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Indigenous Processes of Conflict Resolution in Oromo Society

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Every society develops a worldview through which it perceives and interacts with the surrounding reality. A society's worldview is constructed through the cultural lenses that people have developed through years of socialization. The debate that has been raging for many decades with respect to the origin of war and violence in human society was long between those who believe war is the result of human aggression innate in human biology and those who argue that it is a learned behavior; it now subsides into a third school holding that social conflict is a socially learned phenomenon, just like any other complex activity, such as development of speech and construction of language (Montague 1978). Most anthropologists, following Malinowski (1948), have been focusing on structures of institutions, ideologies, and socialization processes that harness and channel aggression in culture (Bariso 1988).

The data originate from three main sources. The first source comprises interviews that I conducted during 1994–1996 among Oromos living in exile in North America, in Portland, Oregon; Seattle, Washington; and East Lansing, Michigan. The second source is information that has been borrowed from different field works on Oromo culture and society, particularly since World War II. These sources are augmented by my own reconstruction of knowledge from my memory of growing up among the Oromo. I was born and raised in an Oromo family within an Arsie Oromo community of the Rift Valley (in the Negale and Shashamene area) that practiced indigenous Oromo culture in its total orientation—material, symbolic, and ideological. Although as a lad I ran away to school as many kids of my generation did in search of the new challenges promised by the new global system on the horizon, I was able to inherit considerable knowledge both through socialization and practical observations on numerous occasions when *jarsa biya* (community elders) feverishly labored to resolve social conflict at various levels in the community. In addition, during the last two

decades, I have been active among Oromos of various backgrounds (region, religion, class, etc.) in the diaspora—the first generation of Oromo to have been outside their cultural environment—in North America, Europe, and Australia. In the process, I have observed considerable efforts made by the Oromo community leadership in the diaspora to employ Oromo methods of conflict resolution in dealing with social conflict among Oromos at various social levels: interpersonal, organizational, ideological, and political.

■ Emerging Dynamics in Oromo Society

Our exploration with respect to the traditional processes of conflict resolution in Oromo society should be viewed in the context of certain dynamics that have had profound influence on Oromo society during the past few decades.

First, the Oromo society and culture have undergone much stress during the twentieth century, primarily as the result of conquest, colonization, and partition. In contrast to the European colonization of most of African societies, the Oromo society was conquered and colonized by the Abyssinians (Amharas and Tigreans) during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From King Sahle Sellassie (1813–1848) to Emperors Menelik II (1867–1913) and Haile Sellassie (1930–1936; 1941–1974), the founders of the modern Ethiopian empire unscrupulously plundered the Oromo population and recklessly sacked Cushitic cultures, including that of the Oromos, in the manner comparable to their European colonial counterparts (Zahar 1974). Unique cultures were decimated and local leadership was destroyed (Levine 1972).

During this period, the conquerors and the conquered interacted on negative terms. The Habesha culture was imposed on the Oromo society, creating two antagonistic societies within the imperial social order. The Habesha society was considered God's "chosen" people, while the Oromo society was considered subhuman. Until 1974, the Oromos were referred to as "Gallas"—meaning "uncivilized, savage, and cruel" in Amharic—both in the state official communication as well as in Habesha social circles. Its culture was referred to as *aramane* (pagan) and viewed as inferior and only suitable for destruction. Accordingly, the Habeshas developed mythical portraits—a common phenomenon that emanates from the interrelations between the colonizer and the colonized (Memmi 1968)—with respect to the Oromo society as early as the sixteenth century (Abir 1980, 144). The overall policies of suppressing Oromo culture and language sharpened during the reign of Emperor Haile Sellassie. The new policy directives called for the expansion of (Orthodox) Christianity, the predominance of Amharic culture and language throughout the empire, and the formulation of quick

and effective mechanisms of Amharanizing the majority Oromos before they could develop their own consciousness and cause problems.

New religions, primarily Christianity and Islam, penetrated the Oromo society during the same period. Orthodox Christianity was imposed on the Oromos by the colonial rulers, and in reaction many, particularly in the southern and eastern regions, accepted Islam during the 1940s, essentially as a protest against the oppressive Abyssinian system (Trimingham 1965; Baxter 1983). In some areas, Catholic and Protestant Christianity had been introduced as the result of Western Christian missionary efforts (Mazrui 1990; Nyang 1994).

In Ethiopia, this was the period when the imperial state bureaucracy system penetrated every facet of the social fabric of the peoples in the periphery, including the Oromos, as modernity, though limited, was introduced into Ethiopia by Emperor Haile Sellassie. In essence, modernity was coded in the context of Amhara-Tigray culture and language. This policy further intensified the friction between the urban *naftagnas* (colonial settlers) and the Oromo rural dwellers. The tensions emanating from these discriminatory imperial policies created divisions within the Oromo society itself, between the illiterate masses and the educated few. Educated Oromos, in order to succeed in the Habesha-dominated imperial system, were pressured to learn Amharic, to marry Amhara women or men, to change their names from Oromo to Amharic, and to behave as though they were Amharas (Shack 1976; Tuso 1982). The Oromo masses in general came to view the Habeshas as enemies.

Oromo society was separated and organized under various forms as a result of natural and political barriers that had been put in place during the last centuries. The natural barriers include rivers, valleys, mountain gorges, and sheer distance. As the population increased and spread itself in all directions in search of resources, including a sizable migration south into northeast Kenya, its members mingled with other ethnic groups, and separation from the Oromo traditional cultural centers increased. Some adopted the cultures and values of their new neighbors, while others, in due course, regionalized and localized their traditions and cultural practices (LeVine 1972, 78–86, 149, 158). Lack of literacy and modern means of communication and transportation, along with the lack of freedom to plan and manage its own national affairs, has weakened Oromo culture and the language. The European missionary endeavor to introduce literacy into the Oromo society in the Oromo language during the nineteenth century and during the subsequent decades was repeatedly thwarted by the successive Abyssinian rulers (Hassan 1981; Tuso 1920). Having no heritage of literacy has had considerable negative impacts on Oromo society. Among the great handicaps such societies face is that their histories depend mostly on oral traditions and guesses. Worst of all, as in the case of most subjugated people,

they are defined by others. Thus, naturally, the origin of the Oromo people has been a source of controversy. Some have suggested that they migrated to Ethiopia from somewhere outside, perhaps through the Indian Ocean during the periods prior to the sixteenth century (LeVine 1961, 78–86). However, more recent scholarship based on linguistic and oral history has established that the Horn of Africa, between the Bale plateau and the Rift Valley, has been their home for their known history (Levine 1972, 78; Lewis 1966; Laitin and Samatar 1987, 5–10).

Increasingly, stress has been exerted by the successive Addis Ababa regimes on the Oromo people. There is great fear that if the Oromos gained their democratic rights, they might call for the independence of Oromia, with other regions to follow, to threaten the very survival of Ethiopia as a viable political entity. Perhaps as the result of the psychology of rising expectations, the Oromo people are experiencing dramatically increased consciousness, and consequently Oromo nationalism is currently at its zenith after the overthrow of the Mengistu regime in 1991. Culture and language have been the two rallying factors, which is a common phenomenon in the rise of nationalism. Under the general rubric of Oromo culture, there has been a rise of great interest in the Oromo indigenous methods of conflict resolution.[1]

One of the most numerous indigenous peoples on the African continent, the Oromos belong to the general family of Cushitic peoples indigenous to northeast Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia) along with the Somalis and Afars (Baxter 1983, 7; Laitin and Samatar 1987, 4–7). Out of the approximately 52 million Ethiopians, about 25–28 million are estimated to be Oromos, spread through the highlands of Ethiopia including Addis Ababa itself and south across the lowlands of Kenya.

As with other Cushitic groups in the Horn of Africa, the Oromo social system is genealogically based. The society is divided into major autonomous branches: Boran, Guji, Arsie, the Harar confederation (including primarily Ittu and Afran Kallo), Tulama, Matcha (including Wollega and Illibabor), and Abichu-Raya (the two groups in Wollo and Tigray). Each branch comprises four levels from the largest (clan) to the smallest (family), sometimes with variations. These units are: *gossa* (clan), *balbala* (subclan), *anna* (extended family), and *worra* (family). Like the Somalis, the next largest Cushitic group, the Oromos use the clan system as well as the eldership system in the coordination of the social affairs of the nation.

Within their diversity, Oromos share certain basic characteristics: common ancestry, common threads of culture, a common mother tongue, a common psychological makeup, a common institutional memory (the Gada system), and common colonial experience (Baxter 1983, 1996).

The Oromo have a strong and well-defined belief system, based on seven interrelated concepts: (1) *Waaqa;* (2) *Ayaana;* (3) *Setana;* (4) *Chubu;*

(5) *Ballessa;* (6) *Kayyo;* (7) *Qittee.* Oromos believe that *Waaqa* is the universal God, who created everything. There are different versions with respect to his past dealings with human beings on earth, one of which tells that he was troubled by the evil deeds of human beings, escaped to the sky, and currently resides there. Historically, the Oromos also worship other objects such as rivers, animals, and trees. They, however, do not consider these objects as Waaqa, the creator; rather they worship them in their effort to solicit the intermediary services of these elements in their pursuit of mercy and reconciliation with Waaqa and blessings from him (Bariso 1988). *Ayaana* is the process of creation through which Waaqa made all things. It is the grace by which Waaqa expresses himself (Megerssa 1994).

The Oromos believe in the existence of the evil spirit whom they refer to as *Setana.* According to the Oromo notion of sin, Setana constantly tempts people to do wrong things, and one has to watch against being trapped by Setana. *Chubu* refers to one's conscious acts to harm other people, constituting sin against society and Waaqa. It upsets the internal consistency of society and impairs harmonious relationships between humans and Waaqa, *laffa* (the earth), and other elements in the ecosystem. Disharmony as the result of social conflict must be repaired through *jarsumma* (reconciliation/peacemaking.). *Ballessa* refers to the transgression caused when someone harms someone else, usually through omission. *Kayyo* is a broad concept that describes a person's fullest life or lack of it. In the Oromo worldview, everyone should behave in such a way to have *Kayyo qajella* (good *kayyo.*) This requires that one worship Waaqa through gifts, treat fellow human beings fairly, and revere the ecosystem (Hinnant 1977, 36–38).

Qittee expresses the Oromo notion of equality among persons. Legesse (1987, 12) suggests that the Oromo notion of *qittee* (egalitarianism) has shaped the very syntactical construction of the Oromo language.

The system of value is reflected in the language and conduct of the people and in their day-to-day activities. It is no accident that Oromo language does not have complicated pronouns of power. You (*ati*) is a perfectly serviceable multipurpose pronoun whether one is referring to a child or an adult, a man or a woman, a junior or a senior individual. Contrast this, if you will, with the complicated ways of saying "you" in authoritarian societies such as the Ethiopian Amharas.

Believing all people are created equal and therefore deserve equal treatment in most aspects relating to life and basic rights, Oromos spend an unusual amount of time and energy in peacemaking among themselves.

Social scientists have observed that in some societies (e.g., the Amharas of Ethiopia), social conflict is a way of life, while in others (e.g., the Semai in Malaysia), it is nonexistent or minimal (Levine 1972; Dentan 1968; Robarchek 1994). In some societies, violent conflict is allowed under

limited circumstances and strictly stipulated guidelines. The Oromos' societal experience relative to social conflict and peacemaking fits this third category. Oromos wage wars, but under strict circumstances and for limited purposes, to meet their basic needs: self-defense; new resources (e.g., new territories for grazing); and for fulfillment of personal aspirations (to become a hero). Internally, social conflict also takes place at various levels, but Oromo show their attachment to internal social harmony and peaceful coexistence with their neighbors through elaborate principles and processes to manage it.

The Oromos work very hard to manage conflict on three different levels: to prevent social conflict from occurring; if it occurs, to prevent it from escalating; and if it escalates, to make peace between the conflicting parties through the intervention of the *jarsa biya* (elders of the community). The ideological themes underpinning the processes of conflict resolution are *effort* (society has to work at it until the conflict is fully resolved and total reconciliation is consummated because there is no conflict that cannot be resolved); *truth* (*dhuga bassu*) (conflict is resolved by unearthing the truth about the causes of the conflict); *justice* (the goals of peacemaking have to include the consummation of justice); *punishment* (*guma*) (payment for the wrong committed is not usually excessive since the Oromos do not have jails or the death penalty); and *reconciliation* (an act that is believed to be necessary to keep harmony between the creator and the creatures—humans and nature). These then govern construction of political structures (the Gada system), religious customs (the Kallu system), social structures (the eldership, or *jarsa biya,* system), and the elaborate processes of reconciliation (*arara*), systems that the Oromos developed to manage conflicts in a way that transcends divisions along regional, clan (*gossa*), and subclan (*balbala*) lines.

■ The Gada System

The Gada system may be the most studied indigenous African institution. The first writer on the Gada system on record is a sixteenth-century Abyssinian ecclesiastic by the name of Bahrey (1954). Other travelers, diplomats, and social scientists studied the Gada system during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many of them considering it uniquely democratic. For example, W. Plowden (1868), who traveled in the region in the nineteenth century, stated that among republican systems, Gada is superior. Atsime Giorgis (1988), another Abyssinian writer at the end of the nineteenth century, wrote that the Gada system unites and mobilizes all members of Oromo society into a formidable and invincible force. Paul Baxter (1978, 151), a contemporary British anthropologist, wrote, "They [Oromos]

have especially captured the imagination of travelers and ethnographers because of their ancient, enduring and complex system of age-grading, Gada, which, it has been consistently reported, has also served as the basis of a uniquely democratic political system." Asmarom Legesse (1973), an Eritrean anthropologist who is considered to have written the most definitive interpretation of the Gada system, observed:

> The gada system is an institution that appears so exaggerated that it is readily dismissed by laymen and scholars alike as a sociological anomaly. Anomalous though it may be, it is one of the most astonishing and instructive turns the evolution of human society has taken. . . . Gada seems to be one of the universals that binds the entire nation into a coherent system and gives people a common political basis for understanding each other. It constitutes a shared political idiom.

This, then, is the philosophical vantage point from which we view the character of Oromo democracy. What is astonishing about this cultural tradition is how far the Oromos have gone to ensure that power does not fall into the hands of war chiefs and despots. They achieve this goal by creating a system of checks and balances that is at least as complex as the systems we find in the Western societies.

In the Gada system, men are organized along two sets of five categories. The first set is a chronologically based age-grade designation. In this set each male goes through five grades of eight years each where he performs a set of duties and responsibilities prior to moving to the next period. Ideally, a male enters into this generation-grade system on the day he is born and stays in the system through his life, completing the cycle when his active duties are completed at age forty-eight. After that, he retires from active duties but remains an elder statesman who counsels and makes peace within the society. However, Oromo society being a polygamous society, children are born at different parental age periods, which creates major gaps in the age-grade system. The two major purposes in this differentiation in the generation-grade system are to provide the necessary human power for the society all the time and also to prevent sons and fathers from entering into the ruling period at the same time. Each eight-year period in the cycle has a name for the generation grade: (1) *Iti Mako* (8–16 years); (2) *Daballe* (16–24 years); (3) *Folle* (24–32 years); (4) *Qondala* (32–40 years); (5) *Luba* (40–48 years).

The second critical component in the Gada institution is the *luba* system. The equivalent concept for *luba* in the English language is "party." Men are organized into five *luba* (party) sets. The *luba* system is known by other names, such as *misenssa* and *gogsa,* among Oromos. Scholars have used the term "classes" or "age-sets." Thus, each male is born into a party and each party goes through the five periods (generation set system) as

described above. Table 6.1 illustrates the relationships between these two sets (the generation-grade set and the *luba* set [party] and the summary of roles and responsibilities performed. Thus Gada, as a system, is conceived as a unity of interacting parts. The system organizes the social order by dividing all men into groups and providing a blueprint that specifies an arrangement of strategies (grades); the relationships among different grades; rights, rules of behavior, and the tasks to be performed in each grade; and the process by which groups (parties) move from grade to grade (Waldansso 1980).

Table 6.1 Duties of Each Grade

Iti Mako (usual age: 8–16 years)
- Looking after livestock
- Messengers and errand runners

Daballe (usual age: 16–24 years)
- Herding
- Care of livestock
- Look for new trade opportunities

Folle (usual age: 24–32 years)
- Warriors; use physical strength to protect Oromo nation
- Live separate from other Oromo peoples

Qondala (usual age: 32–40 years)
- Reserve army
- Learn the laws and principles of administration
- Marry
- Select their officials

Luba (usual age: 40–48 years)
- Ruling grade
- Handle judicial matters
- Diplomats, arbitrators, and councilors

The result is a hierarchical system of authority or legitimate power (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950). Authority is transferred to a new generation grade every eight years; authority is held in balance, and corruption and nepotism are prevented through the institution of succession; the party in power for eight years assumes responsibility in military, economics, politics, rituals, and peace and reconciliation; the leadership of the ruling party is chosen through open and fair elections; the system has pluralistic characteristics; the system prohibits the political leadership from amassing wealth

while in office; and there is a mechanism to recall officers in case of incompetence or corruption. The nature of the system forces every party to enter new generation grades every eight years when the party acting as luba (the ruling party) retires at the end of the forty-year cycle. Thus, for example, sons and fathers cannot be in the same or even successive ruling generation grade (Legesse 1987; Manglapus 1987, 134–137).

The Gada system of conflict management moves through thirteen identifiable steps on its way to managing and resolving conflict and arriving at *arara* (reconciliation) so that harmonious relations can be restored among conflicting parties, God the Creator, the community, and the surrounding world. These steps are in regard to the most dramatic and emotional of any kind of social conflict, violence leading to loss of life.

As soon as the community learns that there has been violence that has caused the death of an Oromo, male or female, it is shaken by the news and becomes mobilized. The kin (up to the clan level) both of the person who committed the crime and of the dead person want to avoid the escalation of the conflict into a cycle of violence. Whether accidental or intentional, the death of an Oromo is treated by both kin groups with the same level of anxiety and vigilance. Of course, if it is learned early on that the death was accidental, tensions are lessened since Oromos are usually willing to look at such accidents as the will of Waaqa and are much more disposed to give the reconciliation process the matter of due course. If, however, the killing is shown to be an intentional act, then the pressure to mobilize the resources for the purpose of revenge would be enormous and, indeed, could escalate so much that the conflict could get out of hand.

Thus, the community members, being cognizant of this enormous danger, move with great speed, essentially to achieve three critical goals at this stage: to mobilize the community leadership for immediate intervention; to warn the killer's kin that they should conform to the Oromo traditional law of collective responsibility in the case of death caused by a kinsman, considering every kinsman of the killer to be a party to the killing and therefore liable for revenge by the kin of the victim; and finally to avoid spilling more blood. The Oromo believe that spilling Oromo blood would poison the total environment, risking health to all the communities concerned; in Oromo mythology for example, if a person touches or steps upon spilled blood, even when he or she has no part in the incident, he or she, in due course, would develop leprosy or a similar disease (Hinnant 1977).

Thus it becomes important to recruit *jarsa biya* (elders) of the killer's kin groups to assure the kin of the dead person that they are working on the case in compliance with the law (*sera*) and custom (*adda*), that they will soon begin criminal procedures (*gumma*), and that they are eager to work earnestly on reconciliation (*arara*).

In step two of the process, the appropriate *jarsa biya* are selected. The

qualification of *jarsa biya* are many, and steps required for the selection of the elders to serve at this level of societal responsibility are rigorous. At the philosophical level, they must have a commitment to the Oromo societal ideology, which encompasses the five major themes of effort, truth, justice, punishment, and reconciliation. The key qualifications for eldership in such matters include thorough knowledge of both law and custom; intellectual ability to grasp issues and interpret them according to the *sera* and *adda;* skills in managing group dynamics including communication; absolute integrity of character; commitment to the Oromo ideology relative to the cause of truth, justice, and reconciliation; and earned trust from one's peers and the community.

The process of selecting the *jarsa biya* may be initiated at different levels. Usually members of the family of the person who committed the crime approach the elders of their community and ask for assistance. In cases where family leadership does not exist, the elders of the clan or subclan may come forward with the initiatives in selecting the *jarsa biya.* Usually two elders are selected from each side and one person from each representing the Gada institution. The persons representing the Gada institution physically sit between the elders representing the parties at conflict. The *jarsa biya* meet to develop a common understanding of the crisis at hand and the strategy to take. They use a legal inquiry procedure known as *qorra,* in which they are allowed to ask any question with respect to the law and custom relating to the case at hand, sifting information and establishing basic facts. Once consensus is reached as to the nature of the problem, they send a message to the other party that the kin of the defendant wish to settle the matter in accordance with the *sera* and *adda* and respectfully request to meet with the *jarsa biya* from the other side as soon as possible.

In a case where no one has admitted to the act, if the family of the dead person knows the killer or suspects someone, a member will approach the kin and clan to begin the process of charging the suspected person. In such cases, the process of identifying the *jarsa biyas* and developing strategy could be laborious and time-consuming, but once agreements have been reached on the selection of the elders, the next steps are the same.

In step three, the selected elders and the representatives of the Gada institution meet by themselves for the first time to exchange ideas and work out procedures and to select a *haiyu* (judge) from among themselves. For a person to be selected *haiyu,* one needs to have qualities as a member of the *jarsa biya,* plus a superior ability to use proverbs and metaphors, leadership ability to steer the discussion and keep tempers cool, and a record of success in making peace in the community. Once the *jarsa biya* and the Gada representatives meet, they usually go to the clan (*gossa*) of the dead person to ask that the matter be given to the *jarsa biya* and the Gada representatives and to give permission for the use of three critical places by the fami-

ly and clan of the person who committed the crime: residence (that means they do not have to flee from their homes), river, and the market. In the meantime, they assist the family in burying the dead and stay with the family during the entire period of mourning, ranging from one to four weeks. These activities and gestures are designed to ensure de-escalation of the conflict by both demonstrating sympathy and exercising surveillance, so that no one would take the matter in one's own hands and seek revenge.

In step four, the *jarsa biya* deliberate on the nature of the conflict, the law that was broken and the customs that have been violated, and the laws and customs that could be applied in resolving the case. Essentially, they begin to move from the stage of diagnosis to that of finding a formula for resolution.

In step five, the elders meet separately with conflicting parties. This is a very critical strategy for the purpose of controlling the tempers of the parties and the process, consistent with the Oromo philosophy of forestalling escalation and maintaining civility. They listen carefully to the concerned parties and make inquiries. If need be, they may break to caucus (*maqqo*) and discuss it privately.

After meeting with the parties, step six is to meet with the witnesses. The presiding elders instruct the witnesses to tell the whole truth and examine the responses point by point as they interrogate the witnesses.

In step seven, the elders then recess again to debate among themselves on the issues that remain unresolved. If there is still uncertainty or if they feel that the defendant is not telling the truth, the elders (with the plaintiff, in accordance with Oromo tradition) will require the entire family, subclan, and clan of the defendant to swear in accordance with the Oromo law and customs that every person in the community has been socialized through family, civic, and religious teachings to the tell the truth and do justice, to keep harmony in the society and the environment; they are placed before their social responsibility, failure in which would lead to the loss of blessings from Waaqa. If the family and clan believe that their member has been accused unfairly or he or she is telling the whole truth, they defend him or her. After all, to defend a family and clan member against any unfair treatment and false accusations is part of their moral and social obligation.

Everyone looks forward to the verdict (*murtte*)—step eight— that will produce *arara* between the parties and restoration of peace and harmony among the spirits of the people, the deity, and the ecosystem. To the elders who have accepted the responsibility of peacemaking and to the presiding *haiyu* this is a very critical moment too, for their task is not only to declare their findings but to do so in such a manner as to bring the expected peace and reconciliation. The presiding *haiyu* will cite an Oromo prayer to Waaqa that their efforts will bear fruit and ask that the spirit move the parties to accept the *murtte* and move forward in peace and reconciliation. He then

provides a brief summary as to the reasons why they had come together, the work the elders have done, and their readiness to declare a *murtte* and facilitate peacemaking and reconciliation between the parties at conflict. Then the elders will begin *qorra* (legal inquiry) into the issues, the laws and customs, investigations, and the process of reaching the *murtte* (verdict).

Once the process of *qorra* is completed, the *haiyu* will begin carefully declaring the *murtte* followed by the appropriate course of action in response to the findings. If, for example, murder was involved, there will be a determination of the blood payment price (*gumma*). Usually in such a case, the family members of the dead person, with assistance of the kin and clan wise men, will put forward the demands for the *gumma*. However, the guilty party may petition for lenience, and the elders usually support moderation in such matters and may lean toward recommending more symbolic gestures in paying the *gumma* rather than profit making. All of these things are sorted out ahead of time (perhaps in step seven).

In step nine, the *haiyu* representing the elders will proceed and implore the guilty party to accept *balessa* (wrongdoing). In this process, they repeat their findings and remind the party to consider the *sera* and *adda*. The guilty party usually accepts such murtte rather readily, as his relatives and wise people from his community will urge him to do.

Once the guilty party accepts his wrongdoing, the elders will turn their attention to the grieved party, in step ten, and implore him to accept the *dhuga* (truth), to forgive, and to be reconciled. Since the aggrieved party has been represented in the composition of the *jarsa biya* by the elders he and his party selected, and since it is in everyone's vital interest to complete this process and move toward reconciliation, he too usually readily accepts the essence of the *murtte*, including the acceptance of the *dhuga* decided by the elders.

Step eleven is the administration of penalty. In the Oromo traditional system, human life is considered precious, and the penalties (*guma*) for committing a crime against another Oromo are designed to reinforce this social value. They are intended to serve as a deterrent. This is shown by the amount of cattle one is required to pay and the quality of the animals designated as fitting for such purpose. Symbolically, the amount is usually referred to as *kuma toko* (one thousand) cattle; however, in reality, it may be about a hundred. Only cows and horses are acceptable, not other animals such as donkeys, mules, or goats. Cows and horses are the most loved and respected in Oromo society, and one hundred is a sizable number for an average person in that economy. In step eleven, the task is to announce the penalty to the parties in public, and agree on the nature, amount, and time of its payment.

The twelfth step in the long and arduous process of conflict resolution

in the Oromo cultural system is a legal as well as a religious service for the conflicting parties and for the entire community. It is aimed at reconciliation between the parties and between the community and the divine, the earth and the entire psychological and spiritual ecology. It is aimed at cleansing the anger and ill feelings from everyone concerned. At the spiritual level, Oromos believe that receiving continued blessings from Waaqa is dependent upon their forgiving, forgetting, and totally reconciling, making sure that family and clan members will not inherit bitterness and animosity as the result of the conflict.

Thus the conflicting parties and members of their respective communities gather for the ceremony of *arara*. Some kind of drink is prepared for the occasion—*bulbulla* (honey mixed with water) or *dadhi* (soured *bulbulla*) or coffee. The participants share the drink as the elders conduct the ceremony. A variant of the blessing offered on such occasions, as captured by Hinnant (1977, 37), from his work among the Gugi Oromos, contains the central themes of blessings delivered at such ceremonies:

biyya arrara (let the country be reconciled)
guda arrara (let the big, senior, powerful be reconciled)
dikka arrara (let the little, junior, weak be reconciled)
loni arrara (let the cattle be reconciled)
nu arrara (let us be reconciled)
nu nagaes (let us be at peace)
nu itit (let us be thick like yogurt)

The last step is bonding. The activities the conflicting parties undertake during the postreconciliation ceremony are also very critical. For example, if the conflict has involved the loss of human life, family members usually will take further steps to overcome the memory of bitterness and animosity resulting from the conflict. Such actions may involve marriage arrangements or *gudifachaa* (child adoption) between the family members. Another type of activity involves providing lifelong services to a family member whose livelihood has been affected seriously as the consequence of the death of a person in the conflict. For example, if a mother has lost her son, depriving her of the natural help she would normally receive from him, the person and the family responsible for the death will provide lifelong assistance on the farm and other areas of her needs.

The processes discussed thus far are dominated by men. However, Oromos have developed a complex system relating to the role of women in conflict resolution. In the Oromo social system, women are the only group that are protected from physical attack by any party in any conflict. They are sacred humans. Thus, women play important roles as messengers of peace; they organize themselves and physically intervene between the con-

flicting parties in case of violence; they mobilize the community to respond to the situation of conflict quickly and appropriately; and they serve a moral voice in times of social turmoil.

Oromo Process of Conflict Resolution: Change and Continuity

Do Oromos currently use this system in all regions? And do Oromos use the same system in resolving interregional conflicts (e.g., Arsie vs. Shoa or Guji vs. Borana)? Both questions deserve in-depth research studies and intensive fieldwork. However, the available information shows that the Oromo people in general have retained and practiced these processes, with local variations, in different regions, and have used these processes, with some variations, in responding to interregional conflicts. (Legesse 1973 on Borana; Knutson 1967 on Shoa; Hinnant 1977 and Bariso 1988 on Guji; Tuso forthcoming on Arsie; and Bartel 1983 on Wollega).

Variations can occur at several levels. First, there are cases where Oromos in different regions have extended some type of allegiance and Oromohood to other groups. Second, during the last three years, in the face of intensified political, economic, cultural, and linguistic oppression from the authorities of the Ethiopian empire, Oromo political, intellectual, and community leadership at all levels have embraced traditional methods of conflict resolution in their effort to build solidarity for the purpose of empowering the Oromo so that they may be able to restore their basic rights in the fundamental affairs affecting their daily lives. For example, the Maetcha Tulema Association, the first pan-Oromo organization since the Oromos became colonized, which emerged during the mid-1960s, laid its foundation by entering into a covenant, in accordance with Oromo tradition, with the community leadership from various regions to work together as Oromos, irrespective of the diversities the Oromo people have inherited along the way (Zoga 1993).

Third, perhaps the most dramatic development in the restoration of Oromo cultural traditions in modern times took place in 1991 immediately after the fall of the Dergue (military junta). For the first time since the colonization of the Oromo people, Oromo elders across the entire population within the Ethiopian empire-state formed, almost instantly, a pan-Oromo association of elders. Two elders were selected by the grass roots from each eleven main Oromo regions. Then two elders were selected from each of the fifty-two *Woredas* (subdistricts) of Oromia. The purpose of the elders' association was to bring together the then-five Oromo liberation fronts to avoid bloodshed by Oromos against Oromos in the unstable new political order and to make peace and build trust among Oromos wherever they

reside within Ethiopia. They succeeded so well that the new regime eventually banned the newly formed Oromo elders' association, just like all the previous Addis Ababa regimes that had manifested perennial fear and hatred against the Oromos and persecuted the leadership of the elders.

Other examples indicate the Oromos have used the same model of conflict resolution in situations of interethnic conflict. Hinnant (1972, 154–155), from his fieldwork among Oromo Gujis, reports an incident where the Oromos and Sidamas, after fighting for three to four days, sent elder women with messages calling for a truce to the conflict and initiating peacemaking. The conflicting parties met in the presence of those women and made peace. My own informants indicate that the Arsie Oromos use similar patterns of peacemaking after their engagement in violent conflict with their neighbors such as the Sidamas and the Alabas. Bariso (1988, 27–28), an Oromo anthropologist from Guji, reports similar incidents, including a covenant between Gujis and Gedeos (Darasa) not to wage war against each other. A widely reported tradition throughout Oromo history points to a rich legacy of *gudifacha* (adoption) of their victims of war on an equal footing with respect to rights and responsibilities accorded an Oromo citizen (Bariso 1988, 32-33; Hinnant 1977, 112). Historically, Oromos have made peace with their enemies and extended friendship and treated them as neighbors. For example, after they drove the followers of Imam Ahmed Al-Ghazi (Gran) all the way to the city of Harar, where the Adares built a wall around the city as protection against the Oromo cavalry, the Oromos still extended friendship and developed successful cultural and commercial ties with them. Oromos encircled the Amharas in Shoa, and even penetrated the heart of the Abyssinian kingdom during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but never imposed dominance over any of them (Hassan 1983, 147–220; Waldron 1983).

■ Conclusion

This chapter has presented the Oromo processes of conflict resolution in the context of Oromo national historical experience. Oromo systems of conflict resolution are rooted in a worldview that encompasses religion, individual basic rights, human equality, social ethics, and peaceful coexistence with non-Oromo neighbors as well as with the ecosystem. Oromo national ethos can be characterized as egalitarian collectivism. National institutions—political (Gada), religious (Kallu), and social (eldership)—were designed to prevent conflict from happening. Checks and balances were created within the Gada system and between the Gada and Kallu institutions so that no person or group could abuse power. If prevention fails and social conflict occurs, mechanisms are put in place to keep it from

escalating and to resolve it based on a search for the truth (*dhuga*) and a verdict (*murtte*) of justice. The system attaches collective responsibility to the crimes committed by an individual member. The ultimate goal in Oromo processes of conflict resolution is to effect conflict transformation through reconciliation (*arara*) between the conflicting parties and the respective community members, the creator, and other creatures, and to restore harmony (*nagaaa*).

As Oromo society has gone through dramatic social changes, particularly during the last two centuries, many of its traditional institutions have been affected negatively. Both the Gada system and the Kallu institution have been undermined by the impact of external social forces (colonization and the introduction of new religions). Yet, its processes of conflict resolution have survived, and provide comparative models of conflict resolution.

Notes

1. Two important points need to be included in here. First, during the last century, the successive Addis Ababa regimes have partitioned and rearranged the Oromo territories under different imperial provincial systems. In some instances, new provinces were created bearing the names of the land rather than the Oromo branches. A case in point is the division of the Arsie republic into three units during the early 1960s. A new province, Bale, was created; the Arsie Oromos in the Rift Valley were assigned to Shoa Province; and a small territory was retained as the Arsie Province. As a consequence of this history of a system of division (at least in part), by the end of the Dergue rule, there were eleven Oromo regions. Second, the educated Oromos straddle between the two major systems of references. On one hand, they relate to each other at the national level (the Oromo nation); on the other hand, they also relate to the local social structures as described in this section. I formulated these observations after extensive discussion with my informants.

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