belief to further strengthen the terms of reconciliation and to limit its reoccurrence. The ritual performance implies the successful completion of the reconciliation and symbolizes the integration of the disputing parties.

The ritual ceremony must be prepared by the families of the perpetrator. Every ritual practices have their own symbols and spiritual meaning to transforming disputes in peaceful relationship. Property exchange, prayers, jumping a gun, drinking and eating together, and animal sacrificing are the main practices in rituals. This practice is final process, and the trust between conflicting parties and their relationship is restored.

Compensation performance

When the perpetrator reconcile with the relatives of the decedents, he should satisfy the claims. This compensation system is fair and considering of his current economical level, accepted by community elders. Depending on his murder type, using material, and time, the compensation is banned. For example, if the perpetrator kills the person intentionally, the punishment is strong. The action is called *tikurdem*—black blood. Unintentional murder is called *key dem*—red blood. For an unintentional act, the punishment is considerate. For this act, the blood money is half of *tikurdem*. The so called “basabascha” compensation must be paid within a given time. In line with this, the study of Mellese (2008) at Wolayta of Sothern Ethiopia stated that based on the nature and type of conflict, the elder may decide on compensation, payment in kind or cash or simply warn the offender not to repeat the act in the future. After the victim's family became willing to accept negotiation and compensation, they eat together from one dish and everything is concluded by the blessing of the *Abegar*.

If the perpetrator did not complete the compensation within a given time, a conflict with *Abegar* appears. If this happens, they have to stop their work officially. This is

called “*qotitesebrol*”. In this period, the society would isolate perpetrator and his family from every social setting, and push him to complete it, or the community tells *Abegar* to replace the compensation type by other materials like cow, goat, camel, etc. The aim of compensation is to prevent the occurrences of revenge.

Relationship between Abegar indigenous conflict management and the formal state law

The study noted that the relationship between formal courts and the indigenous conflict management in Haberu Woreda is healthy and smooth, as they complement each other. Currently, the court system and the indigenous conflict management work together with full overt support or recognition of each other. The formal state law officially recognizes the existence of the customary dispute resolution systems in Article 34.5 of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) constitution.

According to the data obtained from elders and FGD participants, there is a relation between *Abegar* institution and the formal court system, and they work together in collaboration. It was argued by the informants that one of the institutions cannot be successful without the other, because the formal mechanism has their own legal means (police force, military) to maintain order in the area, but the indigenous one has the experience and traditional authority to harmonize the relation of the people and strengthen social cohesion.

As observed in the study area, formal courts in Haberu Woreda are usually cooperating and give assistance to the elders’ council (*Abegar*) so as to settle the case through the indigenous conflict management mechanisms. For example, when two individuals enter into conflict and submit their case to the court, it is usual to ask the community elders to the plaintiff to withdraw his/her charge formally whenever possible before the police prove the allegation through witness. Based on the Ethiopian penal code, the court frames the charge and allows them to resort to their indigenous mechanisms. Furthermore, the community elders are required to submit their verdict and the fines and compensations given to the victim.

Conclusions

In the present study, it was clearly mentioned that conflict is inevitable and natural, and it prevails in any society. *Abegars* are considered as the father of peace, the ears and eyes of God. They teach about peace and love for their people; and they pray for the good of the society.

Based on the data obtained from interviews, observation and focus group discussion show that, the causes of the conflict in the study area are abduction of girls and women, violation of social values (insult), theft, conflict over claims of a girl, competition over ownership of land, and extramarital relationship with married woman and unmarried

girls. Drunkenness is also the most potent sources of conflict, especially for youths. Moreover, interpersonal and inter-group (family) conflicts are the observed types of conflict. The highly observed conflict is homicide; the killing of one person by another, whether premeditated or unintentional. There are two types of homicide. The first is *Key dem* (red blood). The second is *Tekurdem* (black blood): vengefully killing someone, motivated by revenge, in the cause of conflict on farming lands/border conflict/, conflict on having relations or wanting another man's wife, conflict on case of inheritance between families and so on.

In this study, *Abegar* indigenous conflict resolution system uses community based reconciliation processes and procedures. Reconciliation is inevitable for restoring harmony among a society and making peaceful interaction between those who are at variance. Based on the data obtained from FGD participants interviews, *Abegar* indigenous conflict resolution system has three major community based reconciliation procedures:

Family reconciliation—reconciliation process is made with both the deceased's family and perpetrator's family, without the presence of the perpetrator,

Blood reconciliation (Dem Maderk)—resolving the conflict between the perpetrator and relatives of the deceased.

The processes have participants such as community elders, religious fathers, the perpetrator's relatives and relatives of the deceased, communities and religious materials with ritual ceremony. Finally, *Compensation performance*—when the perpetrator reconciliates with the relatives of the decedents, he should be satisfy the claims. This compensation system is fair and considering of his current economical level, accepted by community elders depending on his crime.

The study noted that, there is a relation between *Abegar* institution and the formal court system and they work together in collaboration.

Recommendations

In a New Ethiopia, victims, offenders, victim-offenders (victims first who then become offenders), offender-victims (offenders first who then become victims), those complicit with such offenses and bystanders must all find ways to become a nation of people who can live, work and flourish in harmony. This will not happen unless we face ourselves and each other with openness to reconciliation and the rebuilding of a new vision for a shared future.

This is the work of the Solidarity Movement for a New Ethiopia is about. It is about not being passive about our future, but instead, helping to set in motion the kind of unity and solidarity that can bring about a more sustainable democracy, greater accountability under a strengthened system of fair and impartial justice, robust freedoms, a vibrant

economy and greater opportunity for all. In unity and in solidarity, a new, better and more just Ethiopia will be possible.

Furthermore, the curriculum of the educational system should be required to include indigenous conflict resolution systems to be taught in peace and justice programs. Government and policy makers should give attention to develop the framework of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms and its relevance for the local community. Such a strategy should be spread, to become useful for the development of local communities.

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