

LENIN KUTO – AYEHU BACHA – GEMECHU TAYE

Guarracha: An Indigenous Inter-Ethnic Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Institution among the People of South Central Ethiopia



***Guarraacha*: An Indigenous Inter-Ethnic Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Institution among the People of South Central Ethiopia**

LENIN KUTO* – AYEHU BACHA** – GEMECHU TAYE***

*Department of Oromo Folklore and Language,
Oromia State University, Ziway, Ethiopia
leninkuto@gmail.com

**Department of Oromo Folklore and Literature,
Jimma University, Jimma, Ethiopia
ayew.bacha@yahoo.com

***Action Aid Ethiopia,
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
gedatc@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article deals with *Guarraacha* institution, which is very important in inter-ethnic peace building and resolving conflict among people of south-central Ethiopia. This institution was named after the Oromo term '*Guarraacha*' (literally meaning black) to indicate its power in inter-ethnic peace building and conflict resolution. It is one element of Oromo *Gadaa* system which was established time immemorial to sustain peace between Oromo and non-Oromo neighboring ethnic groups. The data for this study was collected through interview, observation and focus group discussions in 2014 and 2015. As revealed by this study, *Guarraacha* institution is a guarantee for sustaining peace among people of south-central Ethiopia by managing conflict over boundary, grazing land, looting of cattle and water points. Overall, the study concluded that *Guarraacha* institution has real significance in inter-ethnic peace-building, sustaining social harmony and inter-ethnic conflict resolution. In *Guarraacha*

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institution, people rebuild lost peace and order of *Waaqa* (God) by performing purification rituals. There is no corruption in *Gurraacha* institution since all activities are undertaken according to *Waaqa*'s law and order. There is no false oath in this institution because such act is believed to have negative consequences. The oath of *Gurraacha* institution which are made during reconciliation process transcend generations. This institution is the model of conflict transformation which is hardly found in today's world. Therefore, using this indigenous institution for future policy formulation in the country as inter-ethnic peace building and conflict resolution model is important for the realization of sustainable peace and development.

KEY WORDS: *Gurraacha* institution, peace building, *Gadaa* system, inter-ethnic, conflict transformation, Oromo

Introduction

Interethnic conflicts have existed since the dawn of humanity and our world is experiencing more conflicts. Results of conflict might include but are not only limited to losses of lives, destruction of property and trauma, all of which are responsible to trigger retribution (ISAJIW 2000). Traditional indigenous societies by their very nature tend to be communal, collective, and more prone to foster an atmosphere of peaceful co-existence (CONETH-MORGAN 2005). The application of traditional customs and values in reconciliation efforts may result in a more communal grassroots involvement and thereby contribute substantially to eradication of the root causes of the conflict and to holistic reconciliation.

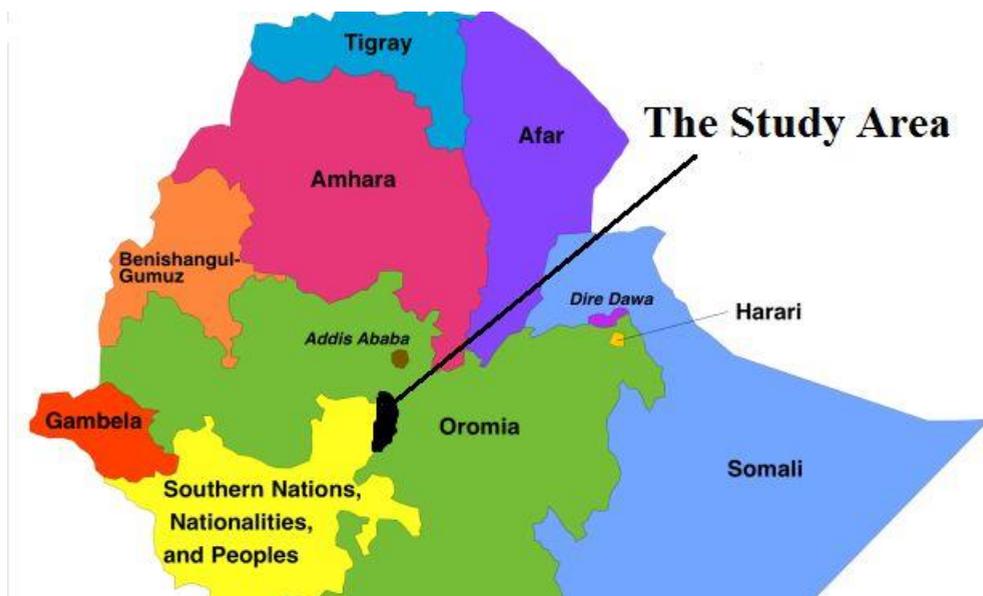
Similarly, a traditional approach to peace building is based on the premise that sustained peace and order in society results from the moral authority exerted by the communal group over its members. In pastoral communities, peace building takes the form of elders from two neighboring clans playing an important part in defusing tensions and conflicts, which usually revolve around the control of grazing land or water (FORTES – EVANS-PRITCHARD 1940). The wisdom and experience of the elders is manifested in clear and well-articulated procedures for conflict resolution in which all the parties to the conflict are given the chance to express their views. On the other hand, the elders were vested with cultural authority to act as arbiters and even give judgment on the rights and wrongs of a dispute submitted to them for resolution and then suggest a settlement, although they may have no power of physical coercion by which to enforce them. But often the pressures of culture guarantee obedience.

Ethiopia is composed of several ethno-linguistic communities with different histories, languages, and cultures. Despite their diverse historical origins and with several points of

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contacts over the centuries, all of them have coexisted as nations among nations. The origins, direction of movement and modes of integration among ethnic or linguistic communities in the unfolding historical processes in the traditional Ethiopian polities had been a multifaceted voyage that could understand a bit more exactly in its context-specificity (LUBO 2012).



From Ethiopian ethnic groups, Oromo, Mareko, Silte and Meskan people have boundary with each other in south-central Ethiopia. As neighboring people living adjacent to each other for centuries, these ethnic groups had multi-dimensional relationships. The historical relation that these ethnic groups had with each other can be described in terms of hostility and cooperation. The relationship among these ethnic groups has made up a history of conflict, accommodation and integration. They designed *Gurraacha* institution to regulate their interaction and ensure peace and harmony. This institution has time-tested qualities in transforming conflicts in the region and realizing peaceful co-existence. Therefore, this study tries to shed a light on the philosophy behind this institution so that the world can learn from it so as to lessen conflicts which are devastating human lives across the world.

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Gadaa system¹ governs all aspects of Oromo life, relations with other communities, and interactions with both social and natural environment. As a result, the Oromo have strengthened the process of ethnic integration with their neighbors. Oromo and their neighbors' relationships were/are shaped by indigenous inter-ethnic conflict resolution institutions which solve problems related with the interrelationships of people of different ethnic origins.

Only two studies are available regarding indigenous peace building institutions between Oromo and non-Oromo ethnic groups or clans. The first one is the work of Tsega which deals with *Michu* (a bond of friendship), *Harma Hodha* (system used to establish a kind of parent-child relationship between the Oromo and other groups) and *luba-baasaa* (mechanism by which the Oromo used to incorporate members of other ethnic groups) and *Meedhicha* institution (an institution which non-Oromo communities were supposed to assume positions of full equality with the Oromo) (TSEGA 2002). The second one is the work of Asebe which focuses on the role of cultural practices as inter-ethnic connectors, especially *Gondoro* and *Wodo* traditions in integrating Guji, Burji and Gedeo ethnic groups in southern Ethiopia (ASEBE 2012).

Tsega's work was limited to Metekkel region of Ethiopia and Asebe's work was restricted to southern part of Ethiopia. Their work did not touch the south-central Ethiopian people in which *Gurraacha* institution is active. Also, they did not discuss *Gurraacha* institution and its role in peace building and conflict resolution.

Lenin highlighted about this institution in his article. He merely pointed out how other non-Arsi clans participate on *Tajoo* ritual to present conflict cases and some types of conflicts resolved by *Gurraacha* institution (LENIN 2016).

As far as the researcher's knowledge is concerned, no deep research has been carried out on *Gurraacha* institution, which is a pillar for sustaining peace among the people of south-central Ethiopia. Therefore, to fill these gaps, this study focuses on the indigenous peace building and conflict resolution institution by focusing on *Gurraacha* among Oromo, Silte, Meskan and Mareko people of south-central Ethiopia.

It is believed that the study of patterns of ethnic conflict management may offer a better

¹ *Gadaa* system is indigenous Oromo democratic governance system. It is system of generation classes that succeed each other every eight years in assuming political, military, judicial, legislative and ritual responsibilities. (For more detail see ASMAROM 1973, 2000).

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understanding of the complexities and accessible mechanisms to ensure ethnic harmony and peace. This paper is meant to be a contribution towards the ongoing quest for new means of managing ethnic conflicts. This study is also important to unearth the historical relationship between these groups as a means to realize the contemporary relationship. Additionally, it is important to investigate how economic and political changes at local and national levels have shaped the relationship between these ethnic groups, which in turn is helpful to appraise the prospect for future relation between these ethnic groups on the basis of the existing circumstances. On the other hand, the study can really show how the customary principles of conflict resolution play an important role in the ethnic relations and preserved their solidarity. Finally, this study enables the new generation of these ethnic groups to develop the objective of revitalizing the culture of peaceful co-existence and mutual benefit which at the same time enhance the restoration of local methods of inter-ethnic conflict resolution among the groups.

Overall, the research investigated:

- The concept of *Gurraacha* institution,
- Historical overview and kinds of conflicts addressed by *Gurraacha* institution,
- The main actors and participants in *Gurraacha* institution,
- The role of *Gurraacha* institution in peace building and conflict resolution.

The Concept of Peace in Oromo: An Overview

According to Asmarom, among the Oromo, the concept of peace goes beyond the human domain. Peace is a pervasive and sustained concern in moral life. The long blessings that are given daily by Oromo elders are prayers for peace. The theme of peace is everywhere. Thus, the Oromo believe that everything must be at peace for societal well-being (ASMAROM 2000).

Similarly, the concept and practice of peace among the Oromo are based on traditional values and beliefs anchored in the *Gadaa*, the politico-military and ritual system of the Oromo. He further explains that Oromo term *nagaa* literally means peace, but a definition that includes everything that it implies has yet to be given (TENNA 2013). Observations of Oromo ritual and ceremonial activities suggest that peace is the harmony of things or parties involved in certain relations. It is the harmonious relation between the different parts of the human and cosmic orders. For the Oromo, peace is understood as one of the necessities of life. In the

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absence of peace, even the fulfillment of all other basic necessities cannot be adequate for the preservation and development of human life.

Likewise, prayers and blessings are important part of the daily life of every Oromo. In those prayers, the most important word is peace. In every moment of prayer, peace is asked for the community (AGUILAR 1996, cited in TENNA 2013).

Every greeting, prayer, ritual and political and judicial protocol invokes peace. Greetings are inquiries about peace and assertions of peace. Bolstered by notions of equality, reconciliation and redistribution, peace is a foundational social idea that informs the structure and ethics of Oromo institutions, serving both political and spiritual ends (BASSI 2005).

Inter-Ethnic Conflicts: An Overview

Ethnicity, inter-ethnic relations and inter-ethnic conflicts can be looked at through primordialism, instrumentalism and constructivism approach. Primordialists view ethnicity as natural and innate to human identity based on fixed deep primordial attachments to a group or culture. The proponents of primordialist accounts of ethnic conflict argue also that ethnic groups and nationalities exist because there are traditions of belief and action towards primordial objects such as biological features and especially territorial location. Constructivists on other hand view ethnicity not as objectively 'given', but rather as fluid, situationally defined, and strategically manipulated, subjective and rational socio-cultural constructions (BARTH 1969). Barth also attests that the issue of ethnic relations can be better understood if the nature of the relationship is singled out. Ethnically diverse societies carry various degrees of conflict potential. Causes of conflict among these ethnic groups can be explained in terms of economic, political, and social/cultural factors. Inter-ethnic relation can take the form of hostility and conflict.

Sisay portrayed this idea as the following: "in Ethiopia, ethnicity is an enormously complex issue of concern. Inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts over issues of identity, governance, and competition over resources (mainly over grazing land, over cattle, over water points and over cultivable land) are common phenomenon" (SISAY 2007:7).

There is no central theory that describes the *Guarracha* institution in inclusive and conclusive terms. Yet, many features of the conflicts in the area can be analysed from the lens of primordialism. The study also exploits some tenets of constructivism.

In north-eastern Wellega where Oromo live in close proximity with Amhara migrants, the funeral association known as *Qire* is a social support institution which takes on some conflict resolution roles. It is managed by the elders of the community and is involved in the

settlement of interpersonal and other types of disputes arising in the community (ASSEFA 1995).

Guji and Burji formerly resolved conflicts through traditional mechanisms, such as the *Gondoro* and *Wodo* traditions. The decline of these traditions has made conflict resolution more difficult. The *Gondoro* tradition is a mechanism of conflict resolution through a ritual procession between victim(s) and perpetrator(s). During the reconciliation process, both sides brought sacrificial animals (sheep from Burji and cows from Guji) for the ritual. Likewise, the *Wodo* practice was a peaceful exchange of booty (captive men or livestock) (ASEBE, 2012).

Peaceful and even cooperative relations between the Oromo and neighboring ethnic groups, which might be developed into social and cultural integration, are more common. In southern Ethiopia, there are good relations and assimilation between the Oromo and the Hadiya, Sidama and Gurage and so on. Likewise, in Kenya, there were and are significant relationships between the Borana and Garre, Sakuye, Rendille, Pokomo and other groups. Conflicts and warfare have existed throughout human history, and naturally border raids and sometimes violence did occur between these groups (TSEGA 2012:194).

The Oromo have *Gadaa* customary institution to prevent and manage not only conflicts but also all aspects of their life which is concomitantly peace-building foundation with neighboring communities. One of these institutions is *Gurraacha* by which intermarriage, mutual harmony and interdependence between the Oromo, Mareko, Silte and Meskan, is realized.

Materials and Methods

In this study, researchers used interview, observation and focus group discussion. Accordingly, interview was used to understand the participant's point of view rather than making generalization about behavior. Researchers used open-ended questions, some prepared in advance and some rising naturally during the interview. Thus, 12 purposefully selected key informants were interviewed. This includes the Arsi, Jille, Mareko, Meskan, Sodo and Silte elders (two individuals from each group).

Observation was another method which was used in this study. By this method, researchers observed conflict settlement processes organized by the *Gurraacha* institution leaders at Koshe town, the administrative town of the Mareko district. They observed *Gurraacha* institution gathering at this town while they were investigating the case of stolen cattle from Mareko people. The researchers obtained information about this *Gurraacha* gathering from

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Experts of Adami Tulu Culture and Tourism Office. The researchers used language translators to capture the discussions.



Figure 1: *Guarracha* gathering at Koshe Town. Source: photo captured by the researchers in February 2015

For the purpose of this research six focus group discussions were arranged. The first two groups were composed of *Guarracha* leaders. The researchers also discussed with two groups composed of Mareko, Silte, Meskan and Sodo at Koshe town and the other two groups at Batu and Maki towns respectively. They discussed about concepts, role of the institution in peace building, relation of ethnic groups, aspects of cooperation, how the institution works, process and procedures and its history with the discussants. Finally, interpretative and descriptive approaches were used to analyse data.

The Concept of *Gurraacha* Institution

Gurraacha is an Oromo term literally meaning ‘black’. Conceptually, blackness is a symbol of powerfulness and purity in Oromo worldview. It also symbolizes the mystery of *Waaqa* (God). Oromo use black for something feared and unknown. For instance, *Waaqa gurraacha* (black God), *halkan gurraacha* (black night), *ganna gurraacha* (black summer), *bosona gurraacha* (black forest) and *bishaan gurraacha* (black water) to express the power of black/blackness.

Therefore, *Gurraacha* institution was named to indicate the power of this institution in peace-building and conflict resolution among the people of south-central Ethiopia. *Gurraacha* institution is feared throughout communities of its members. Doing something wrong and standing in front of this institution is believed to be followed by the curse from *Waaqa* (God).

Most of the time, people use the name of *Gurraacha* to settle personal or group conflicts on spot by mentioning the institution saying, ‘please do not touch me for we have oath of *Gurraacha* between us’. No one refuses this lamentation and continues the conflict for *Gurraacha* is respected and feared. If someone harms somebody by refusing it, it is considered as the refusal of *Waaqa*’s (God’s) will who created all living and non-living beings.

The leader of *Gurraacha* institution is known as *Abbaa Gurraachaa*, literally meaning the father of black. People use the saying ‘*Abbaa Gurraachatiin si qabe*’ and ‘*Abbaa Gurraachaa sodaadhu*’, which literally means ‘please I beg you in the name of *Gurraacha* leader’ and ‘please fear *Gurraacha* leader’ respectively. Refusal is unthinkable for something pleaded in the name of *Gurraacha* institution and its leaders.

On the other hand, elders slaughter black animals in *Gurraacha* institution as a sign of oath and purification on reconciliation process. Sacrificing black animals is believed as taking oath for each other in front of *Waaqa*, who is symbolized by blackness. In reconciliation process, they slaughter black animal and break down its backbone and bury all materials like gun, spear and shield which are used at war or conflict time to indicate eradication of retaliation between the conflicting parties.

Historical Overview of *Gurraacha* Institution

According to the elders, Arsi Oromo started making law at *Madda Wolaabuu*, *Odaa Roobaa* which is found in present day Bale zone of Oromia Region. The first law is known as *Seera*

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Wolaabuu, the law of *Wolaabuu*. Arsi refers this law everywhere and every time when they make laws and decisions. Thus, the law of *Gurraacha* institution is inherited from *Walaabuu*'s law; it is not a new phenomenon; it is as old as *Gadaa* of Arsi.

The law of *Gurraacha* was also declared at this centre. They declared laws as following:

“Do not clash with non-Oromo neighbours for there is an oath of Gurraacha between you; if conflicts broke out unintentionally, reconcile with them by sacrificing black bull and breaking its backbone; Gurraacha keeps peace among you and neighbouring societies surrounding you, the one who break this law will be punished by God” (Focus Group Discussion at Batu town, February 2015).

According to *Gurraacha* leaders, reconciliation by *Gurraacha* institution takes place when a conflict happens between Oromo and non-Oromo neighbouring ethnic groups. The Arsi Oromo also says '*Gurraachi ka Ambaa diinaati*' which means '*Gurraacha* works between Oromo and non-Oromo groups'.

On the other hand, neighbouring ethnic groups used *Gurraacha* institution to demarcate their boundary. The process of demarcating boundary between these neighbouring societies was as follows.

Gurraacha and *Gadaa* leaders and representatives of neighbouring communities were available. *Gurraacha* and *Gadaa* leaders first started digging the land to indicate legality of the demarcation. While demarcating the boundary, they sacrificed black bull and broke its backbone as symbol of oath among them. They also erected a big stone to indicate the boundary and to avoid contention over land in the future. They dug the ground by a material known as *Waraana qotaa* (digging material which has two apexes). They also entombed soil by material known as *wantee gombittii* (a conical shield) which is sometimes called *wantee kakuu* (shield of oath). Entombing and digging soil by hand is unethical in boundary demarcation process because this material was declared to serve this purpose on declaration of laws at *Wolaabu* (H/AHMED at Batu; Focus Group Discussion at Koshe town).

Moreover, they exchanged each other *Itillee* (cowhide used as a sleeping mat), *Okolee* (cultural milking bucket), *gaadii* (milking strap), and spear to show their integration and unity. Additionally, they exchanged their children and breastfed them to show their unity and quest for peace.

According to H/AHMED, they said the following prayer with *Gurraacha* and *Gadaa* leaders as a form of oath while performing the above ritual.

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Afaan Oromo Version	English Version
<p>Ciini kun cidha Gurraachaati Gurraachi buyyaa Waaqaati Adharraa Itilleen teenna takka</p>	<p>This is a ritual of Gurraacha Gurraacha is the oath of God Our sleeping mat is common from todays on</p>
<p>Walitti dhufnu wal bulchina</p>	<p>We host each other when we come to each other</p>
<p>Manni kee mana kiyya</p>	<p>Your home is my home</p>
<p>Manni kiyya mana keeti</p>	<p>My home is your home</p>
<p>Okoleen kee kiyya</p>	<p>Your milking container is mine too</p>
<p>Okoleen kiyya keeti</p>	<p>My milking container is yours' too</p>
<p>Gaadiin kee kiyya</p>	<p>Your milking strap is mine too</p>
<p>Gaadiin kiyya keeti</p>	<p>My milking strap is yours' too</p>
<p>Finni kee finna kiyya</p>	<p>Your child is my child</p>
<p>Finni kiyya finna keeti</p>	<p>My child is your child</p>
<p>Malkaan kee malkaa kiyya</p>	<p>Your river is my river</p>
<p>Malkaan kiyya malkaa keeti</p>	<p>My river is your river</p>
<p>Karaan kiyya karaa keeti</p>	<p>My road is your road</p>
<p>Karaan kee karaa kiyya</p>	<p>Your road is my road</p>
<p>Dheedni kee dheeda kiyya</p>	<p>Your grazing land is my grazing land</p>
<p>Dheedni kiyya dheeda keeti</p>	<p>My grazing land is your grazing land</p>
<p>Diinni kiyya diina keeti</p>	<p>My enemy is your enemy</p>
<p>Diinni kee diina kiyya</p>	<p>Your enemy is my enemy</p>
<p>Rakkadhu sitti dheessa</p>	<p>I escape to you in time of difficulties</p>
<p>Rakkattu natti dheessi</p>	<p>You escape to me at time of difficulties</p>
<p>Daangaa kana Waaqatu buuse</p>	<p>This boundary is demarcated by God</p>
<p>Daangaa kana buyyaa Gurraachaattu buuse</p>	<p>This boundary is demarcated by oath of Gurraacha</p>
<p>Kana Waaqatu jedhe</p>	<p>This is the word God</p>
<p>Kana Waatatu jedhe</p>	<p>And declared by elders</p>
<p>Buyyaa Waaqaa kana ka diige</p>	<p>Anyone who bent this God's Oath</p>
<p>Xiyiitiin isaa bishaan haa ta'u</p>	<p>Let his/her bullets changed to water</p>
<p>Sibiilli isaa bishaan haa ta'u</p>	<p>Let his/her spears changed to water</p>
<p>Wonteen isaa erbee haa ta'u</p>	<p>Let his/her shields become leather</p>
<p>Fardi isaa harree haa ta'u</p>	<p>Let his/her horses become donkey</p>
<p>Waaqan abaaramee Waatanis abaarama</p>	<p>He/she will be cursed by God and elders</p>
<p>Tun toltu! Haa qabattu</p>	<p>This is good! Let it be pertained</p>

After this declaration, the involved groups consider each other as people of one origin. A person who breaks this oath cannot succeed; *Waaqa* harm him immediately following his action.

After a long time of this demarcation, Menelik subjugated the southern nationalities adjacent to Arsi Oromo. He tried to antagonize bordering societies to subjugate Arsi by war. Menelik invaded Arsi after six battle of failure. Menelik war caused a lot of destruction and loss of life especially from Arsi side. In response to this, Arsi *Gadaa* declared war against Menelik sponsored groups and defended itself successfully for the first time.

Arsi Oromo describe about the evilness of Abyssinian in general and Menelik in particular as following, “*Mililik falfaltutu nutti dhufee utubaa dharaa ka hin buqqaane nu jidduu dhaabee haga adhaa ollaa waliin nagayaan buluu nu wallaalchise, haganumaa wanti dandamanneef daddafnee gurraacha itti falanne*” (Focus Group Discussion at Batu and Meki town). This extract is to mean, “Menelik who was witchcraft came to us and erected deep-rooted untruth pole between us; we could NOT live with our neighbours peacefully until now; we adapted to its hectic action by sacrificing black bull”.

The Main Actors and Participants in *Gurraacha* Institution

In *Gurraacha* institution, everybody has a role. Women bring oath materials, *okolee* (milk container), *heexoo*², *daadhii* (honey mead), *gaadii* (milking strap) and children to the reconciliation ritual. They also spray *heexoo* and *daadhii* to symbolize chasing bitterness and bringing the pleasantness among the people on reconciliation. They also facilitate the ritual by preparing different kind of feasts. Moreover, they ululate while peace is nurtured and absolution is made.

Gurraacha and *Gadaa* leaders are also very important actors in *Gurraacha* institution. The institution itself is guided by *Gadaa* laws. Especially, *Gadaa* leaders are important on homicide reconciliation ritual. Most of the time, they need *Gadaa* leaders for praying and blessing purpose in reconciliation rituals.

Gurraacha institution has its own leaders who come from all bordering ethnic groups. The

² *Heexoo* (*hagenia abyssinica*) is a highland tree used to clean human abdomen. Especially, it is famous for the tapeworm vermifuge obtained from the female flowers. The seeds of this bitter tree are also used to ward off illness. People drink *heexoo* as preventative medicine once in three months.

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elders of *Guarraacha* institution are also known as *jaarsa nagaan*, elders of peace. Leadership revolves between all members of *Guarraacha* institution. Most of the time, they are elected from bordering clans of these ethnic groups to avail themselves on spot in time of conflicts.

Members of *Guarraacha* institution are multilingual and they know each other's language in most cases. When a person or certain groups who know only one language come to the institution with conflict case, they use a translator. However, this occurs in rare cases because most people from all ethnic group of *Guarraacha* institution know each other's language. In *Guarraacha* institution, it is advantageous to know most languages of the members to be elected as a leader of the institution. For instance, the current *Guarraacha* leader is from Mareko and does know most languages of the members. Therefore, the criteria of selecting elders for *Guarraacha* institution are closeness to the border, knowledge of languages of most member ethnic groups, age and knowledge of physical and human history of the region in addition to being trustworthy to the society, fairness and willingness to serve the people.

Youngsters similarly play an important role in *Guarraacha* institution. They bring the sacrificial animals, oath materials like *wantee gombittii* (conical shield) and *waraana gotaa* (digging material).

On the day of reconciliation by *Guarraacha* institution, all relatives of two conflicting ethnic groups are present. Males and females, children and elders have to come for reunion and to re-establish peace. In general, on reconciliation process by *Guarraacha* institution, all segments of societies participate without any prohibition. Most of the participants come to learn its values from the ritual.

The Role of *Guarraacha* Institution in Peace Building and Conflict Resolution

Guarraacha institution plays pivotal role in peace building between Oromo and bordering ethnic groups. *Guarraacha* is peace insurance among people of south-central Ethiopia. It facilitates inter-ethnic community dialogue; it organises and activates ethnic groups in the prevention and management of conflict. It also restores and transforms relations among ethnic groups as part of post-conflict interventions and serves as a vehicle of ethnic relations for peaceful co-existence.

It is an oath and guarantee between Arsi and other ethnic groups. It is a law of peace and boundary which keeps peace of *Waaqa* and integrates humanities. In case of counterfeit issues, slaughtering, piercing the stomach of cattle and breaking the back bone of black cow

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is very painful and sinful in front of *Waaqa*. *Gurraacha* institution is very feared and respected in Oromo and its neighbouring ethnic groups in south-central Ethiopia and people trust the institution which validates the institution.

Someone who refuses *Gurraacha* oath may face different problems from both *Waaqa* and *Gurraacha* institution. According to the member societies of *Gurraacha* institution, taking oath on *Gurraacha* reconciliation is believed as standing in front of *Waaqa*; it is considered as a law of *Waaqa* which has to be respected by all human beings.

These ethnic groups cannot live without each other because they have strong social, historical, geographical, cultural, economic and political ties. These neighbouring people have trade relationship; Oromo sell its cattle at market like Hinseenoo, Buttaajeraa, Qoshee, Gabremaraa and Daalochaa and buy different crops for consumption. Ethnic groups from Southern nations also sell their products in markets like Baatuu, Bulbulaa, Jiddoo, Adaamii Tulluu, Maqii and Abboosaa.

On the other hand, they live in difficult environment which changes from time to time. There is no dependable climate to live a stable life in the area. Therefore, these neighbouring people help each other during the time of drought. They escape to each other from natural hazards. They also migrate to each other in the time of difficulties. For instance, they migrate to each other with their cattle to save their lives. They use each other's market in their life. To realise all these, there must be peace among them. *Gurraacha* institution preserves peace among the members by building and rebuilding it.

Gurraacha institution is also very important to handle inter-ethnic homicide cases in the study area. For instance, when somebody kills someone from the member groups of *Gurraacha* institution, the slayer and his relatives have to escape from their village and admit to *Gurraacha* leader to confess. Then *Gurraacha* leader with *Gadaa* leaders goes to slain relatives to announce the killer's clan.

The issue goes to reconciliation step by step by facilitation *Gurraacha* institution and *Gadaa* leaders. On the day of reconciliation, the slayer and all his relatives come to victims' kraal by driving black sheep and bull. After that, the slayer slaughters the sheep and breaks its backbone in two and put them in different directions. Then all participants from both sides pass between the broken backbones of the sheep.

After performing this ritual, they sacrifice black old cow known as *dullacha keeraa* (the cow of peace) as symbol of peace and purification. Before this old cow is sacrificed, two

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conflicting parties touch back of the cow through laid *bullukoo*³ and say *keer, keer, keer* (peace, peace, peace!) in one sound. After sacrifice, two parties smear each other by the blood of sacrificed cow to indicate reconciliation.

After this sacrifice, the slayer and his relatives come to the slain's house by covering their head to show deep sorrow. Then both parties spray honey mead on each other and slayer's relatives put on cultural blanket on father and mother as well as the slain's uncle and *raada gaalee* (connector heifer) given to the slain's brother. In the next morning, all participants sit in circle and tie their legs by the intestine of sacrificed old cow. This is the final oath on which anyone can complain if there is something wrong/unfair throughout the reconciliation process. Then all participants start eating and drinking feasts.

Starting from the reconciliation day, these two conflicting families become relative to the extent of not marrying each other. They communicate with each other on different rituals including funeral ceremony. These oaths of *Gurraacha* institution which are made during the reconciliation process transcend generations. This institution is the model of conflict transformation which is hardly found in today's world.

Gurraacha institution was also established to uphold the commonness of the people in the area. They re-started the institution to build and rebuild the peace that is lost by the strangers to exchange commodities in market and to go through each other's land without any fear. *Gurraacha* institution was also used as a resistance mechanism to the new comers (Abyssinians) and their rule. People of the area resisted the divide and rule policy of *Neftegnas* by organizing themselves under *Gurraacha* institution and shown solidarity of the societies.

When the central government is overthrown in Ethiopia, *Gurraacha* institution revives instantly. Accordingly, it was revitalized during the fall of Menelik, Haile Selassie and Derg regime respectively. *Gurraacha* institution was very important to settle conflict and restore peace among neighbouring societies when central government falls down and societal order becomes questionable. The tyrants escalated the differences among people for their political consumption. Hence people get relief to freely use this institution when governments fall

³ A big cultural blanket made from cotton. It is honored and respected cloth in the society. Traditionally this type of cotton blanket is worn by elders on different rituals like marriage, prayer and thanks giving. The man who marries a daughter gives this cultural blanket for the father and mother with other different gifts as symbol of respect. People also provide *bullukoo* to each other on reconciliation ritual as symbol of respect and reunion.

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down.

Some autocrats have been trying to ban this institution to lengthen their ruling time by using the diversity of the people. For instance, Emperor Haile Selassie tried to outlaw the institution because Meskan, Merako and Sodo refused to fight each other by referring the oath of *Gurraacha*. Therefore, *Gurraacha* institution was considered as the resistance mechanism to the successive Ethiopian rulers. Before the coming of Abyssinian invaders, there were no major conflicts among the neighbouring societies since the boundary of all societies is demarcated clearly by the decision of local representatives from all respective societies.

Stealing of cattle is one source of conflict between the members of *Gurraacha* institution societies. Especially, looting cattle at night have been part of their tradition and the symbol of pride when *Gurraacha* was weakened by the rule of Menelik. Some Menelik agents tried to weaken the relationship of bordering societies by initiating a robbing culture among the people. The robbers and thieves in respective societies work together to exchange what they have stolen from their respective societies. For instance, Mareko robbers or thieves bring stolen things to Oromo thieves and vice versa. Thieves from Arsi drive the stolen cattle up to the border of Mareko and hand over to Mareko thieves. *Gurraacha* institution returns the stolen cattle and other things for all the societies have smooth communication. As a result, the institution serves as a local Interpol. In general, this institution builds peace and resolves all kinds of conflicts arising between these societies.

Recently, *Gurraacha* institution was revitalized in 2010 in a new form when robbing became prevalent in these neighbouring societies. The stealing agents started bribing money from people to bring back the stolen cattle which is sometimes equivalent with the cost of the cattle. The elders of these respective societies revitalized the institution to end this and other problems.

Discussion

Today, indigenous peace-building, conflict resolution and transformation institutions like *Gurraacha* are rare. Up to now, traditional approaches to conflict transformation have not been adequately addressed by scholarly research and political practice. For the most part they are widely ignored, although empirical evidence from relatively successful cases of conflict transformation demonstrates their practical relevance (BOEGE 2006).

The indigenous justice systems administer justice based on customary rules and traditional procedures. The rules and procedures derive their authority from practices and beliefs embedded in the way of life of the community. The indigenous justice systems employ

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restorative and transformative principles. Opportunities for achievement of justice are higher under African indigenous justice systems than with an African state justice system, partly because, the empowerment of victims, offenders and the community is a central principle of African justice (ELECHI 2004). With the same token Aberra clearly states that since the Ethiopian formal justice system was brought in from outside and introduced by way of adopting new codes, the people are not familiar with it. As a result of the imposition of an alien legal system, the customary justice systems and the values and institutions of the majority of the Ethiopian people have been delegitimised and they have been disempowered (ABERRA 2013).

Similarly, according to all informants of this study, *Gurraacha* institution is more effective than government laws. Ethiopian Government justice system focuses on punishing the offender rather than dealing with complicated nature of conflicts that involve groups. The government does not consider the belief and values of people which is very important to bind people together in its decision about the issues. The government focuses only on physical and material destruction in the process of investigation rather than dealing with human beliefs and values to resolve conflicts.

As a system, Ethiopia follows the continental legal system where the laws are in the form of codes. With the adoption of the 1957 Penal Code, the Ethiopian state assumed monopoly over all criminal matters. The subsequent Ethiopian rulers have taken a series of legislative measures to abolish the Indigenous Justice Systems in Ethiopia. The 1960 Ethiopian Civil Code repealed all customary laws (Art. 3347) except for very limited matters. The 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution has made a slight departure from the past in giving some room to customary justice systems. Under Articles 34(5) and 78(5) of the constitution, disputes related to personal and family matters can be submitted for customary adjudication. But concerning criminal matters, Ethiopia has continued to pursue the earlier monist and centralist policy (ABERRA 2013).

This study also confirms the notions of Aberra's research. There are frictions between elders of *Gurraacha* institution and local administration. The government suspects the elders and follows them critically. The elders are also forced to report any activity to the local government bodies. They fear to handle some conflict cases especially homicide.

Traditional approaches focus on the psycho-social and spiritual dimension of violent conflicts and their transformation. Indigenous methods of purification and healing, carried out by customary healers, priests and other spiritual authorities are of utmost importance for the mental and spiritual rehabilitation of victims and perpetrators. Specific conflict transformation endeavours are pursued in accordance with customary law, that is the entirety

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of orally transmitted norms and values and practices that govern the everyday life of the community and that are legitimised through supra-human and super natural institutions such as the spirits of the ancestors, the gods or god (BOEGE 2006). Similarly, in *Gurraacha* institution, people rebuild the lost peace and order of *Waaqa* (God) by performing purification rituals. There is no corruption in *Gurraacha* institution because all activities are undertaken according to *Waaqa's* law and order. There is no untruth oath in this institution because if one makes false oath, it is believed that *Waaqa* harms him in short period of time i.e. cattle, families, and crops become unproductive. The oath is taken in front of the people including *Gurraacha* leaders and elder whose power is given to them by *Waaqa*. People's eye is believed to be not good in case of taking untrue oath in front of the multitude.

According to Jenkins, the Afrocentric perspective is more communal where priority is given to the community rather than the individuals involved in criminal dispute (JENKINS 2004). In African indigenous system, the society is characterised by strong ties. Disputes and conflicts are viewed as issues concerning the entire community, which requires that the justice system gives weight to the restoration of social harmony. In the law of *Gurraacha* institution too, crimes are not treated as individual offences. For instance, if an individual from Silte kill Arsi person, it is called *Silxeen Arsii ajjeese*, which means Silte killed Arsi.

The indigenous justice systems are more accessible, flexible, participatory, and relevant; people favour these justice systems. People are loyal to their group, not the state. Legitimacy rests with the leaders of that group, not with the state authorities, and people do not obey the rules of the state, but the rules of their group. Reference to those traditional authorities and institutions will enhance the legitimacy of any measures taken with the goal of conflict transformation and peace-building (BOEGE 2006; ABERRA 2013). Aberra also portrays that research findings in Ethiopia show that indigenous justice systems are characterised by more accessibility to the people (ABERRA 2013). Procedurally, the process in customary justice is participatory, where parties are given a sufficient time of hearing and work their way to the solution.

This study also confirms the above-mentioned notions. *Gurraacha* institution is very close to the societies than government justice system. It also settles conflicts by considering values, history and cultures of people in dispute. Government needs an eyewitness/witness to investigate the reality of conflict cases. The truth is given only for those who can bring an eyewitness/witness; but *Gurraacha* investigates any case relying on people's values and culture without witness and can investigate any case successfully for it is entrenched in the belief system of the communities. Sometimes, governments arrest people blindly without identifying the wrongdoer and civilians when conflicts take place; however, wrongdoers

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sometimes escape from the government completely; no one can escape from *Gurraacha* institution because the institution is well entrenched into the communities and *Gurraacha* institution is believed to be regulated by the law of creator who is omniscient and omnipresent.

It is their holistic worldview and their respect for truth and laws which make the Borana a law-abiding society not afraid of punishment. Among the Borana, what makes both the ruling and the ruled obey and enforce the laws is the free will and commitment of everyone. Every Borana believes the *Gaaddisa* (shade where the elders sit) is a dwelling place of *Waaqa* where only truth is spoken. For the Borana, the worst crime is *soba* (lying) (TENNA 2007; ABERRA 2013). Similarly, according to informants of this study, someone may bring false information when taken to formal court; but there is no fabrication in the process of *Gurraacha* institution. There is saying which goes, '*dubbiin Jaarsi Gurraachaa qabe dubbii Waaqni qabeen qixa*' which means 'the issues taken to elders of *Gurraacha* institution is equal to the issues submitted to God' validate this reality. Sometimes, wrongdoers refuse to confess at a government court; but they admit at *Gurraacha* institution for *Gurraacha* institution has the power to persuade people. People fear *Gurraacha* institution than government court because standing in front of *Gurraacha* institution is considered as standing in front of God.

There are three interrelated concepts in relation to addressing conflicts. These are conflict resolution, conflict management and conflict transformation. The first one assumes that conflict is a temporary incident that can be put to an end; this is not plausible in many cases. Conflict management stresses on productive treatment of differences and lessening of destructions instead of addressing the root causes. Conflict transformation however is concerned with transforming the root causes of conflict. Accordingly, the destructive consequences of a conflict can be modified or transformed so that self-images, relationships, and social structures improve as a result of conflict, instead of being harmed by it. Usually, this involves framing of issues, actions, and other people or groups. Conflict usually transforms perceptions by accentuating the differences between people and positions. Lederach believes that effective conflict transformation can utilize this highlighting of differences in a constructive way and can improve mutual understanding (LEDERACH 2003). From the perspective of conflict transformation, intervention has been successful if each group gains a relatively accurate understanding of the other. In the end, improving understanding is the objective of conflict transformation, in spite of parties differing or even irreconcilable interests, values, and needs. The philosophy vested in *Gurraacha* institution is also this one. Those in feuds become relatives. Causes of disagreements are changed to grounds of cooperation.

Conclusion

No human community can afford to live in isolation from others. This is because society is fluid and hence there is a higher degree of integration between communities coming into contact with one another. Furthermore, the forces of nature, ecological imbalances, the effects of famines and population movements, natural calamities such as floods and epidemics and other similar factors foster the need for mutual inter-dependence and co-existence between ethnic groups. Empirical data from the field indicate that interactions between the people of south-central Ethiopia were in most cases peaceful. These neighbouring societies have long history of relationships and coexistence. They have strong cultural, economic, social and political relationships. *Gurraacha* is a grass-roots initiative for peace in a sense that it depends on engaging the whole spectrum of all ethnic groups in the region. This mutual co-operation and co-existence became achievable through *Gurraacha* institution from time immemorial. This institution stemmed from *Gadaa* system. This research revealed that the most significant relationship is vested in economic mutual benefits like marketing to each other, migrating to each other in time of drought, giving cattle, food crops in time of need and fighting common enemies together on their land. After the region was invaded by Menelik, *Gurraacha* institution has been fluctuating from time to time. Therefore, the indigenous values in *Gurraacha* institution such as endeavour for tolerance of diversity, respect, equality, and others could be sustainable in contemporary politics if they are encouraged. The institution promotes these values and principles: respecting human rights, inter-ethnic peaceful conflict resolution, mutual assistance, moral obligations, inter-ethnic cohesion and harmony, providing of asylum to inquirers and others which the entire world has been struggling to realize.

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