

Peace-making from Within: The Tradition of Conflict Resolution in Northern Afar, Ethiopia

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Abstract

A study was conducted among the Afar pastoralists of northeastern Ethiopia on local traditions of resolving inter-clan and inter-ethnic conflict. Qualitative data was collected using ethnographic tools such as Observations, Key Informant Interviews and Focus Group Discussions. The findings of the study revealed an increasing trend in inter-clan conflict over the past 4-5 decades. The major source of conflict has been competition over scarce natural resources including grazing land and water. There are assemblies run by council of elders representing different clans in north Afar selected on the basis of age, wisdom, honesty and proper knowledge of local conditions. Inter-clan and inter-ethnic conflicts were better addressed by the indigenous institutions because of their participatory, transparent and flexible nature. Government politico-judiciary institutions such as the local court and security forces often played a facilitating role to complement traditional structures. The ritual of peace-making often involved compensation and the sharing of food and drinks to symbolize the end of animosity between conflicting parties. The fact that the Afar have now been sedentarizing because of economic, social, and political pressures has had negative impacts on inter-clan conflicts and the way such conflicts have been handled. Sedentary life resulted in further fragmentation of Afar culture and social organization and the breakup of traditional pastoral institutions upon which strong economic and social support networks were built. The paper finally recommends an adequate recognition of traditional peace-making institutions with possible integration of the formal and informal institutions for sustainable peace and security in the area.

Key words: Pastoralism, Conflict resolution, Afar, Ethiopia

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Introduction

Conflicts in general and resource conflicts in particular can at times become harsh and devastating, resulting in violence, resource depletion, deteriorations in livelihood, and displacement of people. If unabated, such conflicts can dissociate the whole fabric of society (Unruh 2005). However, the word conflict carries exaggerated negative connotations. It is often thought of as the opposite of co-operation and peace, and is most commonly associated with violence or disruption. This view of conflict as negative is not always helpful. In non-violent settings it can often be seen as a force for positive social change, its presence being a visible demonstration of society adapting to a new political, economic or physical environment (Warner 2000).

In addition to 'violent conflict', some writers (e.g. Markakis 1993) have used "raid" or "rustling" to indicate a state of affairs in which a group of people carry out armed attack against another for the sake of stealing livestock and not necessarily for territorial expansion.

Conflicts are best understood as dynamic, interactive social processes, rather than single, independent events. Although no two conflicts are identical, there is similarity in the structure of conflicts and their dynamics exhibit broadly analogous patterns and stages of development (Doucet 1996). Conflicts do not evolve in a linear way. Rather, conflict is seen as non-linear, progressing and retrogressing between various stages, sometimes skipping a stage totally, sometimes stagnating at a particular stage for some time and then making leaps all of a sudden. The conflict stages are formation, escalation, endurance, improvement or de-escalation, settlement or resolution and reconstruction and reconciliation (Doucet 1996).

Burton (1993) made important distinctions between disputes and conflicts. The former involve competing but nevertheless negotiable interests and issues of gain or loss while the latter implies the development and autonomy of the individual or identity group, and are hence bound up with non-negotiable human needs and questions of identity.

Statement of the Problem

Conflict is an unavoidable and an inseparable part of the social structure. However, violent conflict often leads to loss of life and property wreckage and hence traditionally African societies have been keen to contain, regulate and resolve conflicts to ensure that peace and stability is restored and communities are not divided by blood feuds. The *Afar* pastoralists are no exception.

In Ethiopia, pastoralism has for many years been considered a backward way of life and the people who earn their livelihood from it regarded as lawless and aimless. The Amharic term for pastoralist, *Zelan*, is derogatory *because* it literally means wanderer (Getachew 2001). Hardin's "tragedy of the commons" thesis which portrayed pastoralists as environment-unfriendly and pastoralism as an unsustainable way of life has negatively influenced policy making in East Africa for many years.

The post-1991 period has witnessed a radical shift in political administration in Ethiopia. With the advent of a new ethnic based federalism, the *Afar* gained power to govern their region (Gadamu1994). Besides according to article 78(5) and article 34(5), of the Ethiopian Constitution, full recognition has been given to traditional and religious courts and procedures (USAID 2000). The *Afar* of northern Ethiopia have their own traditional institutions for conflict resolution at both micro and macro levels, i.e. conflicts arising within the community as well as those with neighbouring Tigrayan highlanders. The institutions operate on the basis of shared normative framework and customary laws that emanate from them.

There are a number of studies on East African pastoralism in general and the *Afar* in Particular. However, as far as the latter is concerned, the focus has often been in the southern part of the *Afar* region. Although all *Afar* exhibit similar modes of livelihood and social organization irrespective of territory, there are observable differences emanating from varying degrees of exposure to different ecological, social and political processes in the country.

Literature Review

Theoretical Background on Conflict

Generally, conflict will occur wherever there are scarce resources, divided functions in society, different levels of power, competition for a limited supply of goods, status, valued roles, or power (Haas 1990, Leff 2009). According to Adedeji (cited in Bujra 2002) global conflicts often stem from an overall lack of security emanating from an uncertain political future based on experiences of past social maladies created by the failure of states to provide protection to groups. Bujra (2002) also noted that according to many young scholars, political factors in the form of poverty, unemployment of the youth, unequal distribution of resources, ethnicity and manipulation of sectarian ideologies by the youth were identified to be key elements in triggering violent conflicts.

Brodnig (1998) attributed African conflicts to such factors as widespread environmental degradation, overpopulation and cultural necessities leading to ethnic rivalry. One very prominent anthropological point of view explains violent conflicts in connection with cultural and/or biological selection mechanisms (Ferguson 1999). Proponents of this perspective are apt to describe violent conflict as ultimately goal-oriented and the character of combat itself related to the evolutionary stage occupied by the society in question (Ferguson 1999).

According to Helander (1995), one of the problems with international efforts to deal with African conflict situation is the failure to address the composite nature of African conflicts. One cannot view violent conflicts in isolation from at least two other types of major problems that currently scourge the African continent: political turbulence and resource depletion. Butler and Gates (2010) pointed out that there has been a 'drought' or a 'famine' associated with every African civil war during the last 15 years and this association was also highlighted at the Rio summit on environment and development in 1992.

The most common anthropological explanation of violent conflict is that it is an expression of a particular culture. 'Culture' here is taken in a restricted sense of symbolic belief systems. Countless older ethnographic documents attribute war matter-of-factly to a list of elicited cultural rationales – as quests for revenge, prestige, trophies, supernatural power, etc. Values, religious conceptions, or worldviews that encourage violent conflict sometimes have been taken as a given, sometimes explained by or related to other institutions or conditions. Currently, hermeneutic or interpretive approaches to non-state violence stress that goals, conduct, and meaning should be seen within the logics of broader cultural understandings (Butler and Gates 2010).

Some scholars (e.g. Ferguson 1984) saw conflict and warfare in relation to the social structure with particular reference to patterns of decent, marriage, and post-marital residence. The essence of their argument is that war is a cooperative male activity. Within a society, loyalties of men may be divided by different social institutions ("conflicting loyalties" or "cross-cutting ties") and this reduces the possibility that men will use force to resolve conflicts (Ferguson, 1984). In other words, relationships established as a result of intermarriage and social integration restrict people from using violent means of resolving differences. Other scholars (e.g. Schlee 1997) adopted a different view of the consequences of divided loyalties, and argued that cross-cutting ties serve as factors for conflict escalation. According to them, due to the territorial dispersal of decent groups, individuals from one group may be easily reached for reprisal killing by others with whom their group developed enmity. Affines are likely targets in such inter-tribal conflicts. Such reprisal killings may result in a vicious circle of revenge and counter-revenge. Lang (quoted in Schlee 1997) has emphasised this dimension of

cross-cutting ties by quoting the proverb that “those whom we marry are those whom we fight”. Some recent contributions to the literature (e.g. Fisher 1998) also explained conflict in terms of cultural perceptions. They argued that mind sets or cultural lenses with which the disputing (and potential intervening) parties view the world are crucial factors for conflict.

Conflict and Conflict Resolution in the Context of East African Pastoralism

The Sahelian countries that expand from Senegal in West Africa to Somalia in the East have a significant number of pastoral and agro-pastoral people, a large portion of whom have been driven out of their traditional production system as a result of several factors such as the process of state ‘modernization’, economic transformations, environmental degradation and conflict (Hendrickson 1997). The new thinking on pastoralism rejects the old view that herding is not economically viable and environment friendly. In addition, it is now recognized that conflicts of interest are expected in a situation where environmental variability is high and a marked differentiation of actors. Violent resource based conflicts may also occur when pastoralists’ livelihood strategies are threatened. Further increase of violent conflict is caused by the lack of harmony between traditional and modern strategies of access to resources and handling conflicts (Hendrickson 1997).

Today, rural development polices in semi-arid Africa take into account the issue of conflict management between multiple stakeholders. However, according to Hussien (1996) such policies are not often based on adequate ethnographic and historical understanding of the underlying nature of conflict, adding that the analysis of local level practices is vital before policies are designed and implemented. Hendrickson (1997) supported this view by stating that ignoring the broader social dynamics in rural societies undermines local capacities for conflict management. There is also a growing awareness today that responses to local conflicts should consider the larger economic and political context (Hendrickson 1997).

Cousins (1996) noted that the purpose of traditional courts or tribunals in Africa was to reconcile the disputants and to maintain peace, rather than to punish the wrongdoer. The "winner-takes-all" judgements favoured by adversarial systems of law were generally avoided in favour of a "give-a-little, take-a-little" principle. Procedures in the ideal-typical court were simple and informal and took place in public.

Customary legal processes put focus on fairness and substantive justice rather than strict rules of law, and the chief, with the advice of his councillors, generally

took the final decision. Rights of appeal existed but were seldom used. The distinction between criminal and civil wrongs was blurred, and most disputes were in relation to personal wrongs. Most claims were for reparation or compensation, and sanctions were generally in the form of fines; there was no imprisonment (Cousins 1996).

Following a close investigation of traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution in Barabaig and Maasai societies, Bradbury (1995) argued that the customary institutions proved to have remarkable capabilities for effective handling of conflicts. Such institutions put emphasis on reconciliation of the parties involved in conflict and function on the basis of generally accepted rules and sanctions. Elders who mediate conflicts are bestowed with the authority to make decisions and impose sanctions. However, there are also some challenges. Cousin (1996) stated that one of the difficulties of customary law in contemporary African societies lies in the fact that new situations that cannot be properly addressed by customary laws have emerged. Examples include: the modification of customary land rights; imposition of new administrative structures; when conflicts involve parties from different cultures (e.g. between local resource users and multinational corporations, international conservation organisations, or government officials from different cultural backgrounds), etc. This might also occur in situations where conflicts over resource use occur between pastoralists and farmers in zones of expanding cultivation by in-migrating agro-pastoralists (Bradbury et al 1995).

Some scholars (e.g. Ross 1995) have identified some commonalities between formal approaches and informal procedures of negotiation and mediation. The emphasis on joint problem solving was for example identified as a core similarity providing the potential for possible merger of some features of both mechanisms in innovative ways, by extracting the strengths of both.

In Ethiopia, several studies on pastoral conflict (e.g. Ayalew 2001; Getachew 2001; Dereje 2003; Markakis 2003; Abdulahi 2005) have focused on resource competition, land use and tenure conflicts, small arms proliferation and related factors. More recent studies (e.g. Hagmann and Mulugeta, 2008) have argued that historical and political factors such as the encroachment of the Ethiopian state into the peripheral lowlands have resulted in violent pastoral conflicts which challenged the regional and federal governments in the country.

Objectives

The overall objective of the study was to examine local strategies of conflict resolution in the northern part of *Afar* region, Ethiopia. The specific objectives were to:

- examine the major causes and consequences of conflict in northern *Afar*
- identify the factors for conflict escalation and de-escalation
- identify local institutions of conflict resolution and examine their mode of operation
- examine the rituals involved in the process of conflict resolution
- examine the performance and effectiveness of local institutions
- assess the challenges and prospects of indigenous institutions of conflict resolution in the wake of current social, economic and political dynamics in the area

Methodology

Description of the Study Area

The *Afar* regional state is one of the nine ethnic based regions in federal Ethiopia following the ratification of the new constitution in 1994 with a total population of 1,411,092 (CSA, 2008). It covers an estimated area of 96,707 square kilometers. The capital city is called Semera. It is home for the *Afar* people who are predominantly pastoralists and agro-pastoralists. Only 13.4 percent of the *Afar* population lives in urban centers. The *Afar* regional state is divided into five zonal administrations. This study was conducted in Abala wereda with Ab'ala town as its capital. According to CSA (2008), it has a total population of 37,963, of whom 20,486 are men and 17,477 are women.. The northern *Afar* combine animal husbandry with cultivation in order to augment the ever declining pastoral income.

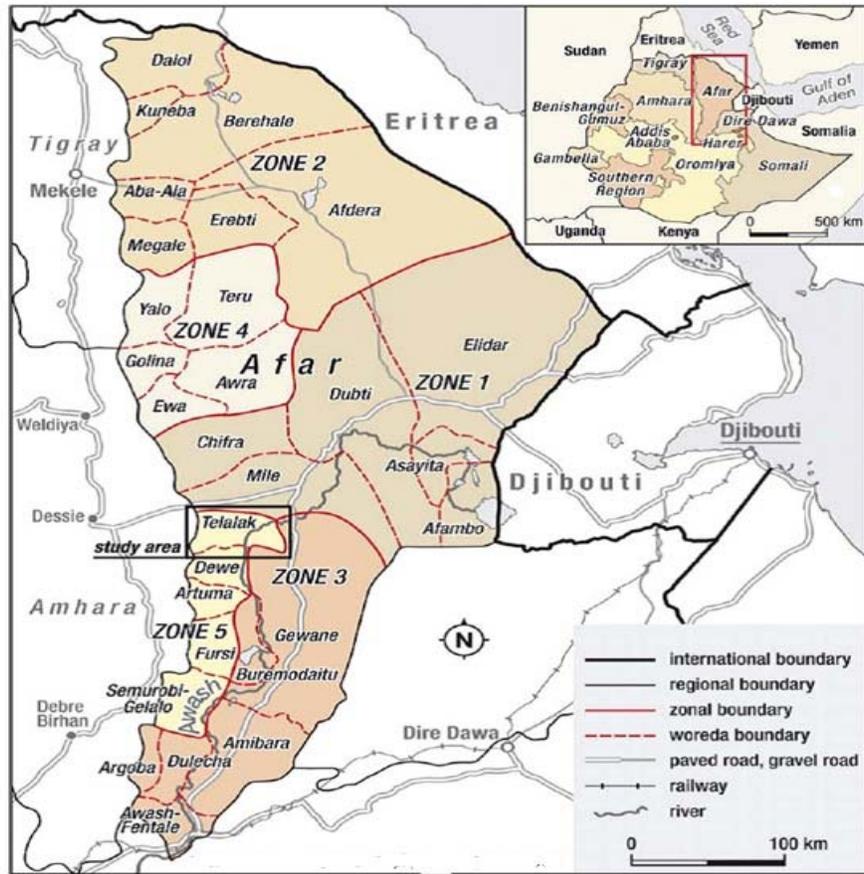


Figure 1: Map of Afar region (Source: MCE 2001; Cartography: M. Wagener, 2007)

Methods of Data Collection

This ethnographic study employed both primary and secondary data collection. Primary data was obtained from different sources in northern Afar including local residents, elders and the administration while secondary data was collected from published and unpublished materials as well as reports. Following is a description of each of the data collection methods used in the study:

Informal interviews: Before detailed and well-structured interviews were conducted, attempts were made to conduct informal discussions on some general issues relating to their modes of living and socio-economic conditions. In the course of these discussions, different categories of *Afar* (old and young as well as men and women) were asked about their perceptions of the institutions of conflict resolution, their views on the decisions made, and their evaluation of the effectiveness of the decisions in restoring peace in the area. Informal interviews also opened a window of opportunity for the identification of appropriate key informants and opinion leaders for more structured interviews.

Key informant Account: Twenty two elderly and resourceful key informants were approached for the semi-structured interviews within the *Afar*. Fully structured interviews were not preferred because the elders were expected to supply ample and valid information if allowed to speak with minimum guidance. The semi-structured interviews were intended to access information on conflict, local tradition, and trends in conflict resolution across time.

Focus Group discussion: Eight Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held with various groups of people representing different socio-economic brackets (gender, age, income and wealth levels, and occupations). Two focal groups were conducted with key personalities in the administration belonging to the different sectors while the remaining six FGDS involved local residents in the study sites.

Participant Observation: I have partially observed and participated² in some dispute processing activities that took place at various levels. Apart from being an instrument for data collection, participant observation was also a tool for developing rapport with community members, thereby helping me gain trust among ordinary people. Participant observation was particularly useful to harness data on kinship based relations and identify the social and economic support networks which had repercussions for the occurrence of conflicts and their resolution.

Secondary Data: Secondary sources were also used to obtain data on background information on past and present socio-economic adaptations that are believed to have some impact on conflict resolution. Some data relating to dispute settlement were available in the *Woreda* Administration and Court. These were analysed and

²A full-fledged participant observation was not possible because of variations in ethnic and religious background of the researcher and the researched.

interpreted. Registered court cases were closely examined and analyzed in order to understand the extent and type of conflict cases reported to the state court.

Results and Discussion

Causes and Consequences of Violent Conflict in Northern Afar

The study revealed that the *Afar* realized that conflict, although usually mentioned as a bad outcome of social interaction, is unavoidable. In the context of the *Afar*, violent conflict was explained as a form of antagonism between two or more people believed to be caused by competitive interests fuelled by loss of self-control often traditionally associated with superstitious influence. When asked about the causes of local violent conflicts, traditional *Afar* informants usually mentioned such elements as greed, emotionality, lack of far sightedness and deficiency in restraint. A local elder further explained that the devil becomes active when these elements rule over human logical reasoning.

Afar informants asserted that conflict occurrences have dramatically increased after the 1960's during which the *Afar* encountered persistent droughts that led to enormous decline in livestock size and the resultant impoverishments. Most conflicts occurred as a result of competition over natural resources, mainly grazing land, water points and territorial disputes. Inter-clan conflicts often involved sub-clan and lineage members of the four major clans that have been dominant in northern *Afar*, viz., Damohita, Seka, Hadarmo and Dahimella clans. This has often been complicated by the history of bitter reprisals and counter-reprisals in successive generations³. Inter-clan conflict sometimes took the form of power struggle to establish political supremacy against an opponent. *Afar* relations with neighbouring *Wajirat* agriculturalists also followed similar trajectories. Until 1991, the *Wajirat* people have been in a better position to subjugate the *Afar* who lacked the proper organization and armaments to defend their territories. The *Wajirat* on the other hand enjoyed better protections by the natural topography (forests and mountains) with a centralized political administration.

According to Focus Group Discussants, the consequences of violent conflict were found out to be multifaceted. It crystallized poverty and separation of community members in blood feuds. It caused migration and displacement and loss of access to fundamental pastoral resources. Often, those who have been involved

³The social organization of the *Afar* is based on clanship. Hence interpersonal disputes often turn into violent inter-clan conflict which quickly spreads to different villages as the *Afar* have very efficient means of communication called *Dagu*.

in the confrontations happened to be able-bodied young and adult men who had family responsibilities and hence the death or injury of such economically active people often meant loss of livelihood for the entire household. Women and children were often not directly targeted in violent conflicts at all levels but they too paid heavy prices as conflict usually led to rape, displacement and migration. Besides drought, the *Afar* generally attributed the gradual decline of their herd size to violent conflicts with highlanders, especially in the remote past when organized raids and cattle rustling were common.

Factors in Conflict Escalation and De-escalation

Escalation is defined in the literature as an increase in intensity of a conflict. As conflict escalates, the disputants change from relatively gentle opposition to heavier, more confrontational tactics. Disputants change from only wanting to win themselves, to wanting also to hurt the opponent. In the context of East Africa, this may well be related to resource depletion (Butler and Gates 2010).

Many factors exacerbated conflict in northern *Afar*. The culture of violence particularly among neighbouring ethnic groups (such as the *Wajirat*) has been an important phenomenon which prepared young people for warfare against another group. Often the need to use force to achieve one's own cherished goals was legitimized and nurtured by oral tradition, folklore music and poetry. Local singers often sang songs of praise to heroes who vehemently attacked *Afar* territories causing damage on human lives and property without sustaining injuries on themselves.

Inter-clan and inter-ethnic conflicts sometimes escalated when state agencies rush to serve justice without proper consultation with traditional institutions. When offenders were brought to the court and rigid verdicts enforced, tensions and potentially explosive situations hover in the villages, polarizing conflicting parties further.

In addition, the entire region bordering Eritrea is a potentially volatile area with cases of hijacking and killing of tourists reported in recent times. Conflicts in neighbouring countries tend to be quickly felt in *Afar* territories. This point has been supported by other empirical studies in Africa. Waithaka (2001) for example argued that the spill over effects of conflicts in the larger regional context adversely affect relations between pastoral and agricultural communities belonging to different ethnic groups. Besides, political elites often used ethnic and local identities to mobilize support to press their ulterior power motives.

Over the last few decades, the *Afar* have experienced frustrations over declining economic performance and state of deprivation due to drought and poverty which increases the propensity for conflicts at all levels. Today, the fact that there is easy access to modern firearms (such as the Russian made AK-47 rifle) both in the highland and lowland areas made it difficult to deal with outcomes of violent inter-group conflict because of the huge casualty when conflicts broke out.

Conflict de-escalation, on the other hand, is the opposite of escalation. It occurs as parties tire out, or begin to realize that the conflict is doing them more harm than good. They then may begin to make concessions, or reduce the intensity of their attacks, moving slowly toward an eventual negotiated resolution (Waithaka 1999).

Traditional nomadic pastoralism is on the verge of disappearance in northern *Afar* region as a result of growing ecological problems, climate change and drought as well as long years of political marginalization. The *Afar* have now shown greater inclination towards adopting an agro-pastoral mode of production taking up other livelihood strategies such as crop cultivation, trade and wage labour migration. Sedentarization of the *Afar* redefined their relationship with neighbouring highland communities, facilitating social and economic integration between the two communities. This increasingly resulted in improved conditions and a peaceful co-existence.

Types of Traditional Institutions of Conflict Resolution

Conflicts generally occurred at various levels including the family, community, inter-clan and inter-ethnic levels⁴. The institutions involved in resolving the conflict also varied depending on the type and nature of conflict. Local disputes among family members were often referred to prominent elders in the neighbourhood. In the case of disputes among marriage partners, those who actively participated in the arrangement of the union have had the moral obligation to intervene. In exceptionally serious matters, the cases were often referred to the local *Sharia* courts for ultimate decisions.

Inter-clan conflict resolution processing takes place in *mablo* assemblies. Representatives of various clans form up a council of clan leaders to process conflict cases and finally reach a settlement based on the principles of negotiation, mediation and/or adjudication. Often a combination of several techniques is used flexibly in order to reach the desired outcome. Settlements are reached on the basis of tacit rules entrenched in *Afar* traditional norms and value systems.

⁴The focus of this paper is on the inter-clan and inter-ethnic levels because they are the most serious.

At the inter-ethnic level, representatives from the *Afar* and Tigray highlands organize themselves under the *Gereb* institution which unlike the inter-clan context is based on written rules. However, the foundations of these rules are to be found in shared culture of the *Afar* and Tigray ethnic groups. The institution is often led by a chairperson elected by members. Representatives of the two ethnic groups are elected on the basis of age, wisdom and a good sense of reasoning, honesty and impartiality.

The Rituals of Conflict Resolution

The procedures and rituals in processing inter-clan conflict cases largely depend on the extent of damage caused on individuals and property. Minor incidents are often easily settled following negotiations led by a limited number of the clan leaders of conflicting parties. When serious offences such as murder, heavy injury (or camel stealing⁵) is inflicted, more people are needed into the council of elders and those clans that are not primarily involved in the conflict take the lead in processing the conflict case with assured neutrality and impartiality. In the case of murder for example, the process starts with sacrifice of an animal, locally called *Waidal* (preferably a large stock, i.e. a camel or a cow) as a necessary precondition for initiating the peace process, and a necessary step for the burial of the victim without which resort to retaliation is always possible. Once the cornerstones are laid, further investigations are carried out for several days (usually up to forty days), during which the conflicting parties are advised to avoid regular contacts in order to evade possible reprisals and counter-reprisals. Clan members of the victim are usually put under solemn promise not to take any action against perpetrators of the killings. Once initial investigations are carried out behind the curtain, successive open air meetings⁶ are held to solidify evidences from witness accounts and testimonials based on argumentative presentations from conflicting parties. Under *Afar* customary rules, every *Afar* is expected to tell the truth and this is strengthened through oaths in front of religious leaders. It is an astounding experience to observe that every procedure in the assembly takes place in an orderly manner with every speaker taking turns one after the other in a logical order. Equally amazing is the way *Afar* elders speak eloquently with a rhetoric of

⁵Among the *Afar*, the camel is a highly cherished animal and hence any offence involving the camel is considered grave.

⁶The usual saying in the modern world, ‘Justice delayed is justice denied’ does not seem to hold true in the context of *Afar* traditional conflict resolution as the process might sometimes take years before a final settlement is reached.

influence occasionally supported by wonderful proverbs, parables and stories to substantiate major arguments and perspectives. It is expected that everybody exhibits respect and humility to the elders (clan leaders) who are bestowed with the symbolic authority to regulate the behaviours of fellow members of their clan and mobilize resources for the common good.

Conflicting parties are interrogated one after the other. Filing evidences and witnesses also form an integral part of the fact-finding mission of elders. Eventually, only the elders come together to share ideas and reach a settlement. Ultimate decisions are often based on a consensual arbitration rather than a one-man judgmental intervention. The *Afar* people recognize the importance of involving as many wise men as possible as there are always possibilities for different interpretations of ideas and practices. Differences in people's perceptions seem to be acknowledged. Once a general consensus is reached, a man is chosen to act as a spokesperson to reflect the collective decision of the assembly. He responds with a language of humility in a typically ritualistic manner. In a particular conflict resolution drama, a newly elected spokesperson had the following to say:

I know there are wiser men in this assembly. I would have been glad if they could speak on behalf of the council. I have no better qualities whatsoever but am rather inferior to the big men around me. However, I have been chosen to speak so I speak now. You know, in a race, one who is lame has to be placed a few meters in front of other healthy ones so that he does not fall far behind when the actual competition commences. Similarly, the wise men here are behind me and I, the weak, am to taking the lead...

The settlement of inter-clan conflicts is achieved through the tradition of forgiveness (*Afu*), transfer of compensation and sharing of food and drinks to symbolize the end of animosity, and the restoration of peace. The *Afar* say *Rabti Miki Tenemteishi* (meaning, let bygones be bygones) in order to capitalize on the importance of forgiveness. Clan members also have shared responsibilities in the contribution of blood money which is a crucial step in conflict resolution. Clan members share the good and the bad together. In the good old days, the *Afar* paid a good number of livestock as compensation. Today, cash rather than livestock is widely used and the amount to be paid has also substantially declined because of poverty.

Inter-ethnic conflict resolution follows a similar trajectory except that settlements reached are less enduring and more volatile. Long years of raids from the *Wajirat* highlands especially in the early times have created deep rooted inter-group resentments which complicated the way conflicts have to be handled.

The *Gereb* which serves as a traditional court institution picks up issues that are very serious and hence cannot be handled at an inter-personal level. A case in point is murder. The process usually starts with an appeal made to the council of elders. The culprit (and accomplices, whenever applicable) are hunted down and brought before the court in disgrace and humiliation. The family of the deceased are often given the courtesy to have a say on the direction and outcome of the court procedures. They however do not go for capital punishment in anticipation of possible mistakes committed by their own kin groups in the future. A spirit of forgiveness rather than revenge is often the norm. Otherwise, a fair and mutually accepted fine is imposed. Then, the usual procedures of oath swearing, compensations and joint feasts will follow. Elders will utter such blessings as “...may peace prevail in our territories,” “...may what is of the past be taken away by the winds in the highlands and the floods in the lowlands”.

Sometimes, villagers are unwilling to extradite the culprit by hiding him or arrange his disappearance. In such cases the *Gereb* powerfully reacts by imposing economic and social sanctions against the entire neighbourhood, preventing villagers from entering the local market and limiting their movement and social interaction with other people.

Even in times of peace, the council of elders who run the *Gereb* institution arrange periodic meetings in order to assess security situations in the area and discuss the way forward. Meetings are often arranged in *Afar* and Tigray territories alternatively.

Effectiveness of Indigenous Conflict Resolution

According to informants, the traditional institutions were generally believed to be effective although institutions that operated within the *Afar* were much more effective than the institutions for inter-ethnic conflict resolution. Several factors have contributed to such effectiveness. Firstly, the traditional institutions function on the basis of cultural norms that have been very well internalized by community members. Those local elders who handled conflicts were also from within the system and hence well known, trusted and respected by the community at large. Traditional structures have had comparative advantage over the modern courts because they were proved to be more flexible, transparent, democratic and participatory. The modern courts on the other hand operated on the basis of fixed code of laws not even well known to the majority of the people, especially given the fact that most *Afar* were unable to read and write. It was also mentioned that modern litigation was unaffordable for many ordinary *Afar*.

Secondly, the prime aim of a traditional conflict resolution strategy had less to do with restoring justice and more with seeking long term sustainable community peace based on a win-win approach. Besides, the resolution of a violent conflict based itself on shared responsibilities and accountability with everyone having a stake. Social sanctions rather than manifest physical or psychological damage lay at the centre of the settlement process. Continuity of the tradition has been ensured through informal peace education which often started at home with women playing a central role in the process.

Finally, the fact that the state also adopted a policy of recognizing and encouraging traditional conflict resolution at the grassroots' level gave the informal sector the freedom and leverage to work side by side with government judiciary systems adding to its state of effectiveness.

The northern *Afar* institutions of conflict resolution seemed to function with minimum direct interference from governmental structures. This applied to dispute resolutions at all levels of society. The state undertook some form of dispute processing in exceptional cases of armed violence in which the conflict culminates in complete chaos and social disorder. It was, however, almost always true that the state became active only at some stages. Government institutions played a role in controlling violent acts, referral of reported cases to local elders, and enforcement of decisions made by the council. Administrative authorities operated as catalysts whose roles were limited to facilitation. They also sometimes supported indigenous conflict resolution through provision of proper logistics during conflict processing stages. Therefore, it seems conspicuous that these indigenous institutions have not been undermined by the modern structures introduced by government. On the contrary, the government supported its structures and modern legal institutions appeared to work in harmony with the traditional institutions. In effect, the complementary existence between the formal and informal institutions have contributed to the resilience, effectiveness and continued existence of the latter.

Challenges and Prospects

Despite their effectiveness and good relations with state machineries, local initiatives in peace-making in the context of the *Afar* have not been well connected to the larger politico-legal framework at the national and international levels. Apart from the provision of adequate recognition and mutual support, the informal and formal structures have not been well coordinated and integrated with clear mandates for intervention. Often each operated independently and appropriate incentive mechanisms for traditional structures have been lacking. As Helander (1995) also noted one cannot view local conflict resolution systems in isolation

from the governmental agencies and the international processes at large. Besides, locally established peace agreements in low intensity conflicts are not likely to last long unless they are understood and supported by the measures taken by the external actors (Helander 1995).

With globalization, urbanization and cultural influence from the highlands, the indigenous culture of the *Afar* has gradually been losing its integrity which undermined its previously vigorous role in society. *Afar* informants argued that the institutions were much stronger in the past compared to the situation today. There have been clear evidences of declining gerontocracy that ultimately led to the gradual weakening of the tradition of conflict resolution. Traditional norms and value systems have constantly been diluted by the young generations who perceived such institutions as archaic and not fitting into the demands of a globalizing world. An *Afar* elder explained the current situation as follows:

In the good old days, our children listened to us. We had power and authority over them. We were very much influential. Today, all that has gone. We became like old dogs that can only bark but never bite or even create an impact of fear. The so called modern education has done our children bad. They [the young generation] have now developed contempt to their own tradition, a tradition that has existed for centuries

The ever declining pastoral income due to drought and resource degradation, coupled with social and demographic factors have forced the *Afar* to adopt agro-pastoral modes of livelihood. The current government policy also encourages settled agriculture through villagization programmes. These developments dictated a new form of social organization and an alteration of the traditional clan based social structure. While settled life brought new opportunities for improved access to social services, it has, on the other hand, weakened livestock-based support networks that made up the foundations of intra-*Afar* conflict resolution and peace-making. On the other hand, the settlement of the *Afar* pastoralists in permanent villages curbed the extent of mobility to potentially dangerous hot spots where inter-ethnic conflicts have remained rampant. This facilitated highland-lowland interactions in trade, and social relations enhancing a spirit of interdependence and collaboration based on mutual trust.

There is now a situation where the two groups cannot avoid or exclude each other. Some have developed strong social ties as bond friends (*Fiqur*) to the extent that they treated each other as belonging to the same kinship group. For example, on several occasions, my assistant and translator, an *Afar* from Kalla locality has always mentioned about a 'relative' who happened to be a Tigrayan migrant from

the highlands who had settled down in *Afar* territory since long time ago. They often exchanged gifts. In times of drought, the *Afar* sent some of their livestock to their close friends in the highlands for protection and better grazing conditions. There have also been incidents of inter-ethnic marriages between the two groups despite the fact that the *Afar* are Muslim and the Tigrayan highlanders are largely followers of Orthodox Christianity. According to many informants these intermarriages date back to the times of the Nobility⁷. With sedentarization, therefore, the extent of inter-ethnic conflict has diminished. When conflicts arose, members of both ethnic groups have been quick enough to initiate a peaceful resolution with the help of their traditional institution, the *Gereb*. A positive development in contemporary ethnic relations between the two groups had a lot to do with the significant decline in mass raids and cattle rustling.

Conclusion

Violent conflict is endemic to the pastoral system of the *Afar* given the extent of mobility and inter-group competitions over marginal resources. With increased degradation of natural resources and other accompanying compounding factors both from within and outside the pastoral system, inter-clan conflict occurrences have increased in magnitude and severity in recent years while inter-ethnic rivalries have generally subsided following continued inclination of the *Afar* to cultivation-based economy.

On the other hand, the *Afar* have long years of experience in meticulously handling violent inter-clan and inter-ethnic conflicts through well-established traditional structures and procedures. Indigenous conflict resolution provided better outcomes in terms of securing a peaceful and safe future and establishing harmonious relations among members of different clans, thanks to the wisdom of elders and a strong sense of morality in the normative framework that have taken root in the *Afar* social structure since time immemorial.

However, the traditional institutions of conflict resolution are currently at crossroads facing the threat of possible extinction due to continued social, economic and political pressures. While it is true that such institutions have hitherto been resilient, current global, national and local trends such as climate change, urbanization and the diffusion of western culture as well as government settlement policies have dramatically altered the modes of livelihood of the *Afar* resulting in the loss of old pastoral norms and value systems.

⁷There are widely held claims that Emperor Yohannes himself was married to an *Afar* woman who bore him a child.

Recommendations

- Conflicts are often caused by scarcity of resources and the resultant economic frustration. Hence, mechanisms for poverty alleviation should be designed and implemented in order to improve access to basic resources required to sustain production systems and the values associated with them.
- The current support and recognition of local traditional dispute settlement and conflict resolution institutions provided by the national constitution should be further encouraged and strengthened.
- However, beyond support and recognition more practical measures are needed to integrate the two systems in a more systematic manner allowing them to work side by side without the need for duplication of work.
- Both the modern and traditional systems seem to focus on the aftermath of conflict. It is absolutely mandatory that they start working on the prevention aspect taking pre-emptive measures before the breakout of deadly conflict at all levels.
- Inter-ethnic conflict between *Afar* pastoralists and Tigray cultivators in the highlands tend to be solidified through prejudiced feeling, ethnocentrism and the culture of violence. Hence, proper orientation and peace education should be arranged on both sides of the ethnic boundary. Joint development programmes involving both ethnic groups such as reforestation, soil and water conservation activities could be arranged to bring the cultural groups together and enable them to get to know each other better and facilitate social integration to avoid stereotypes and prejudices.

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