

Full Length Research Paper

The value of indigenous social knowledge* in managing intra and inter-group conflicts: Experience from South East Tigray, Ethiopia

Abrha Tesfay Asmerom

Department of Political Science and Strategic Studies, Mekelle University, Ethiopia.

Received 4 March, 2016; Accepted 1 September, 2016

This article portrays the importance of home-grown cultural values and institutions in addressing intra and inter-group conflicts in South East Tigray, Ethiopia with particular reference to Wejerat community. The paper draws that indigenous social institutions in the community provide an opportunity to maintain peace, justice, order and security within and outside the community with minimum cost by the application of social knowledge. It promotes social bond, peaceful co-existence and enactment of order at family, intra and inter-communal level. The paper yet examines that the community placed more focus on the cultural system presided over by various sections of the society like a council of elders, clergy men, women, etc; for dispute or conflict settlement and justice dispensation including homicide. It concludes that some social institutions are intact while some are nearly disappearing due to the influence of socio-cultural and political dynamics. The intact indigenous social institutions irrespective of their limitations such as Debarte (institution of women), Demer Ahiwat (at family level up to 7th line), the church and Gereb (usually at inter-group level) that are applied by the Wejerat community offer great prospect for peaceful co-existence and harmonious relationships at intra and inter-group level in pre and post-conflict periods than the modern technique of dispute resolution in law courts, particularly in areas where government oversight is weak and ineffective.

Key words: Indigenous social knowledge, Gereb, Debarte, Kanchi system, Demer Wejerat.

INTRODUCTION

Naturally human beings request secure life. To realize this, they establish strong cultural values that enable them to tone down dilemmas beyond state institutions. Hence, in the political-history of human beings, almost no society has ever lived out of the sphere of social order and admin. The input of cultural values in general and

conflict resolution values in particular for the purpose of keeping collective security, peace, justice and order is highly considerable (Abrha, 2005). In contrary to this, conflict exists in all walks of human kind. If meaningful interaction exists, the conflict occurs in all kinds of human relationships and social settings. Conflict is inherent. We

E-mail: wejerat@gmail.com.

*It is home-grown age-old social ability, skill, attitude, values and beliefs rooted in socio-cultural setting along with social institutions that people have about what is important, what differentiates right from wrong and good from evil, and what principles should govern how they lead their lives

Authors agree that this article remain permanently open access under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

can't evade it though we can minimize it through the use of various dispute settlement mechanisms like socio-cultural values. Of course, social values could be a challenge and an opportunity to make peace. What matters is the way we apply them in the given context, the right time and the right values (Mayer, 2000). Ethiopia as multicultural and multilingual country has many of these Indigenous essential peace-making values in different societal institutions. In many parts of Ethiopia, various communities have developed their own cultural values and social knowledge to govern their relations and to mitigate conflicts (Ambaye, 2008: 101 to 102; Uthman, 2008:78). Since time immemorial Eldership has been part and parcel of Ethiopian culture where spiritually guided mediation is deep rooted in the Ethiopian history. Even foreign visitors like Alvares and Almeida as cited in the work of Ephraim wrote and gave their witness about this proven high moral status and very sophisticated dispute settlement system in Ethiopia three hundred years ago (Ephraim, 2008: 4 to 5). These social values serve as opportunities to solve issues of national importance even in 21st century Ethiopia beyond communal and family disputes (ibid; Tarekegn 2008:17).¹ When conflicts occur, these social institutions play an imperative role to normalize all these problems.

The Northern and Central highlands of Ethiopia practiced with decentralized administration for many centuries up until the turn of the 20th century. Tigray as part of this region had and persists to have its own *sirit* (laws) and traditional devices for conflict resolution in line with the recognized state institutions. These *sirit* and customary mechanisms operate even in the absence of such formal institutions (Assefa, 2010: 5). The Wejerat people are one of the Ethiopian societies found in South East Tigray who own strong home-grown cultural values with rich social knowledge common among others to manage intra and inter-group conflict (Abrha, 2005 and 2011). The principal socio-cultural and political ideology of the Wejerat people is termed as *Kanchi*² (literally means 'equality'). It is used to be the foci of communal life where ethical standards are established to govern the people for centuries prior to the introduction of modern administration to the land of Wejerat (ibid). Some of the principal components of the *Kanchi* system among others responsible and intact to date to address intra and inter-group disputes are *Demer Ahiwat*³, *Rikbe kahinat* or

*guba-e likawnt*⁴ (priest's institution-church), *Debarte*⁵ and *Gereb*⁶ (ibid). These institutions have substantial role to play in enhancing peace, justice, order and security in their cultural and institutional perspectives though they lack credit and attention from the side of government. This article is thus intended to give a reader a glimpse into how the Wejerat people are managing social relations to bring about peace at inter and intra group levels by applying aboriginal diverse indigenous cultural values at their disposals. Finally, it analyzes the value of social knowledge in managing intra-communal and inter-communal relations for the sake of communal peaceful co-existence in the focus area.

Physical settings and demography of Wejerat

Currently, Wejerat is the sub-*Wereda* of *Hintalo-Wejerat Wered*⁷ located in South-East Tigray, Ethiopia. Formerly, it was one of the ten *weredas* of *Enderta Awraja*.⁸ It used to constitute twenty *embas* (villages) termed as '*Isra-Adi*' (Abrha, 2005; Degafi, 2001 E.C⁹; Hiluf, 2001). Nowadays, the former 20 physical and administrative units (*embas*) of Wejerat are set into eight '*kebeles/tabias*'¹⁰ namely: Sebebera, Gonka, Sen'ale, Genti, Adi-keyh, Tsehafty, Adi-mesno and Bahri –Hatsey (the former *Wereda* and today sub- *Wereda* capital of Wejerat). The land area of Wejerat measures above 46,287 hectares and its elevation ranges from 800 to 3500 m above sea level. In terms of topography, the land lies in three ecological zones: quolla (low land), Woina Dega (intermediate), and Dega (high land). The mean annual rain fall ranges from 700 to 1200 mm (Abrha, 2005; Tarekegn, 2005). The region is characterized by varied topography, much of it rugged terrain intersected by valleys, rivers and ravines (Abrha, 2005; Degafi, 2001; Tarekegn, 2005). Regarding the demographic features of Wejerat, the population projection of 2005 indicates that the total population is 45,377 of which 22,496 are males and 22,881 are females. However, some researches claim that the total population of Wejerat is estimated to be above 70,000 (Abrha, 2005; Degafi 2001).

¹ Ephraim and Tarekegn explain the value of nonpartisan eldership in negotiating national issues with cases related to the release of the former CUD (Council of Democratic Union) party leaders and supporters in 2007 through eldership intervention who were in prison following the 2005 election.

² Egalitarian system that rejects hierarchy or social strata and believes everyone is born equal. It argues hierarchy is unfair, discriminatory, unjust and against the very tuition of God on equality. It refers to a convention of open and equal access to political and social office so as to manage and use common resources, maintain peace, security, law and order

³ Assembly of brothers, relatives or kinship members up to the seventh generation responsible to shape the mind of families to love each other and act ethically and behave in line with the cultural value of the society

⁴ An assembly of the clergymen that runs particularly spiritual functions independent of secular institutions and yet engages in resolving social conflicts and disputes

⁵ Customary institution of women that function independently and is more responsible to affairs of women though has other social responsibilities.

⁶ *Gereb* literally means "river" in the land of Wejerat. It is an indigenous institution that comprises *abo-gerebs* (collection of elders) committed to the overall societal issues as local court of administration.

⁷ Administrative structure of governance higher than the kebele administrative unit

⁸ Government administrative structure immediately higher than wereda administrative unit

⁹ It refers to the Ethiopian calendar which is eight years late to the G.C (here in after referred as 2001)

¹⁰ Administrative structure of governance lower than the wereda administrative unit

Mode of livelihood

The land of Wejerat is favorable for the growth of various plants and production of livestock. Mixed farming is commonly practiced. Cattle, sheep, goats, donkey, camel etc are the major animals kept by the people. As the case in most parts of Ethiopia, agriculture is the backbone of the economy. About 99% of the population is dependent on agriculture and livestock production as the main sources of employment, revenue, food and the like (Degafi, 2001). The Wejerat people are agro-pastoralist. The people produce a variety of crops. The most important crops that are grown in the area are cereals and pulses. The cactus tree is common in most parts of the area which serve as food for both people and animals in the land of Wejerat including the neighboring Afar communities. Particularly, when there is a serious drought, the Wejerat people share the cactus with their neighboring Afar unselfishly (Abrha, 2005). The cactus tree feeds animals the whole year while it serves as a food for more than six months for human beings. Unfortunately it is destroyed today by an insect termed as Chuchineal which is introduced by irresponsible government bodies without assessment of environmental impact and without the consent and knowledge of the society.

Contemporarily the area is one of the most heavily affected areas of successive drought. Population growth, environmental degradation, lack of adequate land for cultivation, and inadequate grazing land for cattle population are some of the actual factors threatened the life of study people. Consequently, the youth are migrating to Middle East countries without having the necessary skill and knowledge. This in turn brought about tragedy outcomes on the social values of the community as a whole beyond loss of life and the financial crisis of the outgoing individuals. The technology of the production is archaic and simple. It does not encourage the expansion of modern farming. Infrastructure developments and social services like roads, transportations, electricity, communications, health centers, schools and water supply are poorly developed in Wejerat. Pack animals especially, donkeys, mules, camels and the like are the dominant mode of transport. Currently, there is a positive starting point to enhance access to education with the involvement of Wejerat Development Association (WDA) in collaboration with other stakeholders. Yet, the study area lags behind with regard to the expansion of modern infrastructures compared to others areas.

Historical overview of Wejerat

In the early times, the history of Wejerat is mostly associated with the history of self-governance and self-defense. Raids and campaigns against external powers that tried to intervene in their internal affairs was the

mode of their culture, too. It is not uncommon in the land of Wejerat to chat and revisit nostalgically to a time they were enjoying an independent socio-cultural and self-governance than they do now (Abrha, 2005). Little is known about the history of Wejerat in written form apart from religious books prior to the 16th century. It is believed, however, that the original settlers of the area had settled in the present land of Wejerat long before the introduction of Orthodox Christianity in the 4th century A.D (Abrha, 2005). Wejerat used to live in the relatively secure and densely forested areas for the purpose of self-security from any outside pressure. This appears to have stimulated the development of institutions that solidified the people as a political and cultural community. Most importantly, opposing the feudal exploitative type of socio-political system of the Abyssinian state, the people had established their own independent socio-political system called *Kanchi* based on principle of equality and self-governance (ibid).

To this effect, Wejerat had achieved an extensive political and socio-cultural cohesion in the period between the 16th to 20th centuries. It is from the 16th century onwards that we can find some sort of written documents about the land and people of Wejerat. Prior to this period, Wejerat were closed societies who live creating their own world. Particularly, their relationship with neighboring lowland communities was weak (Hiluf, 2001). Oral traditions and written documents report that since the 16th century, Wejerat have been engaged in a wide range of social interactions with their neighboring lowland communities: the Afar, the *Doba*, and the Oromo in both conditions of peace and conflict (Abrha, 2005). Wejerat is a homogeneous society in terms of religion, language, culture, psychological makeup, and shared historical experiences as well as socio-economic and political background (Abrha, 2005; Degafi, 2001). Arguably, it would seem that cultural homogeneity has enabled them to stand up against outside pressures and to maintain autonomous self-governance for a long period of time. There are Wejerat people living in *Wegaye* and *Ab'ala* (*Shiket*) areas who hold the moral fiber of Wejerat people and identify themselves as *Wejeretot* though the political administration of post-1991 Ethiopia categorized them within the administration of Afar Regional State (Abrha 2005 and 2011). Regarding religion, the total population (100%) of Wejerat follows the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. And this is one of the distinctive and unique features of Wejerat. Today, there are more than forty churches in the region. Linguistically, the Wejerat people are speakers of Semitic language. They speak *Wujirina*, the native tongue of Wejerat which is Tigrigna of Wejerat dialect. They are, thus, simply identified by their language and dressing style from other surrounding areas (ibid, Degafi, 2001).

The commencement of Orthodox Christianity in Wejerat matched with the arrival of the nine Saints to Ethiopia. It is suggested that Orthodox Christianity has been

introduced in the 5th to 6th centuries in the land of Wejerat by these holy monks to whom the Wejerat people refer as nine saints. Religious written sources state that prior to the introduction of Orthodox Christianity in the land of Wejerat, there were various kinds of traditional beliefs and practices including different types of spirits like Zar (evil spirit), idol cult, and murdering persons, and so on. The Geez version *Gedle*¹¹ *Abune Yem'ata*, one of the nine saints, found in one of the churches of the 20-*embas* of Wejerat in St. Mary of *Adi-Bati* hysterics with the idea of traditional beliefs and practices that had been long common in Wejerat. Saint Yem'ata¹² succeeded in completely abolishing the idol cult and instantly he chased away the Zars to Zebul, the land of Doba (ibid). It is from then on the Wejerat society remained unbending adherent to Orthodox Christianity. Oral informants, principally high up church leaders affirm that the number of churches in the land of Wejerat increased in an alarming rate during the region of King Amade Tsion (1314 to 1344). There is no other religious institution in the region except Orthodox Christianity to date.

Why conflict and what is it? Conceptualization and definition of conflict

Conflict is often defined as an innate process in life span of human kind. It is a relationship between two or more groups who assume that they have or will have incompatible goals (Simon, 2000). It is commonly illustrated as if it is exclusively negative. This, nevertheless, is not constantly true. It can either be constructive or destructive based on how it is handled (Faleti, n.d). It is claimed that conflict is inevitable due to the existence of various interests and interactions in a given society. It is about "life, pointing straight to contradictions as life-creative and life-destructive" (Galtung, 1996: 71). Galtung went on saying that conflict generates energy but the question is how to channel that energy constructively. This asserts that conflict is one dimension of life in the history of human kind and the problem is not the existence of conflict but the way how we handle it. Though conflict is a mark of life, human beings are loath to admit that they are in the midst of it (Mayer, 2000). There is no single opinion on the nature, causes and impacts of conflict among scholars. Conflict is a fluid and infinitely dynamic concept which can be twisted into different shapes and has become an issue over which scholars find themselves in sharp disagreement with their colleagues (Faleti, n.d). This entails that conflict is a contested concept over which there is theoretical debate how to define or conceptualize it from different perspectives (school of thoughts).

The structural conflict theory argues that conflict is

originated from the specific ways in which societies are structured and organized. The political and economic marginalization, injustice, exploitation, poverty, inequality and so forth are sources of conflict. When the existing structures are tilted in favor of one group at the expense of the other without acknowledging the rights of others to be different, conflict will emerge and escalate (Faleti, n.d). Marginalization includes social division and destruction of internal relations (Jeong, 2000). Hence, the structural inequality (economic and social inequalities and access to political power) is considered one of the central causes of violent conflict (Fearnelly and Chiwandamira, 2006). Frustration–Aggression theory, on the other hand holds the position which is similar to that of human needs theory. Its main assumption is that all humans have basic needs which they seek to fulfill, and that the denial and frustration of these needs by other groups could affect them in the short-run or long-run thereby leading to conflict. Basic human needs refer to the essence of physical, psychological, social and spiritual needs. For instance, recognition, security, and identity are few among others. Since such needs are non-negotiable, failure to attain these needs often leads to intractable conflict (Kriesberg, 2003, Mayer, 2000). Yet, the Community Relations theory argues that conflict is the result of ongoing division, cultural differences, antagonism and distrust between various groups in communities. Sociological, political, economic and historical relationship of such groups is taken as fundamental roots of violent conflict (Faleti, n.d). A past historical legacy is explained as one source of conflict too. This kind of conflict between various groups possibly led to the revitalization of unconstructive stereotypes, cultural intolerance and prejudice. Thus, the history of the past may make it difficult to integrate different ethnic and religious groups to succeed because their past experiences make it difficult for them to trust one another. The fact that 'others' are perceived as different make them feel they are entitled to less or are inferior by reason of conflict values. This hinders the flow of communication between them and to that extent twists perception that they have about each other (Ibid). Thus, the promotion of tolerance, acceptance of diversity and improving communication and understanding between conflicting groups are the possible remedies to maintain the smooth relationships of the community (Simon et al., 2000). The lens of Economic conflict theory tends differently to provide an economic explanation of the conflict. This is largely because people in conflict are assumed to be fighting over, not about, something that is material.

Overview of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms

The emergence of local governance in traditional society is the result of a lengthy process. It is not an overnight episode. Fine and Rai (1997:11) reveal:

¹¹ It means chronicle that describes the entire spiritual life history of the saint

¹² One of the nine saints who come from Rome to Ethiopia in the 5th-6th century and expanded religious education

Traditional notions of civil society convey an idea of historical depth, in which communities, interpersonal bonds, public institutions and national cultures are created over long period of time and become resistant to even the most oppressive political authorities.

The pattern of violent conflict is common among the peripheral (borderlands) of pastoral communities in Eastern Africa. This has escalated into security dilemma that governments appear to be incapable to contain it (Mahmoud and Elmi, 2006). This is because either the governments pay less attention to manage it or because these areas are out of government administrative sight. It is here the demand of indigenous social knowledge and social institutions have to be applied. The quest of indigenous or local conflict resolution approaches, thus, involved a wide range of concerned communities. Fisher (2006) suggests Conflict resolution demands both the collaborative process by which disparities are managed and the outcomes that are jointly agreed to by the parties are fair. This in turn, provides significant input to the genuine conflict resolution and reconciliation. The 21st century has witnessed of resource conflict in semi-arid Africa. The major causes of the conflict are growth of human population, land scarcity, while the environmental degradation is mounting up. Conflicts over extensive common potential arable lands, wetlands and grazing have aggravated the mismanagement of resources. Conflicts between pastorals and agro-pastorals arise throughout border areas (Hussein, 1999). The growth of population requires more pasture land, control over fertile and conducive environment by subjugating others. This resulted in clash of interest among/ between societies. In the absence of local conflict resolution institutions that would maintain peace and security, chaos dominated the traditional society. In traditional society “the superior authority has powers overriding those of the lesser authorities” (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, 1940:63). That is, those who have power exploit and harm the weak. To this effect, to avoid such a problem, people established indigenous traditional institutions. People came into consensus to establish institutions and appoint leaders who would maintain peace and order, and work in the public interest.

Holding indigenous traditional office requires social knowledge that is acquired via experience, the wisdom of handling conflicts and taking a fast decision during a crisis. Personal qualities are at the heart of managing conflicts. At the personal level, mediators (elders) as peace actors require many of the qualities and analytical skills of knowledge of particular customs ,be patient, impartial, and respectful of diversity in handling conflicts on the bases of integrity (Tarekegn, 2008). Substantial self-confidence and passion is necessary to move into the demands of intergroup conflict. A high level of self-awareness is essential in terms of how one is affected by the behaviors of others (like criticism or attack), and how one’s own behavior is usually perceived by and affects

others (Fisher, 2006). Impartiality is mandatory in handling conflicts. It must be noted that in the wider fields of social relationships, there are always and everywhere persons with conflicting and competing interests, seeking to have the dispute settled in their favor and to influence the community in accordance with their interests (Mair, 1964). Aging has a positive correlation with an individual’s high status. One famous instance of aging cycle in Ethiopia is the Gada system in Oromo society. The system embodies an age grade classes that succeed each other every eight years in assuming economic and socio-political responsibilities. The authority held by the elders is derived from their position in the system. The elders (*Lubas*), thus, settle disputes among groups and individuals and apply the laws dealing with the distribution of resources, criminal fines and punishment, protection of property, theft and the like (Asmerom, 1973).

Likewise the Wejerat communities in South East Tigray, Ethiopia have indigenous institutions to manage socio-political and cultural affairs. When we consider the Wejerat indigenous institutions, *Demer*¹³ and *Kanchi*¹⁴ are deep rooted institutions of the community. It is a common assumption that aged people are mature enough to run elements of reconciliation and they can pass wise decisions (Lipson, 1981). For instance, the Wejerat experience shows that “all elders are councilors. Authority is vested in the council of elders representing the twenty villages” (Gebru, 1996). Surprisingly, the Wejerat communities have indigenous institution termed as *Gereb* to solve any sort of inter-ethnic conflict particularly with Afar communities. Traditional conflict resolution mechanisms are commonly linked with socio-political and economic realities of the given society. They are deep-rooted in the culture and history of the people. In one way or another they are unique to each contextual setting. The local courts lie on benevolence of the communities to serve community interests being loyal to its verdict (Abera, 2009). As component of indigenous socio-political patterns, the accustomed conflict resolution mechanisms in Wejerat are rooted- in the cultural and historical values of the community (Abrha, 2005). In traditional political system, holding office is based on primordial relationship. In most cases it is hereditary and patriarchal where women are denied of such status (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard, 1940). In contrary to this, women in Wejerat community have their own indigenous or traditional office where they can run their affairs independently (Abrha, 2005 and 2011).

***Kanchi* system: The egalitarian socio-political organization of the society**

Ethiopia is a home of diversified societies. These

¹³ It is the highest organ of *Kanchi system* that functioned as legislative, executive and judiciary body to provide social justice since long ago (see, Abera, 1998)

¹⁴ Supra note at 2

diversified societies have developed their own social and indigenous public institutions to maintain peace and order within their territory. *Kanchi* system in the land of Wejerat (Aberra, 1998; Abrha 2005 and 2011), *Mela* in Afar communities (Yayneshet and Kelemework, 2004:10), *Abegar* in Amhara-northern Wollo (Uthman, 2008) and *Gada* system in Oromo society (Asmerom, 1973), and the like are some instances of social organizations in Ethiopia. There are social institutions that hold known structure of justice and reconciliation, some in written form and some are orally transmitted. Some socio-cultural organizations, however, are not adequately investigated, documented and are tend to be disperse (Tarekegn, 2008:13). *Kanchi* system is one instance among others. *Wejerat* people have socio-cultural institutions of administration that enabled them to enhance peace, maintain order, social and environmental security, and justice, and keep their integrity and identity within their territory. The public institutions are common throughout the twenty *embas* of *Wejerat*. The communal interactions and interests of the society realized the existence of these institutions. The public institutions were guided by *Demer Wejerat* in a place called *gra-gerebo*, the center of the twenty *embas*. The institutions are imperative to solve public troubles and work for common goals (Abrha, 2005).

The socio-political philosophy of the Wejerat people is called “ከረዓት ቻንጭን ሓቅን ዓኳይ ወጀራት ዕስራ ዓዲ” *literally* means “the system of management of the common person in the land of *Wejerat Isra-Adi* based on equality, justice and truth”. *Kanchi* system treats the people on equal bases before the law of *Wejerat*. Its core motto is justice and equality for all. The system allows the people to have governor-governed relationships, but strongly condemn the ruler and subject relationships (Abrha, 2005; Assefa, 2010; Degafi, 2001). The system is necessary for the people to use and manage their common resources equally, to maintain their culture, to help each other, to settle dispute and to inculcate their culture in the minds of the young generation (Abrha, 2005 and 2011). The system believes that everyone is born equal and there should not be social strata. Hierarchy or social strata is considered unfair, discriminatory, unjust and against the very tuition of God on equality. In the eyes of *kanchi* system, the ordinary people and people who claims they are from special class or hierarchy including Dynasty are equal. It is common to use the words *ziban higi* (in the name of law) or *ziban nigus* (*in the name of king*) in Tigray and other parts of Ethiopia when one believes his rights are violated and is in dispute with any person. Contrary to this, in *Wejerat* everyone would say amusingly *ziban gereb* (in the name of the river), *ziban defai dinkul* (in the name of the farmer) or *ziban kedahi mai* (in the name of water fetcher). This implies the strong aversion of the people to class or power structure. Besides, it avows the fortitude of the people to be governed under a system where everyone is treated equal (Assefa, 2010: 11 to 15).

Kanchi is administered by *Demer* (General Assembly) of *Wejerat*. *Demer Wejerat* is the highest organ of *Kanchi* system and it is accountable to the *Esra Adi/Emba Wejerat*. The function of legislative, executive and judiciary body lies on the shoulder of this General Assembly. The *Demer* discusses all matter of Wejerat-sovereignty, resource management, peace, collective security, patterns of relations with neighboring communities and others. Every adult usually above 20 had the right to universal suffrage in *Demer Wejerat* except clergymen and women. This was not intended to undermine the role of women and clergymen but rather because they have their own organization of social entity. Regardless of wealth, age and gender, everyone have the right to use common resources that are found in the land of *Wejerat*. Unless a person attended the *Demer*, he had never been elected to hold administrative position irrespective of his talent and wisdom. The *Demer* tries to the extent possible to decide its resolution based on consensus, otherwise it applies majority vote. Usually every individual in the region is heard saying “*Arena/Kanchi bena*” which literally means “we are equal”. These principles and mechanisms become active tools on maintaining solidarity, integrity, peace and collective security, cultural value of the society as well (Abrha, 2005).

Kanchi system was a republican by its nature, but it had its own limitations. It was only focusing on strong political organization. It lacks strong social services, economic and military organizations (Degafi, 2001:295). The conservative traditions in Wejerat distrust and resist the expansion of education, health centers and infrastructures until recent times in the area. Expansion of these services was considered as a tool for government to infiltrate and weaken the Wejerat *kanchi* system of administration and justice. It is only recently that schools and clinics have started to operate in the area (Abrha, 2005 and 2011; Assefa, 2010: 13). The system was the center of the society, having vital rules and regulations of all sectors of human life, yet its rules and regulations are not written down and organized thoroughly in one place (Abrha, 2005; Degafi 2001) though there are efforts to document and publish them as of late.

Structure of *Kanchi* system

The administrative system is structured with certain levels. At the top of the system is *Demer Wejerat Esra Adi/Emba* (the General Assembly, sum total of the twenty units). It legislates law what the people call *sirit* which is applicable to the land of *Wejerat* as a whole, and decides all cases and disputes that are beyond the capacity of the lower structures. One step below the *Demer*, there are two *Aserte Adi* (ten villages). In other words the twenty *Embas* (villages) are divided into two sections; each section has ten *Embas* (villages). The *Aserte Adi/Emba* (ten villages) has full right to administer its internal affairs at *Aserte Adi* (ten villages) level. Each ten *Embas* can

choose its representatives as spokes persons to *Demer Wejerat* and vis-à-vis the government when the demands rise to discuss or negotiate cases. One level down to the *Aserte Adi/Emba*, we find the *Emba* administrative structure. Each of the *Esrá Adi* (twenty villages) enjoys full freedom to administer their affairs independently at *Emba* (village) level. The lowest structural unit is *got* which is more responsible for discharging matters of small importance. The church and women have their own autonomous structure as well (Abrha, 2005 and 2011; Assefa, 2010; Degafi, 2001) that should be discussed in the next topic. To put it in a nutshell, the *Esrá Adi* implies that there are twenty *Embás* (villages) in *Wejerat* where each *Emba* enjoys certain autonomy and elects its leaders annually.

Types of conflicts and indigenous ways of managing them in *Wejerat* community

The conflicts and social disagreements that have been most commonly scrutinized in *Wejerat* can be classified in two major categories. The first category consists of intra-communal and micro-level conflicts within the *Wejerat* community itself involving individuals and groups. The second one includes inter-communal/ethnic conflicts that happen between *Wejerat* and their neighboring communities particularly with *Afar* neighbors. The word intra-communal here is used to analyze internal conflicts that happen within *Wejerat* at family, individual and group levels. Those multifaceted disputes have a variety of indigenous institutions like *Demer Ahiwat*, *Debarte* and *Rikbe Kahinat* to address them via the application of social knowledge. The term inter-communal here is used to examine external conflicts that happen between *Wejerat* and neighboring communities particularly with *Afar* neighbors. Those multifaceted disputes have very well-known indigenous institution termed as *Gereb* to treat them through the use of social knowledge. Hence, the system has cultural conflict resolution methods. The *Wejerat* people have an orientation to apply their own social knowledge to the solution of practical and potential problems through effective indigenous conflict management mechanisms, which will give maximum benefits at family, community and inter-ethnic levels. Under the umbrella of *Kanchi system*, *Debarte* (women assembly), *Rikbe kahinat* (priests' assembly-church), *Demer Ahiwat* (assembly of relatives) and *Gereb institution (mostly at ethnic level)* have its own special functions in managing conflicts today in the land of *Wejerat* (Abrha, 2005 and 2011). The meaning and function of each of these social institutions are treated.

“Demer Ahiwat”¹⁵ and its function

One of the moral and normative values of *Wejerat* is

having good relationship among family. Everyone is in the bracket of the norm of the society refraining from any act that may have negative impact on others. Culture sets an agenda of rules, rituals, and procedures that teaches you how to relate to others or how to communicate, violating this may have social sanction and warning (Dodd, 1995). More importantly collective action is indispensable in *Wejerat* against the violations of the norms of the community, simply to build collective security (Degafi, 2001). When an individual commit a crime-theft, incest up to the seventh generation, injury or harm to human body, rape etc. and disobey to accept decisions passed by *Demer Ahiwat*, sanctions would be imposed up on him /her and is marginalized from any family social affairs. Social relationship will be cut off, that is he/she would be excluded at the time of sadness and happiness of his/her relatives because of his/her failure to adhere to societal valves. This maintains the social order, mental and physical strengthens of relatives. It avoids unnecessary disputes and revenges at large (Abrha, 2005).

The church: “Rikbe kahinat”¹⁶ and its function

This institution operates spiritual functions independent of secular institutions to maintain the order and the day-to-day activities of the parish church. The general assembly of priests' institution is locally known as “*Rikbe kahinat*”. They meet regularly at a place called Bahri-Hatsey (*Debub*) once monthly at a particular date 24 (Abrha, 2005). The basic objectives of the forum are: to evaluate the spiritual activities of the region: how the clergymen discharge their duties and responsibilities, how to protect and resolve social conflict, how the laity following the order of the parish church and protect its property at large; to share and exchange experience among church bodies etc. The priest is esteemed for his spiritual leadership and serve as a counselor, sought out as a father to every individual and family. The role of the religious institution is not only limited to church services. Rather it is also involved in resolving social conflicts and disputes.

When murder is committed, the church would actively intervene to solve the problem peacefully. If such a tragic crime is committed, the family of the doer of the wrong action requests the church to help ending the problem via arbitration. As a result, the priests carry the cross and travel to the family of the deceased along with other institution, *Debarte* and elders who rally behind the priests to request for a mercy in the name of the killer. Here, the pastors of both the killer and the deceased play a leading role in the arbitration (Abrha, 2005; Degafi, 2001:329 to 338). In *Wejerat* tradition, if such a grave crime is not ended via traditional arbitration, the wrong doer has no guarantee for his life, no matter how the

¹⁵ Supra note at 3

¹⁶ Supra note at 4

legal court imprisoned him for years. When the priests involve actively in arbitration of social conflicts, reconciliation via the mediation of the 'debarate' is part and parcel of priests' institution. All in all, the priest's institution has pastoral duty to look after the flock in peace and is also responsible for building up healthy generation physically, mentally and spiritually (Abrha, 2005; Tarekegn, 2005).

Debarate¹⁷: Customary institution of women and its function

Debarate has been practiced in the land of Wejerat for centuries. It is communal prayers of females locally known as "Mihila". Leaders and coordinators of the *Debarate* are elected from among wise women. The *Debarate* may be divided into units and charged on *Emba* level or *Gereb* basis; at the need time embraces all women of the region as a whole. As societal institution the ritualistic function of the *Debarate* prayers have been exercised in: the time of both natural and social calamities; arbitration and mediation of social and political conflicts; disseminating information or message via *Awiat* (wailing) and *Elela* (frisky) in the time of sudden accidents and pleasure respectively; and providing moral and material support for male during war time, etc. Prayer is one of the major functions of *Debarate* during conflict resolution and unpleasant situations (famine, drought, epidemic, war, etc) (Abrha, 2005; Degafi, 2001: 322 to 328). The church and *debarate* are inseparable entities in peace making process though they have their own autonomous institution. In Wejerat community, priests and women are sent first to settle when an armed group comes to attack the people. When disagreement is occurred between Wejerat and any external force, the Wejerat will send the women and the church (carrying the cross) to negotiate and to reconcile the issue before the outbreak of conflict or war. This is to search a window of opportunity to end the issue via non-violent means so that the war will be prevented. In this course, no adult male is involved. Only when this diplomatic means has failed will the men stride to the battle field. Women are also responsible to take care of war prisoners. The reason is that an angry man may cruelly punish the prisoner. To avoid this they are submitted to the care of women (Abrha, 2005; Assefa, 2010).

Gereb¹⁸ and abo-gereb¹⁹: Priceless role in conflict resolution

Gereb is one of the successful indigenous courts or

institutions in managing inter-ethnic conflict in the land of *Wejerat* beyond intra-communal issues particularly between *Wejerat* and *Afar* (Abrha, 2005 and 2011; Degafi, 2001). *Gereb* has a long history in the land of Wejerat. Its origin is related to a form of public struggle towards democracy and self-rule from time immemorial. However, the exact time about *gereb* expansion to include neighboring communities is not found in literature. Yet, some works suggest that the Wejerat *gereb* is established as a joint institution almost a century ago to embody neighboring communities. The very objective of the *gereb* was to resist the then government suppressions inclusively. The long and deep rooted self-rule of *Wejerat* community became a model for other neighboring communities to follow the same path. It was a symbol of reaction to the existing undemocratic rule and bad governance (Abera, 2009). Thus, different local communities of Wejerat, Enderta, Seharti-Samre and Bora-Slawa met in Hintalo for the first time to develop common agenda on how to run self-rule and challenge the government. Then after, the term "*Gereb Arena*" literally means "we are equal under the umbrella of *gereb* administration" became common stand of the participants by launching common articles.

The following are some of the articles included: Women should have equal rights as men; Don't consider Emperor Haile Selassie and other government officials as God, they are human like us; Stop theft and raid; Every adult citizen of our locality should be ready to struggle against any external enemy; The 20 *embas* of Wejerat should be governed by *gereb* Wejerat as usual; and *gereb* is our identity for our next liberty struggle etc (ibid). Through the passage of time, *gereb* became a joint institution which functions as an indigenous court run by council of elders from *Afar* and Wejerat. *Gereb* members are elected by the entire adult men population of the locality through voting with the prime responsibility of restoring law and order. The *gereb* develops its own rules and regulations which serve as *Sirit* (traditional law) to its localities. It is not fixed. When necessary, it could be modified with full justification by the *gereb* members. The *gereb* institution maintains mutual benefits of the two ethnic groups. The institution embraces representatives of the two ethnic groups for whom the society refers to "*Abo-gerebs*". The criteria for election of *abo-gerebs* are based on the social acceptance, patience, past experience, and neutral and impartial stand of individuals in making wise decisions (Abrha, 2011). The role of *abo-gerebs* remains a fundamental affair in resolving inter-ethnic conflicts. The *abo-gerebs* serve as an ambassador of the people of Wejerat in their relations with other neighboring communities especially with *Afar*. The *abo-gerebs* are responsible for maintaining security and peace by negotiating with the *Afar* elders and clan leaders through *gereb* institution which is a core institution to restore peace. The *abo-gerebs* has and play essential role in dispute resolution of inter-group cases related to cattle raid, use of water, grazing land, theft, robbery etc

¹⁷Supra note at 5

¹⁸Supra note at 6

¹⁹ *Abo-gereb* (s) literally stand for father of river(s), a collection of people who run the *gereb* institution as actors of peace to resolve mostly an inter-communal conflict or inter-ethnic conflict.

including homicide between the two groups to date. They developed symbiotic relationship to maintain peace and security. The *Wejerat* used to send their cattle to the common grazing land of *Afar* and *Wejerat* during the rainy season for favorable weather is available for cattle raising. Basically, every highlander sends his cattle to his loyal friend *Afar* traditionally termed as "*fukur*". The *Afar* friend "*fukur*" is responsible to look after the cattle along with full and enjoyable right to consume the milk and milk products from the cows of his partner. Besides, the two communities have close relationships where the *Afar* takes wheat during harvest ("*kaw'e*") time from *Wejerat* and in turn the *Wejerat* takes goats or sheep during Easter or New Year's Day from *Afar* (Abrha, 2005 and 2011).

The *abo-gerebs* have full power to impose sanctions on offenders in resolving conflict. Usually compensation-'blood price' imposed on the wrongdoers would be decided by the bilateral agreement of the *abo-gerebs* of the conflicting parties. All decisions passed by *abo-gerebs* are practical and binding. In a nutshell, *abo-gerebs* are real representatives of their respective community and are watchdogs upon the values and norms of the society so as to maintain peace and minimize conflict. They are active actors in resolving inter-ethnic conflict timely at least to recover the status quo, with less expense and more products. They expose offenders and let them to punishment via *gereb* institution. In this way, peace is maintained through non-violent means between the two ethnic groups which is a necessary remedy to bring durable peace between the two groups (Abrha, 2005 and 2011). However, it is claimed that the *gereb* is not discharging its responsibilities properly in post-1991 period compared to pre-1991 periods. This is due to structural problems that resulted in the decline of *gereb* power (Abrha, 2011; Degafi, 2001). All these features of *gereb* were observed in the recent peace process to resolve the violent conflict that happened between *Wejerat* (*Sen'ale*) and *Afar* (*Gela'eso*) on August 2010. More importantly, the author observed and followed public reconciliation meetings. A peace process was held to end the recent violent conflict. The peace process had four phases held in four different places in the lands of the parties in conflict. The process in general took about two solid months to come to its peaceful end. Ten neutral *abo-gerebs* from *Wejerat* and *Afar*, five members each (out of the areas in conflict) were elected to solve the problem. Besides, fourteen additional elders were elected from the two groups in conflict seven each in the assembly. The *zonal* and *wereda* government officials, including security officials of the two regions, were observers of the process. The *gereb* members and elected elders elaborated the causes and consequences of the conflict between the two groups.

The *abo-gerebs* decided in that assembly the amount of compensation to be given for victims: for deceased

30,000 Ethiopian birr, disabled or seriously injured 10,000 birr, and simply injured 5,000 birr for both ethnic groups. The burden of compensation lies not on individual offenders but on the respective communities entirely. The end remark of the assembly was completed at the 4th public reconciliation meeting held in *Sen'ale* on October 27/03 E.C. Government officials of both regions were participants in the reconciliation process. Peace dialogues were held to end the conflict at community level under the leadership of *abo-gerebs* in the presence of religious leaders, government and police officials as well as elders of the two communities (Abrha, 2011). The conflict resolution has its own procedures. Usually when an individual commits a crime, for instance, from the *Afar* side, the relatives of the offender send their representatives to the community (*abo-gerebs*) where the victim/s is/are found. This is a way of admitting and notifying the mistake made by the respective communities of the representatives. Thus, the representatives, who act on behalf of the offender, will arrange conflict resolution appointments along with the consent of the victim community. The resolution might be about problems related to homicide, theft, and loss and damage of animals and materials. The reconciliation meetings often will be decided to be held in the area of the victim group. The logic behind is that the offender is the beggar that has to travel to the home of the victim to get mercy. There is a probability that the assembly can be held in the homeland of the offender if the victims are voluntary with a full consent of their respective communities. Nevertheless, if the conflict is communal in the sense that retaliatory action, particularly homicide is committed from both groups; the resolution will be held in both sites of the parties in conflict with the involvement of *abo-gerebs* of the two communities (Abrha, 2011).

The criminal is requested to kneel down on the ground and ask pardon to the victim group, locally known as "*afu*" in *Afar* and "*yitref*" in *Tigrigna* (*Wejerat*). The parties in conflict will greet and kiss each other by shaking hands. Then, the *gereb* asserts to the assembly regarding the advantages of peace and firmly advises the communities to make sure that such similar wrong actions should not be committed in the future. The *abo-gerebs* express their heartfelt gratitude to the conflicting parties for their commitment for peace. Particularly, the victims' relatives are advised by *abo-gerebs* to avoid the ill feelings of revenge completely. The blessing ceremony "*duua*" in *Afar* and "*mireka*" in *Tigrigna* continues after the reconciliation ceremony is completed. Elders and religious leaders of both groups bless both communities for the obedience they have shown for the prevalence of peace. The author of this article observed all the aforementioned activities in the recent peace process held in 2010. The religious leaders of both groups made an oath by calling words from Bible and Quran and their respective group did the same way so as not to repeat the same mistake. The role of religion in enhancing peace and culture of

tolerance to live together brotherly through mutual understanding among communities is essential.

Crimes and corresponding sanctions

In the point-of-view of Wejerat crime is viewed as any kind of act against the moral values and culture of the society. Moral and normative values in Wejerat are used to control social behavior. Social control is maintained and monitored by each individual's adherence to the culture of the society. Some of the moral and normative values of Wejerat include respect for elders and parents, respect for religious festivals and good relationship among families. There are various activities that are publicly condemned in Wejerat community of which the few are the following: homicide, theft, banditry, rape, incest up to the seventh generation, injury or harm to human body, violation of women's rights etc. As a result, when an individual violated the deep rooted norms of the society, he or she would be liable to sanction and would be heal responsibly. Nevertheless, in some cases, if an individual from Wejerat inflicts injuries on an individual from a different ethnic group, usually Afar and vice-versa, it may provoke inter-ethnic conflict where the responsibility for crime committed penalties will be held collectively by *gereb* institution from both sides (Abrha, 2005). The patterns of sanctions or penalties in Wejerat community involve micro and macro levels. Sanctions such as marginalization or ostracism from social life, compensation (fee), condemning and cursing of the wrong doer for his/her breach of norms of the community are considered micro sanction. On the other hand, macro sanctions include blood price, leaving ones home land particularly in the case of homicide at intra-group level. However, there is a possibility in which the offender can live with the family of the victim after he accomplished reconciliation. This has been done via marriage relationship between the conflicting parties (Tarekegn, 2005).

Modern approach nexus Indigenous approach peace intervention

The modern legal approach as conflict resolution mechanism includes modern court and police force. As a wing of government, the police force stresses more on pre-conflict directives to protect conflict infuriating factors through awareness creation on law issues for the public at formal and informal public venues like religious gatherings and political meetings. Besides, it has a sense of duty to relinquish offenders and forward them to the formal court of law so that corrective measures can be taken on the basis of the articles set under the formal court. The modern or formal court, besides, refers to governmental justice organ supported by the national

constitution. It emphasizes on difficult issues that cannot be seen by the local traditional courts and governmental social courts such as killing of human, loss, or theft of goods. Its main function lies on protecting illegal actions to foster peace, order, and security of the communities and the nation at large. But, the modern court has certain limitations to solve inter-communal or group conflict in the focus area (Abrha, 2011).

In the view of modern law, anyone who commits a crime must face justice in front of the court and take individual responsibility and accountability. Nonetheless, the *Gereb* (*Abo-gerebs*) take the lions share in restoring peace including the case of homicide believing that criminal responsibility and accountability is collective, particularly at inter-group conflict case. The role of the formal institutions-the court and police- is thus, consigned to a mediator while the decision mandate remains in the hands of *Abo-gerebs*. The reason behind is, first, the formal approach is not more acceptable by the pastoral areas that are not well-literate. Prison is considered as death among the pastoral communities. Second, the conflict sites are located in the remote areas (out of government site) of the two groups (Wejerat-Afar). It is difficult to follow up closely the movement of the communities due to security problems, lack of transportation and telecommunication services. Third, the action is communal and hence it is very difficult to punish the whole communities. Even if an individual commits a crime, members of the respective communities do not dare to discover the first wrongdoer and hand over him to the modern court. Fourthly, the governments give no attention to the conflict and fail to punish offenders (ibid).

That is why the local Indigenous approaches at community or local level have better acceptance in the public and are more effective in conflict resolution ability than the governments. The intervention of the government in managing inter-group conflict in the areas is not more than providing emergency aid for the victim group in its non-inclusive way of doing activities to restore the status quo after violent conflict occurs. The governments of the two regions (Tigray and Afar) not only lack early warning mechanisms and conflict prevention tools but also fail to address the real causes of the conflict. This was the reality observed in the 2010 conflict which happened between Afar (*Gela'eso*) and Wejerat (*Sen'ale*). There was partial treatment between the two victim groups at the time of state intervention. This in turn has its own impediments in peace intervention and in developing trust between the community and political officials (ibid).

Compensation (*kahsa*) as an opportunity of peace intervention

Compensation has a great value in the Wejerat community as part of conflict resolution. The social institutions usually grant the victim certain amount of

compensation in kind or cash. The concern here is not to impose harsh punishment that would bring yet another encircling conflict and retaliation, it is rather how to make peace possible. The highly valued compensation in the land of Wejerat is not about taking recompense from the wrongdoer. Accepting and believing your fault, telling the truth and asking for pardon with genuine regret is the highest reward of all. In many simple and less serious disputes be it at family level, between individuals, between neighborhoods etc, compensation payment to the victim is merely of nominal amount. What matters here is the appearance of the *abeity-adi* or *abo-gerebs* (negotiators) to the victim on behalf of the wrongdoer. In some cases like simple injury, compensation fee might only cover medical expenses. The culture does not promote taking compensation in such cases. Someone who accepts compensation (*kahsa*) is condemned and insulted as '*belaei kahsa*'²⁰ and is excluded by the community to the extent of intermarriage exclusion. Thus, once the victim suggests his compensation amount to *abeity-adi*²¹ and is decided, taking *kahsa* is an uncommon observable fact unless it involves property or cattle theft which is considered more of restoration than compensation (Abrha, 2005 and 2011; Tarekegn 2005; Assefa, 2010). However, in case of homicide, the *abeity-adi* or *abo-gerebs* will consider the acceptance of compensation locally termed as *gar nebsi* (blood money) as a prerequisite to end the case. The rationale is that unless the family of the victim accepts the *gar nebsi* negotiated by *abeity-adi* or *abo-gerebs*, it is an implication of readiness to retaliate their deceased relative and that is bad clue. When the *abeity-adi* or *abo-gerebs* negotiate, the victim's family should accept the *gar nebsi*, the deceased family may claim high amount in some cases. The *abeity-adi* or *abo-gerebs* will never give immediate response though they think the amount is inflated. Hence, they respect the word of victim's family and they will leave the house fixing the next day to come back. In the next meeting, the *abeity-adi* (elders) negotiates the victim's family to reduce the amount they claim considering the time, energy and resources the elders spent (ibid).

The *abo-gerebs* scrutinize the nature of the offense and identify type. Usually, there are three categories of homicide: intentional (*tsaeda dem*), negligent (*keyih dem*) and accidental (*tselim dem*). The amount of compensation (*gar nebsi*) is high if the homicide is intentional. It is the most challenging case to settle and is more exposed to retaliation and grudge. The amount of compensation is covered by the contribution of the entire family of the perpetrator. However, if it is not enough and is beyond the capacity of the family, the killer has to beg money from the public in public gatherings like church, market places etc by saying '*sile nebsi kasihut me'alti*

yadihinkum' roughly translated as "by the name of the dead, may God keep you from misfortune day". In the other cases like accidental and negligent homicide, there is a possibility where the victim's family is not willing to take the compensation. Nevertheless, the dead family may ask via the *abeity-adi* that the wrongdoer to be uprooted from his homeland and reside elsewhere where they do not hear and see about him (usually if the crime is at intra-group level). Yet, the *abeity-adi* or *abo-gerebs* may propose an intermarriage between the two contending family as a means to end any future bloodshed. Finally, the victim's family will not take all the decided amount of compensation. They deduct some amount by the name of the church (cross) and the elders. The actors of peace (the church, women, and *abeity-adi*) are fee-free. The only reward for them is restoration of peace along with enjoyment of local food and drinks prepared by the wrongdoer (most of the time) and the deceased families which marks the end of hostility. The overall objective of the reconciliation process is to restore peace and harmony in the community and prevent any future bloodshed irrespective of the seriousness of the offense (ibid).

When the homicide is at inter-group level particularly with Afar group, women are not direct participants of the reconciliation process though they participate indirectly like preparing and providing food, local drinks and water. It is the *gereb* institution through *abo-gerebs* (*collection of male*) that takes all the responsibility to end the hostility. The *abo-gerebs* from both communities (Wejerat and Afar) play crucial role by reconciling the disputing parties, concluding some rituals and ending the bloodshed. The *abo-gerebs* are thus, responsible for maintaining not only local peace and order in Wejerat but has become a joint institution for inter-regional peace and stability. One conflict was occurred in 2010 between Wejerat and neighboring Afar where homicide and serious injury was happened from both sides. It is the *gereb* (*abo-gerebs*) that restore the peace between the two groups by compensation means. The compensation was covered by the entire respective community of both groups for the nature of the crime was communal (Abrha, 2011). Though the compensation rate depends on the type and severity of the problem at hand, the local compensation law (*sirit*) is not fixed. When necessary it could be modified with full justification by the *abo-gerebs*. In this peace process, victims' families took the already decided money via their representatives from the hand of the chairperson of the *gereb* in the presence of elders and religious leaders. At the end of the arbitration process the offenders were obliged to pay compensation that amounted to 30,000 to 10,000 Ethiopian birr for death and injury respectively (Abrha, 2011). Figure 1 speaks more about the role of compensation in conflict resolution. If victim families take the compensation decided by the *gereb* and reconciliation is accomplished, no one dares to take retaliation and violate the decision of the *gereb*. The *gereb* leaders of the two communities (Wejerat and Afar)

²⁰ Literally it means coward and collector of booty or ill-gotten gains

²¹ It refers to local elders who negotiate to make peace and sometimes can be used interchangeably with *abo-gerebs*



a). Afar Victims' Families Taking Compensation



b). Wejerat Victims' Families Taking Compensation .

Figure 1. Victims' family of Afar and Wejerat taking compensation money from the hand of chairperson of the Gereb in the presence of respective communities (Photo by the author 2010).

chaired the assembly. The government officials of both communities conveyed additional messages with the permission of the *gereb* leaders.

The *abo-gerebs* of the two disputant communities also conveyed common message about the importance of peace and effect of conflict by remembering the deep-rooted relations of the two communities had and the common mistake committed between them that has a negative influence on the two communities in particular and the two regions in general. "*Peace is priceless and incomparable, let us develop a sense of tolerance as best solution which was our unique trait for centuries*" was the golden message of the *gereb*. The closing remark of the arbitration was held by preparing a large feast at *emba* Sen'ale involving all pertinent parties and religious figures along with *abo-gerebs*. Two cows were slaughtered and provided for ceremony as dinner one for each group, from Wejerat Sen'ale *Emba*. This is because the host *Emba* is expected to cover all the expenses of the resolution. This food invitation depends on the number of participants during the ceremony and the severity as well as length of the conflict. Besides, locally available drinks commonly "*Sewa*" for the Orthodox and "*Hilwa*" (soft drinks) for the Muslim were also provided. This was to convey their genuine happiness as a signal for the removal of vengeance on each other.

Opportunities, challenges and limitations of the indigenous institutions

All culture is composed of essential and secondary elements, of strengths and weakness of virtues and vices, of positive and negative aspects (O'brien, 1993:75). Some social institutions of Wejerat community are intact

and some are in vanishing largely due socio-cultural and political dynamics of modernization and partly due to governments' negative attention (considering them as potential threats of modern governance). Through critical analysis, thus, the intact home based social institutions of the Wejerat community have their own strong and weak sides. As regards to their strength, they could play a significant role in preventing and resolving violent conflicts in areas where poor governance and weak law enforcement and justice system exist. In comparison to the formal legal courts, they are less complex, more-time saving, cost-effective- the peace makers (*abo gerebs, demer Ahiwat, church and debarte*) do the reconciliation for job free. Settling conflict is a necessary but not a sufficient condition in the view of these socio-cultural institutions. Thus, unlike modern legal system they do reconciliation as well as conflict resolution mechanisms in line with dispute settlement. As they are culturally fit, the intact social institutions offer opportunity to parties in conflict to keenly participate in solving their problems and managing their affairs in their own cultural settings via the application of social knowledge. Nevertheless, there are weaknesses in these traditional institutions of conflict resolution. For instance, *gereb* the joint institution, most of the time lacks early warning system and conflict prevention mechanisms. It usually intervenes after the conflict has occurred. Besides, the *gereb* institution is a male-oriented institution; women have no direct participation in conflict resolution process between the two ethnic groups (Wejerat-Afar). Above all, the joint institution, *gereb*, is largely dependent on oral tradition than written documents and lacks permanent venue.

Most importantly, the modern and traditional (*gereb*) courts are not in collaboration to manage conflict. The *gereb* plays vital role in restoring peace in conflict

situations via public reconciliation meetings to control inter-communal conflicts, but not willing to hand over individuals who committed serious crimes to the modern court of law instead it letting them pay only compensation and go (Abrha,2011). Though *abo-gerebs* are actors of peace without incentives, the *gereb* institution has faced certain challenges. It lacks recognition on the side of government. The government has poor attention to it. The government calls the *gereb* when the conflict becomes beyond its capacity rather than providing capacity building activities for *abo-gerebs* in advance. Even there is a tendency from the side of government to manipulate the *gereb* to be loyal to it than the public via benefit offering. Besides, the *abo-gerebs* are heavily loaded by personal household duties. Thus, they consider the *gereb* functions as extra roles (ibid). However, in general framework, the strong sides of the cultural institutions mainly conflict resolution mechanisms outweighs their weaknesses in keeping collective security, peace, order, and justice at intra and inter-communal level where weak law enforcement is observed regardless of the limitations they have. Hence, they provide social justice to resolve conflicts via non-violent means and are useful to establish strong social bond within and among communities.

CONCLUSION

The wejerat society has developed indigenous institutions of self-administration and conflict settlement mechanisms in the course of their history .The *kanchi* system is relevant to what the legal frame work (FDR²² Constitution) has demanded in order to enhance peace, order, security, justice and equality between themselves and neighboring communities (particularly Afar community). The Wejerat society has been facing changes on many levels in terms of its cultural values. Despite all these ups and downs in different scenarios, some of the indigenous institutions, particularly conflict resolution mechanisms at neighborhood, relatives, neighboring *Afar* ethnic groups are functional to date in the area. The church, *debarde*, *Demer Ahiwat* and *gereb* are intact social institutions in the region to keep collective and individual security. These social institutions are effective, save time, energy and financial related resources and provide effective and fast solution of civic matters with a minimum cost including homicides in areas where the formal state institutions are weak. Above all they avoid unnecessary revenge-the evil feeling of humanity. *Abo-gerebs* are actors of peace without incentives (job-free) at inter-group level. Several arbitrations have been made from 1995 to date to address the violent conflict between Wejerat and Afar groups through *gereb*.

Even in recent times more than three conflicts that occurred between *Afar* environs and *Wejerat* people were solved by *gereb* institution. There is still one conflict case

in process to be addressed by the same institution between the two groups that occurred in August, 2015. Hence, cultural institutions provide social justice to resolve conflicts via non-violent means and are useful to establish strong social bond within and with neighboring communities. The indigenous social knowledge to resolve and manage conflict is valuable in the region. The institutions at family, women, church and *gereb* levels, exert their social knowledge to enhance peace, order, and security in the community. Particularly, the role of *gereb (abo-gerebs)* in managing and preventing inter-group conflict is observed to be superlative compared to the modern approach in the region. This witnesses what Lipson (1981) asserts, the accustomed conflict resolution mechanisms are rooted in an indigenous system where aged people are full-fledged to execute element of reconciliation and pass wise decisions. However, from time to time the power of the *gereb* has declined to resolve conflicts to influence the community. This seems partly due to the decline of moral values of both communities to be loyal to the institution (*gereb*) and largely due to the weak and ineffective modern state machinery to deal with the problem. Unfortunately, the deep and long established home-grown democratic institution, *kanchi* system, is currently nearly disappearing in official practice though its wisdom-full philosophy is in the mind of each and every member of the Wejerat community and some of its elements are intact. Hence, I recall that the Wejerat community should restore the system into practice officially using their constitutional right stated under FDRE constitution article 41 (9) "the state has the responsibility to protect and preserve historical and cultural legacies---" and article 91 (1) "Government shall have the duty to support, on the basis of equality, the growth and enrichment of cultures and traditions that are compatible with fundamental rights, human dignity, democratic norms and ideals, and the provisions of the constitutions" in consultation with the concerned government bodies. I hope the government will have also an open ear and mind to refurbish this missed opportunity and to protect from disappearance such golden indigenous values as responsible organ for the execution of good and local governance for public interest.

Conflict of interest

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Aberra J (1998). Legal History of Ethiopia 1943-1974. Rotterdam: Erasmus University.
 Abera H (2009). Rangeland based conflicts between pastoral and agricultural groups in north east Ethiopia: implications for rangeland management and livestock herding. M.A Thesis in livestock production and pastoral Development, Mekelle University, Mekelle.

²² Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

- Abriha T (2005). The Impact of External Influence on Kanchi System: The Traditional System of Administration in Wejerat. B.A Thesis Political Science and International Relations, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa.
- Abriha T (2011). Dynamics of Inter-Communal Conflict in North- East Ethiopia: The case of Wejerat people and Their neighboring Afar. M.A Thesis in Peace and Security Studies Addis Ababa University Institute for Peace and Security Studies, Addis Ababa.
- Ambaye O (2008). Traditional Conflict Resolution Mechanism (TCRM): the Case of Sidama, in Tarekegn Adebo and Hannah Tsadik (eds.) Making peace in Ethiopia: Five cases of Traditional mechanisms for conflict Resolution. Peace and Development committee: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia pp. 101-120.
- Assefa F (2010). Traditional Mechanisms for Conflict Resolution (TMCR) in Ethiopia: Case Study from Tigray. Peace and Development committee: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- Asmerom L (1973). Gada: Three Approaches to the study of African Society. New York: Free press.
- Degafi G (2001). Bahilin Tarikin Hizbi Wejerat (Tigrigna Version).Mekelle: Zemenawi Hitmet.
- Dodd CH (1995). Dynamics of international communication (9th). Madison: W.C. Brown.
- Ephraim I (2008). Foreword, in Tarekegn Adebo and Hannah Tsadik (eds.) Making peace in Ethiopia: Five cases of Traditional mechanisms for conflict Resolution. Peace and Development committee: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. pp. 4-7.
- Faleti SA (n.d). "Theories of Social Conflict" in Best, Shedrak G. (Ed) Introduction to peace and Conflict studies in West Africa: A Reader.
- Fearnely L, Chiwandamira L (2006). Understanding Armed Conflict and peace building in Africa (unpublished).
- Fine B, Rai S (1997). Civil society: Democratic perspectives. Frank Cass: London, port land, OR.
- Fisher RJ (2006). Interpersonal and intergroup processes: "Intergroup Conflict" in Deutsch, Morton et al (eds) The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. pp.176-196.
- Fortes M, Evans-Pritchard EE (1940). African political system. London: Oxford University press.
- Galtung J (1996). Peace by peaceful means: peace and conflict, Development and civilization. International Peace Research Institute, Oslo: London, New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Gebru T (1996). Ethiopia: Power and protest, peasants Revolts in the 20th c. New York: The free Press.
- Hiluf B (2001). The 1943 Woyane Rebellion in Tigray: a study of the Wejerat. B.A Thesis in History, Bahir Dar University, Bahir Dar.
- Hussein K, Sumberg J, Seddon D (1999). Increasing violent conflict between Herders and Farmers in Africa: Claims and Evidence. Dev. Pol. Rev. 17(14):397-418.
- Jeong HW (2000). Peace and Conflict Studies: An Introduction. England: Ashgate publishing Limited.
- Kriesberg L (2003). Beyond Intractability: A free knowledge Base on more Constructive Approach to Destructive Conflict .file://E:/identity-issues.htm
- Lipson L (1981). The Great Issues of Politics: An introduction to Political Science. Sixth Edition. New Jersey, Englewood Cliffs.
- Mahmoud H, Elmi A (2006). Conflicts and Pastoral Livelihoods in the Kenya-Ethiopia-Somalia Borderlands. In 'Comparative Research on Cross Border Pastoral Conflicts in the East African Region-Case Studies from Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda'. Workshop report, 2nd and 3rd October 2006, UNECA, Addis Ababa.
- Mair L (1964). Primitive Government. Baltimore: penguin Books.
- Mayer B (2000) The Dynamics of Conflict Resolution: a Practitioner's Guide. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- O'Brien, Jay (1993). Ethnicity, National Identity and Social Conflict, San Bernardino, California. Nordic J. Afr. Stud. 2(2):60-80.
- Simon F, Dekha IA, Jawed L, Richard S, Sue W, Steven W (2000). Working with conflict: Skill and Strategies for Action. London: Zed Books.
- Tarekegn A (2008). TMCR in Ethiopia: meaning, values, structures, procedures and outcome, in Tarekegn Adebo and Hannah Tsadik (eds.) Making peace in Ethiopia: Five cases of Traditional mechanisms for conflict Resolution. Peace and Development committee: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. pp. 9-20.
- Tarekegn G (2005). Change and continuity in the Traditional Institutions and Mechanisms of Local-Governance and conflict Resolution among the Wejerat. M.A Thesis in Social Administrations, Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa.
- Uthman H (2008). The Role of Abegar (Divine Father) in Conflict Resolution: the Case of Northern Wollo, in Tarekegn Adebo and Hannah Tsadik (eds.) Making peace in Ethiopia: Five cases of Traditional mechanisms for conflict Resolution. Peace and Development committee: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia pp. 78-100.
- Yayneshet T, Kelemework T (2004). Indigenous Rangeland resources and conflict Management by the North Afar Pastoral Groups in Ethiopia. A pastoral Forum Organized by the Dry lands Coordination Group (DCG) in Ethiopia, June 27-28, Mekelle, Ethiopia. DCG Report No. 31 November.