

Full Length Research Paper

Vendetta case and oath based indigenous conflict management in Jawi district, Northwest Ethiopia: A symbolic ritual perspective

Abraham Genet

Department of Social Anthropology, Faculty of Social Science, Bahir Dar University, Ethiopia.

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Study was conducted on the mitigation of vendetta case and oath based conflict management in Jawi district of northwest Ethiopia. The study was aimed at investigating the mitigation and reconciliation of vendetta and management of conflicts through an oath, from a symbolic ritual perspective. Primary data were collected by in-depth interviewing of informants and through informal conversation methods. Secondary sources reviewed from empirical researches, statistical documents and from locally conducted studies on the study theme were used to complement first hand data. The primary and secondary data were analyzed and organized thematically, cross checking the results obtained by those methods to increase validity of the research. The study found that vendetta, which has been a common phenomenon in the study area, was mitigated and resolved through an indigenous reconciliation system accompanied by a symbolic ritual. Oath involving diverse symbolic procedures was found to be another widely practiced mechanism of managing disputes in the study area. In both cases the traditional role of symbolism appeared to be crucial in terminating violence, implementing and sustaining effective reconciliation, and rebuilding harmony and peaceful coexistence in the society. The strict traditional symbolic rituals and procedures containing elements of supernatural belief conducted during reconciliation of vendetta and execution of an oath reinforce on the disputing parties a serious observance of the reconciliation. The study implied that the indigenous reconciliation of vendetta and oath based management of conflicts, together with the aid of symbolism, are effective in restoring sustainable peace and efficient in terms of finance, time, and energy.

Key words: Vendetta, oath, symbolic ritual, conflict mitigation, reconciliation, Jawi, Kolegna Agaw.

INTRODUCTION

There are various definitions and perspectives on the issue of conflict. Conflict is a salient feature of human society which is as old as mankind. Men must fight even if they do not possess arms or when tools of violence are not within reach; and even when there are no arms to fight, men will fight with their bare fists. From birth, a baby

begins the journey of conflict by crying, which is a flash of conflict (Folarin, 2015).

According to the Council of Europe and the European Union (2012), the word "conflict" comes from the Latin word *conflictus*, which means collision or clash. The definitions given to conflict vary based on the different

E-mail: abrahamgenet2015@gmail.com. Tel: 251910625217.

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given to conflict vary based on the different analytical viewpoints (for instance, some focus on the causes such as material resources, some other base their conception on the conflicting parties). According to Schelling (1993) conflicts are bargaining situations in which the ability of one participant to achieve his ends is dependent on the choices or decisions that the other participant makes.

The anthropological notion of conflict has usually been derived from the biological concept of competition (in its most succinct form, competition being defined as it occurs when two or more individuals, populations, or species simultaneously use a resource that is actually or potentially limiting (Schmidt and Schröder, 2001)). Conflict is a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, values, or goals. According to this view conflict broadly denotes the incompatibility of subject positions (Pia and Diez, 2007).

There are viewpoints which suggest that conflict is normal. Conflict is a normal and even healthy part of relationships. After all, two people cannot be expected to agree on everything all the time. Since relationship conflicts are inevitable, learning to deal with them in a healthy way is crucial" [Helpguide, 2018]. Conflict can also lead to a new social or political organization and therefore be productive if the parties involved are able to deal with their incompatibilities in a way new organizational form is achieved (Pia and Diez, 2007).

Types of conflict

With respect to the types of conflict, various criteria could be used for classification like the conflicting parties, context of the conflict, the triggering factors behind the conflict, and consequences of the conflict, duration and intensity of the conflict and presence or absence of violence in the conflict (Council of Europe and European Union, (2012)). Evans (2013) classifies conflict as interpersonal, intrapersonal, intragroup and intergroup. Interpersonal conflict (man against man, man against nature and society and family conflict) is a conflict between two individuals which occurs as the result of incompatible choices, interest feelings, etc. Intrapersonal conflict (man against self) occurs within an individual as the result of frustration they feel with themselves or over their personal goals, plans, targets or accomplishments, or due to competing values and questions of conscience. Intragroup conflict happens due to misunderstandings and/or disagreements within a team, or may be within a social group, clan, ethnic group, etc., according to the setting where the conflict arises. Intergroup conflict takes place between various formal and non formal groups: For instance, it can take place between the government and trade unions, between class groups, between departments within an organization, or between cultural groups in a community. There may also be these categories as intra state conflict, interstate conflict and

global conflict (Folarin, 2015; Council of Europe and the European Union, 2012; Evans, 2013).

Theories of conflict are the assumptions and elaborations to account for the root causes of the different forms of conflict. These may include structural theory, Marxist theory, realist theory, and psychological theory. Structural theory of conflict is an explanation of conflict as a product of the tension that arises when groups compete for scarce resources. According to structural theory conditions which lead to conflict include such things as social exclusion, deprivation, class inequalities, injustice, political marginalization, gender imbalances, racial segregation, and economic exploitation (Folarin, 2015; Oakland, 2005). Marxist theory of conflict is based on the Marxian understanding of society; since society is divided in classes, that is, the upper and lower class, the exploiting and the exploited class struggle and conflict become inevitable. The rich boosts wealth at the expense of the exploited poor (Lenin, 1917; Folarin, 2015).

Economic theory of conflict emphasizes (Folarin, 2015) on the economic factors in conflict causation. It claims that there is considerable interface between politics and scarcity. People seek power because it is a means to an end, more often, economic ends. Communities feud over farmlands, grazing fields, water resource, etc., and groups fight government over allocation of resources or revenue. The political realism perspective presents conflict as an inherent attribute of man. "As far as men live with their 'baggage of emotions', so will conflict remain a part of their habitat; and as long as man remains a 'political animal' with interests different from others, so shall conflict of interests remain a feature of society" [ibid: 9].

Frustration-anger-aggression theory addresses conflict psychologically. It suggests that that it is natural for man to react to unpleasant situations. Aggression is the result of blocking, or frustrating, a person's efforts to attain a goal. When someone's expectation fails the tendency is to confront others; his/her aggression cannot be expressed against the real source of frustration, displaced hostilities can be targeted to substitute objects, that is, aggression is transferred to alternate objects (Dollard et al., 1939; Miller, 1948; Berkowitz, 1969). There are also other theories of conflict such as biological theory, international capitalism theory of conflict, etc. It should further be noted that each of the conflict theories earlier discussed briefly have their own critics and flaws.

Indigenous conflict management systems

Almost all societies, regardless of their location in time and space, have laws for handling disputes and achieving resolution of differences (Gulliver, 1979; Abebe, 2016). Before briefing on indigenous conflict management systems, with respect to the theme of this

paper, it is important to conceptualize such terms and phrases as conflict resolution, conflict transformation, reconciliation, conflict mitigation and vendetta, and gratitude and forgiveness.

Conflict resolution tries addressing the root causes of direct, cultural and structural violence academics, professionals, civil mediation, citizens diplomacy, international and local non governmental organizations involved in conflict resolution through non-coercive strategies like facilitation and consultation.

Conflict transformation attempts to transform the relationships, interests, discourses and the constitution of society that supports violent conflict by means of capacity building, trauma work, grassroots training, development and human rights work (Pia and Diez, 2007).

A glossary on Violent Conflict (USAID, 2001) defines reconciliation, conflict management and vendetta as following.

(1) Reconciliation is the process through which conditions that lead to conflict are addressed and adversarial relationships are transformed into more harmonious ones. Sustainable peace is maintained as communities use nonviolent channels to resolve conflict, a sense of nationhood is established or restored, and social capital is enhanced.

(2) Conflict mitigation or management includes efforts to contain and reduce the amount of violence used by parties in violent conflict and engage them in a process to settle the dispute and terminate the violence.

(3) Vendetta is practice of a family taking vengeance on the person who shed the blood of one of its relatives (blood feud is one of the synonyms). Vengeance is taken in kind, that is, an eye for an eye, and may also be taken on one of the offender's relatives. It is an established institution in many cultures. Vengeance therefore, is inflicting punishment or obtaining satisfaction for an injury, hurt, and is one personal response to unjust treatment. Vengeful people are high in negative affectivity and are easily angered and offended by others. Vengeance is usually a driving force for destructive and aggressive interpersonal behaviors such as homicide, rape, arson, shoplifting, sexual infidelity, etc. (Satici et al., 2014).

Gratitude and forgiveness are the other side alternatives to address conflicts positively. Gratitude can be described according to Satici et al. (2014) as the positive emotion one feels when another person has willingly given, or intends to give, something needed or valued. Grateful feelings strengthen social relationships and help people cope with stressful situations, as well as bolstering self-acceptance. Forgiveness on other hand can be conceived as a pro-social motivational change toward someone who offends, which reduces motivation to seek revenge or to avoid the transgressor, and increases

compassion or sympathy. Forgiveness is vital for maintenance of close relationships, and is viewed as necessary for satisfying and lasting relationships.

Indigenous conflict management systems alternatively referred as 'local' 'traditional' 'customary' 'alternative' justice systems have been playing vital roles in addressing and resolving various forms of conflicts in societies across the globe. Many of the contemporary societies (especially in the developing world) rely on indigenous justice systems, practicing side by side with the formal law, thus, having dual justice systems.

According to Melton (2013), the formal justice system, supposed to be rooted in the world view of Europeans, is guided by codified laws and written rules, procedures, and guidelines. The retributive philosophy holds that because the victim has suffered, the criminal should suffer as well. It is premised on the notion that criminals are wicked people who are responsible for their actions and deserve to be punished. Punishment is used to appease the victim, to satisfy society's desire for revenge, and to reconcile the offender to the community by paying a debt to society; it does not offer a reduction in future crime or reparation to victims.

The indigenous justice paradigm is based on a holistic philosophy; these systems are guided by the unwritten customary laws, traditions, and practices that are learned primarily by example and through oral teachings of tribal or community elders. The holistic philosophy is a circle of justice that connects everyone involved with a problem or conflict on a continuum, with everyone focused on the same center. The victim is the focal point, and the goal is to heal and renew the victim's physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being (Melton, 2013)]. "Indigenous justice systems are based on a holistic philosophy. Law is a way of life, and justice is a part of the life process" [ibid: 2]. Therefore, it could be argued that indigenous justice systems are built up on the principles of peace, harmony and healing of broken relationships.

Accompanying conflict resolution with various rituals and symbols is one of the features of indigenous justice systems. Such symbolic rituals, built upon the society's traditional values, serve as means of strengthening the sustainability of the reconciliation and increasing solidarity and harmony among the society where the conflict has happened.

This paper is aimed at investigating conflict mitigation practice in cases where there occurs a homicide involving blood feud (Vendetta) and also in situations where conflicts are managed by oath based procedures, in Jawi district, northwest Ethiopia. What connects the two themes, that is, the vendetta and oath based cases is that in both cases there are symbolic rituals and procedures done at times where conflicts are mitigated in such mechanisms. Therefore, the paper stresses on the symbolic rituals and procedures in vendetta case and when conflicts are chosen to be addressed through traditional oaths. The research was done on the



Figure 1. Map showing the study area, Jawi district (green colored) within Amhara national regional state [ibid].

justification that while feuding (and following ritual based reconciliation) and oath based conflict management systems are prevalent in the district, there were no adequate empirical studies conducted on the issue.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Study area

Jawi is one of the districts in Awi administrative zone, Amhara regional state, in northwestern Ethiopia. The Agaw people living in Jawi district are commonly and popularly known as 'Kolegna Agaw' (Agaw lowlanders), corresponding to their habituation of the lowland section of the Agaw Awi area. Other than the Agaw, there are also people that reside in Jawi that come as settlers, and as the district is area of cash crop and large-scale projects like sugar production, there is nowadays active movement of people in the area (Figure 1). The capital town of the district is Fendika, which is 210 km far from the Zone capital Enjibara, via Enjibara-Chagni-Benishangul Gumuz route, turning to north entering pocket road after crossing Beles river; and 67 km far from Dangila (Jawi was formerly part of Dangila district) through the direct steep route (Awi Zone Finance and Economic Development Department, 2007).

As of the Central Statistics Agency (CSA, 2007), Jawi district has a total population of 79,090, of whom 41,407 are men and 37,683 women; 7,722 or 9.76% are urban inhabitants, the rest of the population resides in rural areas. The majority of the inhabitants practiced Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity, with 93.1% reporting as

their religion, and 4.85% of the population said they were Muslim.

The climate alternates with long summer rain fall (June-September) and a winter dry season (October-May) with mean annual rain fall of 1569.4 mm. The mean temperature varies between 16.68 and 37.6°C. The altitude ranges from 648 to 1300 m.a.s.l. The land is covered by different vegetation types namely savanna grass land, forest, riverine and bush lands with major agricultural products like sorghum, maize, sesame and cotton (Shimelis et al., 2011).

Research method

The study is based on qualitative research methodology which is found to be suitable for such kind of enquiry where detailed data and deeper interpretation is essential. In-depth interviewing of informants, informal conversations and assessing empirical studies and documents relevant to the research theme were the data collection methods utilized for the study. Field data were collected in the vicinity of Fendika from October-November 2014 by meeting the appropriate participants of the study.

With respect to in-depth interviewing, 12 elders who are experienced in resolving most difficult cases like vendetta and in executing oaths have participated. Officials in the Zone administrative office and justice department and from the District's offices were also interviewed. Interview data from informants were tape recorded and then transcribed in to a written form. The interview was done in Amharic language.

Informal conversation has been conducted at all stages of the field data collection with elders, the clergy, those that experienced

feuding in their families and in undertaking oaths, and with the local district officials. Informal conversation was important in opening up new areas of interest within the research theme and in enriching the data gathered by the other methods.

The first hand field data were also checked against the local unpublished secondary data that were consulted. Especially from the district's culture and tourism office, important research documents on feuding and oath based conflict management were carefully reviewed and analyzed together with the primary data to increase the validity of the research.

Data analysis

Primary and secondary data were analyzed, organized, and interpreted thematically. Data gathered through the language of Amharic were carefully translated into English. Emphasis was given to emic interpretation of the symbolic rituals and procedures conducted during mitigation and reconciliation of conflicts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Causes of homicide and vendetta

In the study area, there are many factors which lead persons to non-violent and violent conflict such as issues on farming and pasture land, fracas due to various cases, looting, theft, quarrels over property ownership, adultery, and so on. So, while the causes which may result to homicide are common socio-cultural, political-economic and psychological, the fundamental pressure for vendetta is found to be the tradition of masculinity. One who did not revenge his father's or brother's blood is not considered as a man. He cannot talk freely in public. He can even hardly argue, quarrel and fight with another person; he is scolded as "you! Quarrel with me putting aside your brother's blood?..." A man who did not go for vengeance of his family's blood is insulted tacitly for his spiritlessness. He suffers from veiled criticism and sarcasm. Due to this, it is not surprising that the man goes blindly for revenge to maintain his masculinity and dignity among the community he lives. Informants reveal that, even a child who lost his father in pregnancy is intentionally socialized to grow up learning about the murderer/s of his father, to create in him a sense of courage and feud, so that he revenges his blood when he becomes matured. Therefore, in the study area, the practice of vendetta is deeply associated with the cultural expectation of masculinity.

Mitigation of vendetta and the reconciliation ritual

Among the *Kolegna* Agaw, in any case, if a person is killed by another person, the victim's family manages to revenge their blood immediately. The murder between two persons quickly turns to be family group feud. Vendetta is achieved by killing the murderer himself/herself or a person from their patrilineage.

Because it is believed that 'ye enat wogen dem ayimolam-matrilineage does not satisfy for blood feud', relatives of the murderer from the mother's side are not the target for vendetta. Vendetta is taken normally on same sex; if the murdered is female, female would be killed, and male would be killed if the victim is male. If possible, it is recommended that the funeral of the two deceased shall be executed on the same day. According to the elders and informants from the clergy, this is for the rational to quickly balance the vendetta and deescalate the situation to prevent further loss, and to timely start the mitigation process. Usually the victim's groups refuse to bury their deceased before revenge is taken. No one interferes between the adversaries during that toughest time. Even elders and the clergy do nothing until the victim's group takes revenge of their blood.

Up on the achievement of balanced vendetta, elders immediately start their assignment, the process of mitigating the violence. Influential elders representing both blood adversary groups would be selected to lead and execute the mitigation and the reconciliation. Elders contact both adversarial groups and call for termination of the violence. They convince the adversarial groups to stop and put down their hands for peace. After this, the elders and both adversaries start preparation for the reconciliation ritual. As the primary field data and also secondary sources (Jawi District Culture and Tourism Office, 2003) reveal, the ritualized event of the reconciliation looks as the following.

On the day of the reconciliation, the elders and adversaries go down to a river with an ox (bought in the contribution of both adversaries), 'tela' (traditional beer), and having two needles. The two adversaries sit on the opposite banks of the river. The elders start by explaining deeply with example about the loss and damage the bloodshed has left; the bad stressful situation it resulted; and the necessity of ending it which brought them this place. After this, two men selected from both adversary groups come, hold together a single knife and cut the neck of the ox presented for the reconciliation sacrifice. This (shedding the blood of the ox) is called 'chifi'. The two men cut out the ox's tongue and give a mouthful to one another. This signifies that 'we (the adversaries) have become brothers from now onwards'. Also, both men each cut a piece from the tongue and throw it away, which means 'if I initiate feud after this let it (God?) throw me like this'. Then, one of the elders comes and does the following symbolic action: he impales one of the needles on the nearby verdant tree, which symbolizes as 'let it freezes your feud like this needle, and greens your reconciliation like the tree'. The two men together break the other needle with their bloody hands, which implies 'one who transgresses the reconciliation shall be broken like this'. After this, the two adversaries sitting on the opposite banks of the river come and join together. 'Tikur dem derege-vendetta comes to an end'. A loud of joy bursts from the audience which marks for the restoration

of peace and harmony. The ox then would be slaughtered by both groups together; its ribs removed and put on a stone. In the presence of the elders, the murderers from both adversaries stand opposite sides and break the bone, symbolizing 'let it breaks like this one who disobeys the reconciliation'. Then the feast follows..... The reconciliation ritual ends with the blessing of the elders.

Although the relationship between the adversaries cannot be expected to be as it was before the bloodshed, since the time of the reconciliation, at least they do not intend to feud one another. Adversaries still keep their interaction modest, but they can freely move outdoors and conduct their daily routines.

From the symbolic rituals conducted during the time of the reconciliation, we can understand that the symbolic actions are intended to create a strong ground for the observance of the reconciliation. Therefore, symbolism plays essential role in the efficacy of the indigenous justice system in the study area.

Oath based conflict management

Oath was found to be another effective and efficient indigenous system of conflict management and extracting truth in the study area. Oath is feared and respected. It is a powerful mechanism of assurance for hidden crime suspects without the need to search and present evidence. It is also used to prevent future malevolence, by forwarding punishment directly to the supernatural force which is believed to cause bad consequences if the person/s that made the oath transgresses it. People usually do not dare to make oath falsely for fear of the consequence. Oath is arranged by elders or third party, when someone appeals that he/she has lost their cattle or any other property or believe that they and/or their families are hurt in any case directly or hidden (for instance, may be sorcery) where they cannot or do not want to present a direct evidence against the suspect. So, if the suspect agrees to take the oath proposed by the plaintiff, it would be implemented that way. However, the suspect himself/herself may initiate the oath taking, if they know or believe that they are innocent and the plaintiff is suspecting them falsely. In this case, the plaintiff assures the truthfulness of his/her complaint or take the property they claimed by making the oath proposed by the suspect and/or the elders. Whatever risk resulting from the oath, if conducted falsely, is unto the oath maker.

Among the *Kolegna* Agaw, oath making have been a common and widely practiced mechanism of conflict management. The oaths are symbolic, and embrace both religious and traditional beliefs. Let us make a look on a few of them as an example:

Closing church door saying "let it shut me down like this if I really have done that (mentioning the suspected deed

presented against him/her by the plaintiff)". Or may be stamping out a cross implying "let it stamp me out like this..."

Uprooting a grass- "let it uproot me like this grass if I did that or will do this for the future"

A mountain named Agaza Mebacha has been worshipped by the local people. If a conflict or deny on something occurs, the elders, the plaintiff and the suspect may go to the mountain to execute an oath. They put three stones on the ground, the suspect then states "If I have taken his... or done this..., let Agaza Mebacha overthrow me like this" and overthrows the stones.

Another practice is that elders may take the conflicting parties to Beles River. The oath maker mixes up water from the river saying "let I am disturbed like this if I have done that or will do this..... for the future"

On the day of Finding of the True Cross the suspect may be asked to sweep the ash, stating "let it sweep me like this"

Removing out and snapping the intestine of live hen saying "let it snap me like this", etc.

To sum up, in the study area, oath making is found to be a powerful instrument of managing dispute and denial on various cases based on a strong symbolic component, confronting truth for fear of the supernatural. Oath based conflict management is both preventive and curative. It brings to an end unsettled cases. Furthermore, oath provides guarantee for the future wellbeing by halting disputants from doing malevolent acts against one another. It builds trust.

Conclusion

According to the local informants and legal officials in the study area, in Jawi district homicide and vendetta have shown a declining trend from time to time, and the cases when happened, are nowadays increasingly dealt in the formal court. Nevertheless, the indigenous ritual of reconciliation still has an invaluable role in preventing further loss of human life and property and in rebuilding sustainable peace and harmony in the society, which is the crucial essence in conflict management lacking in formal courts.

Symbolism in both vendetta and oath based conflict management systems plays vital role in making the reconciliation effective and sustaining it by building a strong traditionally acceptable belief in the psychology the conflicting parties. The strong symbolic actions heartily expressed in different traditional forms oblige the parties to be loyal to the reconciliation. Also the firm

symbolic oaths seem to be the easiest and shortest ways of accessing truth, and avoiding future malevolence of persons against one another.

The study findings imply that both the reconciliation ritual of vendetta and oath making are generally effective especially in sustainably repairing and maintaining interpersonal and communal peace and stability.

“ለማጠጠን ብለህ አንድ ወንዝ አትሻገር፤ ለማስታረቅ ብለህ ግን ሰባት ወንዝ ተሻገር- never cross a river to provoke but cross seven rivers to reconcile” (Folk proverb).

“Peace is not absence of conflict; it is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means” (Ronald Reagan).

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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