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The Role of Women in Conflict Resolution: Perspectives from an Indigenous System

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This article commences with an observation that, while the emergence of conflict resolution as a profession from the Western social and intellectual ecology is a heartening development and has the potential to have universal appeal, more and serious explorations should be undertaken in the study and incorporation of conflict resolution systems which have been created and practiced by indigenous peoples in various cultural, social, and historical settings.

The Oromo system of conflict resolution is presented here, with a special focus on the role of women, as a case study. The Oromo system of conflict resolution was selected because its social system and cultural orientation — considered by outsiders as egalitarian — has attracted scholars for its unique democratic features. Although Oromo society has gone through dramatic social changes because of Abyssinian and European conquest during the last century, and the coming of new religions — Christianity and Islam — the Oromo have managed to keep their system of conflict resolution intact. In fact, their system of conflict resolution has survived better than any other Oromo indigenous institution during these years of social turmoil.

The role of Oromo women in this system of conflict resolution is described here. In particular, we will examine: 1. intrafemale conflict; 2. female-male (husband and wife) conflict; 3. intra-Oromo conflict; 4. interethnic group conflict; and 5. conflict among the Waaga (the supernatural), humans, and nature. Further, we will examine ways the Atete, an exclusively female institution, is utilized in resolving social conflict.

Introduction

The concept of conflict resolution that uses negotiation and mediation has become common in North America during the last two-and-a- half decades (Bush and Folger, 1994, pp. 1-32; Burton and Dukes, 1990, pp. 27-37; Moore, 1996, pp. 22-32) and has been adopted at the international level.[1]

From the perspective of developing societies (including the indigenous peoples in the Americas) who have been accustomed to a series of violent armed conflicts predicated on the interests and policies of the North, commencing with the 15th century, the evolution of an intellectual movement originating from the West whose basic tenets include concepts such as basic human needs (Coate and Rosati, 1988; Burton, 1990; Azar, 1990),[2] conflict resolution through mediation, problem solving, and empowering the weaker party (Bush and Folger, 1994; Cobb, 1993; Laue and Cormick, 1978) is a very

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hamdesa Tuso was born and raised in Oromo country in the Ethiopian Empire. During his years in high school and junior college, he distinguished himself as a leader in activism for social change, community development, and human rights against the injustices perpetrated by the regime of Emperor Haile Sellassie against the landless peasants in the newly-conquered and incorporated territories to Empire the 19th and 20th centuries.

From 1982 to 1990, Dr. Tuso served George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, as the head international student advisor and director of the Office of International Student Services and as a liaison with the U. S. Immigration & Natu-

ralization Service, the U. S. Department of Labor, and the U. S. Information Agency and embassies.

During the last decade, Dr. Tuso has also been involved in a broad range of activities relating to social change and conflicts in cross-cultural settings. He was responsible for the emergence of five different organizations ranging from a refugee support unit to a scholarly society relating to the Horn of Africa.

Dr. Tuso served as a senior fellow at the Center for Development Policy in Washington, D. C. (1982-1984); consultant, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies at Conard Grebel College, University of Waterloo (Canada) pertaining to the conflicts in the Horn of Africa (1986-1991); and formally joined the Institute for Conflict Analysis & Resolution, George Mason University faculty in September, 1994.

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heartening and appealing development. In my view, the emergence of such an intellectual movement from the Western social and academic ecology should be greeted with a great sigh of relief and enthusiasm. However, in spite of the renewed interest by scholars and policymakers from the Western influential centers in the ideals of conflict resolution, we can safely state that the field of conflict resolution is far from enjoying a depth and breadth of theoretical and practical knowledge that allows it to interact with different cultures. As it stands now, literature relative to conflict resolution is based on a post industrial, Western paradigm. This presents Western conflict resolution models with considerable limitations. While social conflict is a universal experience in human communities, (Moore, 1996; Coser,1956), culture defines the social ethos, the "enemy," rules of engagement, taboos, sanctions of conflicts, and the frame of reference for their resolution. (Ross, 1993; Lederach, 1995; Murdock,1965, pp. 81-86, 144-150; Savovar, et. al., 1991).

An example of this problem is third-party mediation, a Western method of conflict resolution. Third-party mediation is predicated on bringing externality and neutrality to the conflict situation. Other significant criteria associated with the third-party mediation model are professionalism (the notion of expertise) and fairness (Fisher, 1983). These elements constitute the sources of legitimacy for the external intervener. Wehr and Lederack, however, report that, based on their involvement in the negotiation to end the conflict in Central America during the1980s, the *confianza* model was preferred over the North American-based third-party model. According to these authors, the *confianza* model is predicated on trust relationships, and the conflict groups in the above-indicated case preferred insider, partial peacemakers rather than outsider, neutral mediators (Wehr and Lederack, 1991). Reports are also coming from the experiences of *indigenous* peoples in North America that mediation in their cultural paradigm is radically different from the Western model relative to the issue of neutrality. Bluehouse and Zion(1993) write:

> General American mediation uses the model of a neutral third person who empowers disputants and guides them to a resolution of their problems. In Navajo mediation, the naat'aanii is not quite neutral, and his or her guidance is more value-laden than that of the mediator in the American model.
>
> Peacemakers have strong personal values, which are the product of their language and rearing in the Navajo way. Those values are also the teachings of Navajo common law. A peacemaker, as a naat'aanii, is selected because of personal knowledge of Navajo values and morals and the demonstrated practice of them. Peacemakers teach values through prayer and a "lecture" to tell disputants what is right and wrong. Navajo peacemakers, unlike their American mediator counterparts, have an affirmative and interventionist role to teach parties how they have fallen out of harmony by distance from Navajo values (p.335).

Furthermore, in the mediation of broader international disputes, evidence is emerging which indicates that cultural differences do influence the mediation processes (Deol, 1985; Glen, 1980).

Other social forces not unrelated to culture are pushing the need to embark on a line of inquiry regarding Western, neutral-party mediators. Three of these social forces are worth mentioning. First, many scholars and policymakers have called for the integration of cultural perspectives into the development of policy considerations. Major international organizations such as UNESCO, the UN. and the World

Bank have legitimated this subject by convening major conferences on this critical area of development (Serageldin and Taborof, 1994; Troil, 1993; Dia, 1996). Second, contrary to the expectation that the end of the Cold War would reduce conflict around the world, ethnic conflict has proliferated since the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 threatening the entire global system — which is predicated on a nation-state system (Brown, 1993; Ottaway, 1994; Jalali and Lipset, 1993; Crocker, et al., 1996). Third is the fact that many ethnic groups, who have been in subordinate positions in the modern state system, are now asserting their basic rights; contained in this demand is the call for the restoration of their cultural institutions, including their system of conflict resolution, into the legal systems which affects their daily lives (LeResche, 1993; Mansfield, 1993; Wilmer, 1996).[3]

This article is a preliminary attempt to contribute toward filling this obvious gap in literature relative to the experiences with respect to social conflict and conflict resolution in the non-Western cultural systems. However, there is not much data on the subject of *indigenous* systems of *conflict resolution* from which one can draw information for the purpose of comparative analysis. Even anthropologists whose profession has invested an inordinate amount of time and energy in the study of *traditional* society have concentrated on searching for the *war-mongering* savages in developing societies. In the process, they have neglected the peacemaking activities of such ethnic groups. In what could be considered an open confession, two anthropologists, Sponsel and Gregor (1994), recently wrote:

> In anthropology, until recently, conflict, aggression, and violence have claimed most of our attention; peace both interpersonal and intergroup has received relatively short shrift (p.V).

Thus, we have to start with case studies. Of course, some may question the usefulness of case studies in the social sciences since they have limitations. However, case studies have been recognized for the unique opportunity they provide to researchers for the examination of a new subject from various dimensions.

On a personal level, I feel that, as one who originated from an indigenous system of social order, in addressing this topic, I may run the risk of being dismissed by some as an exilee who is "romantic about his 'tribal' past." Be that as it may, I hope this humble effort on my part will challenge others to take a serious interest in the subject of indigenous systems of conflict resolution, including the role of women in such processes.

Conflict Resolution: Perspectives from the Indigenous Cultures

The concept of indigenous identity and culture is complex. It is usually used to describe a broad range of ideas and systems. However, we can suggest that there are two major areas where this concept is commonly employed. The first is in reference to traditions and cultural systems which are non-Western. In this sense, all the cultures in Africa, Asia, and the Americas (i.e. the Indian cultural system) (Mazrui, 1990; Ayittey, 1991; Said, 1993; Dia, 1996) can be classified as indigenous systems. Second, it is specifically used in reference to the populations around the world who have been marginalized culturally, economically, politically, and ideologically in the modern global system (Burger, 1987; Wilmer, 1993; Polanco, 1997).

Several definitions have been developed to characterize *marginalized* indigenous peoples around the world. Among the significant entities which have labored on this endeavor include: International Labor Organizations (ILO), some indigenous organizations, scholars, and the United Nations.[4] For our purpose, I will employ the working definition which has been adopted by the UN (1982). It defines indigenous peoples as:

> People descended from those who originally inhabited a land at the time of conquest and domination by peoples of different ethnic origin who reduced them to a colonial situation;
>
> Cohesive societies who today wish to live more in conformity with their own continually adapting traditions than with those of the dominant (conquering) society;
>
> Societies which have been placed under the control of state structures which incorporate national, social and cultural characteristics alien to theirs.[5]

Some analysts categorize indigenous peoples in the contemporary as being the fourth world on the al-

ready existing scale of classification relative to the level of development and industrialization (Sills and Morris, 1993; Wilke, 1993). Commonly, the *first world* category is used in identifying the Western nation-states, the *second world,* the former Soviet Union and its satellite states in Eastern Europe, and the *third world* encompasses those decolonized areas in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America (Sklair, 1995, pp.10-12; Hulme and Turner, 1990, pp. 7-8; Rapley, 1996, pp. 10-13). Thus, the *fourth world* represents those territories and nations which still remain under subjugation. The Oromo society belongs to the category of populations around the world who are stateless and, as such, are marginalized in the contemporary global system.

The Role of Women in "Traditional" Societies

I wish to suggest that women in developing societies play important roles in peacemaking. Because the subject of conflict resolution often limits the scope

OROMO COUNTRY

Anthropological Map of the Oromo Country in the Horn of Africa

Source: Amnesty International (1995); Baxter, et al (1996)

for the analysis of peacemaking to a "rational" dimension (e.g. negotiation and mediation), I wish to argue that our consideration should encompass a variety of rich activities which various segments undertake in order to ensure peace and justice in societies. Such rich activities may include playing supportive roles in some instances and undertaking pivotal roles in others. Such is the case with the women in Oromo society in the Horn of Africa.

Oromo Worldview

Worldview is a concept social scientists employ to describe an internalized body of values which shapes the meaning of life, its relations with the surrounding environment, (human, nature, material, and spiritual) and mores for a society (Clark, 1989, pp. 16-7). A society's worldview is constructed through the cultural lenses which people have developed through the years of socialization. They develop rituals to establish patterns of social behavior for the purpose of reinforcing the basic component of those worldviews. Several anthropological research accounts have shown that conflict prevention, management, and the aptitude of hostility or peaceful disposition toward fellow human beings had direct relevance to a society's worldviews and internalized value systems (Fry, 1994; Hollan, 1988, p. 52; Robarchek, 1994; Draper, 1978; O'Nell, 1979, 1981, 1986).

In order to fully appreciate the Oromo indigenous system of conflict resolution and the critical role women play in it, we need to approach our analysis from the Oromo perspective. The Oromo worldview is imbedded in their belief system. Contrary to the commonly held view among Westerners and Middle Eastern societies, the Oromos have a well defined belief system (Rey, 1927).

The Oromos are the largest national group in the entire region of the Horn of Africa (estimated to be about 30 million people). They are one of the largest indigenous peoples on the African continent (Baxter, et al., 1996, p. 7; Rey, 1927, p. 39). They constitute more than half of the population in contemporary Ethiopia (currently estimated to be about 52 million). Also, they are found in Kenya and Somalia. (Please see Map 1.) They belong to the large stock of the Cushitic family of people of which the Oromos, Somalis and Afars constitute the largest blocks (in the order in which they are listed) (Laitin and Samatar, 1987, pp. 4-7).

The following interrelated concepts constitute the basic Oromo belief system: (1) *Waaqa* (the universal creator); (2) *Ayaana* (a process through which *Waaqa* made all things); (3) *Shetna* (evil spirits which cause wrong); (4) *Chubu* (conscious acts to harm others); (5) *ballessa* (transgression against others usually through omission); (6) *Kayyo* (a concept which describes a person's fullest life or lack of it); and (7) *Qitte* (equality among persons). In the Oromo worldview, conflict creates disharmony and poisons the relationships between *Waaqa* (the universal creator), *Lafaa* (the earth), humans, and other creatures. Thus, the Oromos believe that:

1. As much as possible, conflict should be prevented from occurring.
2. Once it occurs, everything should be done to prevent it from escalating.
3. All institutions should work together to manage conflict.
4. The ideological themes underpinning the processes of conflict resolution include:
   - A. There is no conflict which cannot be resolved (the message is that relevant elements in the society should work hard until it is resolved).
   - B. Pertinent facts must be unearthed before resolution to a conflict can be found.
   - C. The goals of peacemaking must include the consummation of justice.
   - D. While the individual parties must pay the price of causing conflict, conflict formation must be treated as a collective responsibility of the family and community of the individuals who are responsible for causing the conflict in the first place.
   - E. The ultimate goal of conflict resolution is to make arara (reconciliation) of the parties. In the Oromo worldview, reconciliation is necessary so that the relationships between the supernatural, human, and nature that have been damaged as the result of the conflict should be repaired. (Hinnant, 1972, pp. 35-

38; Bariso, 1988, pp. 23-25; Bartels, 1983, pp. 91-112; 231-53).[6]

Women in Oromo Society

For any person or group to intervene in a conflict situation with the purpose of resolving it, reality requires that the entity has power to do so, and this power comes with status and resources (Folger, et al., 1996, pp. 95-126). Thus, it is relevant that we discuss, though briefly, the status of women in Oromo society.

Women in Oromo society have a special place.[7] They are considered the source of life, and as such, are treated as sacred (*woyyu* — partly divine) beings who a have special connection to *Waaqa* (God). In fact, in Oromo mythology, *Waaqa* has two beings below him: one called *Oglia* which is male and the second is *Atete* which is female (Rey, 1927, p. 44; Huntingford, 1955, pp. 76-77). Bartels (1983), a European Catholic priest and an anthropologist, who lived among Oromos and studied the Oromo belief system, made the following observation about the role of a woman:

> Matcha society (Matcha is a branch of Oromo nation) has several roles of behavior which enshrine the woman's dignity as a source of life: (a) Matcha [Oromo] women are forbidden to kill; they should not even witness a killing; (b) Female animals which are not evidently barren or past bearing should not be killed, either for domestic use or for rituals;(c) This is even more the case if a girl or a woman is killed, here fertility does not play a part at all. Far from being an honorable act, to kill a woman would be spoken of with horror (p. 284).

Oromo society can be classified as patrilineal, and men play prominent, heavy-handed roles. However, the society has made significant provisions in its legal and moral codes to ensure women's basic rights and protect them from negligence and physical abuse. For example, the basic rights of a woman are set out on the day of her marriage at the wedding. During the process of performing marriage rituals, someone representing her family will enunciate the basic rights of the bride and the responsibility of the bridegroom and his family and *gossa* (clan) to her. The basic rights of a woman in the new community include: rights of membership in the new community (to become the mother of the community; one can become a member through child bearing or adoption), and protection from ill-treatment and negligence. If the new husband must discipline his wife,[8] he cannot do any harm to her physical well being. If he breaks any of her bones, breaks her tooth, or spills her blood, he commits a crime equivalent to taking someone's life and, he and his family and community will be charged with *gumaa* (murder). In such events, the bride's family of birth and the community will press the charges against the husband, family, and the entire community. Thus, on the wedding day, the family and community of the bridegroom, by virtue of the solemn pledge which they undertake, accept the responsibility for the protection of the basic rights of the woman. Included in these rights are the prohibition against attacking her family and clan identity. The society will allow for disagreement between the husband and wife; however, the dispute and the verbal exchange between them should never cross over to her family or community. For example, the husband is strictly prohibited from insulting her family and community.

The Oromo system also provides for the economic basis for the women. The bride is given property the day after her arrival. Also, she brings a lot of gifts (*gegaio*) from her family, relatives, and community on the day of the wedding. She is in charge of these properties as well as the property of her children until they are of marrying age.

Even in the area of her rights relative to engaging in extramarital affairs, which may be the most sensitive sphere with respect to husband and wife relations, the Oromo's society makes relatively more liberal provisions to women than other societies. As with most traditional societies, the Oromo society is polygamous. Men are expected to engage in extramarital affairs. Likewise, women are allowed to have formally sanctioned lovers outside of marriage. It is perfectly acceptable that on the night when her lover wishes to come to her house, she would tell her husband her lover is coming.

The Role of Oromo Women as Leaders in Conflict Resolution

As Walter Goldschmidt (1994) has suggested, we will examine the institutional roles which societies use in peacemaking.

Oromo use several institutions in making peace. Four such institutions are worth noting.

1. The *Gada* system: It is a political system which is based on generation-grade (comprised of five each generation grade rules for eight years) and five parties which rule for a period of forty years. The *Gada* System may be one of the most studied African institutions. Reports and descriptions about the Gada institution go back in history commencing with the 16th century. The central attraction of the *Gada* system to Western travelers, diplomats, and scholars (particularly anthropologists) lies in its complexity and democratic features (Legasse, 1973; Baxter, 1978; Hinnant, 1977). Thus, in some respects, the *Gada* system is the ultimate manifestation of the true national ethos with respect to equality, justice, and peace for the framers of this institution have integrated the basics of conflict management into the political system.[9] Professor Asmarom Legesse (1987), an authority on the *Gada* institution, captured this aspect of Oromo political philosophy when he wrote:

> *Gada* seems to be of the universals that bind the entire nation into a coherent system and give 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 in 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 (p. 2).

2. *Kallu*: This is the religious institution which has been known to be present in all Oromo segments (Knutsson, 1967; Hinnant, 1972). The main function of this institution is for the priests to serve as intermediaries between the divine, individuals, and the people as a whole in time of trouble. For example, when there is no rain, the community goes to the *Kallu* community for prayers, mediation, and predictions. Men or women can become priests in this religious system. However, the individuals who serve as *Kallu* are excluded from participating in the *Gada* system (Legesse, 1973). It seems this was done for the purpose of avoiding the concentration of power in the hands of a few. In fact, to some extent, it parallels the American doctrine of separation of church and state which has been enshrined in the American constitution. In Oromo society, there is no gender differentiation with respect to roles in the *Kallu* institution. The *Kallu* institution also plays an important role in peacemaking in the society (Knutsson, 1967).

3. *Eldership*: *Eldership* is an institution which is predominant in most traditional societies (Suzuki and Knudtson, 1991; Ayittey, 1991, pp. 39-69). It is the intellectual and moral backbone of such societies. *Eldership* is headed by competent, thoughtful, and respected individuals in the community. No one is born to *eldership*; one earns it through mastery of local tradition and cultural norms, and the quality of leadership one provides to the local community and beyond. Like other traditional societies, Oromos utilize eldership to resolve all manner of intra-Oromos disputes. As we will note later when discussing the role of Oromo women in mediating interethnic conflict, the institution of eldership is also used to address conflicts which result from clashes between Oromos and other ethnic groups.

4. *Atete*: This is the fourth institution which one finds in Oromo society, though with considerable variations. It is a system organized and run by women for the purpose of empowering themselves and protecting their interests. It is an institution which women use for resolving conflict among various groups. Professor Paul Baxter (1979), a British anthropologist, and an authority on Oromo culture, rendered the following description relative to *Atete*, as he observed it in the Arsie region:[10]

> [*Atete*] is a meeting of women who assemble in order to discipline an erring male or female neighbor and later to celebrate their

success in doing so in song, dance, prayer, blessing, and sacrifice is itself called *Atete*. The women at such meetings reiterate in their words and gestures the importance of both domestic and neighborhood concord and of fecundity — the former being, in part, a prerequisite for the latter because female fertility, like that of earth and the fertilizing rain, depends on a flow of prayers and blessings.

The conclusion of each *Atete* I witnessed was marked by a casual, jocular, festal atmosphere, appropriate to a gathering of people who were well known to each other. They were meetings of countrywomen. At each, one of the clearly expressed intentions of the participants was to celebrate the procreative importance of women and their contribution to the family as domestic and stock-caring labor. The tone was overwhelmingly and joyously woman.[11]

Atete is distinctive in that it is the only public ritual in which women are the principal organizers, the active participants, and the congregation and of which the timing and staging is determined by them and at which they may decide a case that they have laid against a man (p. 4-5).

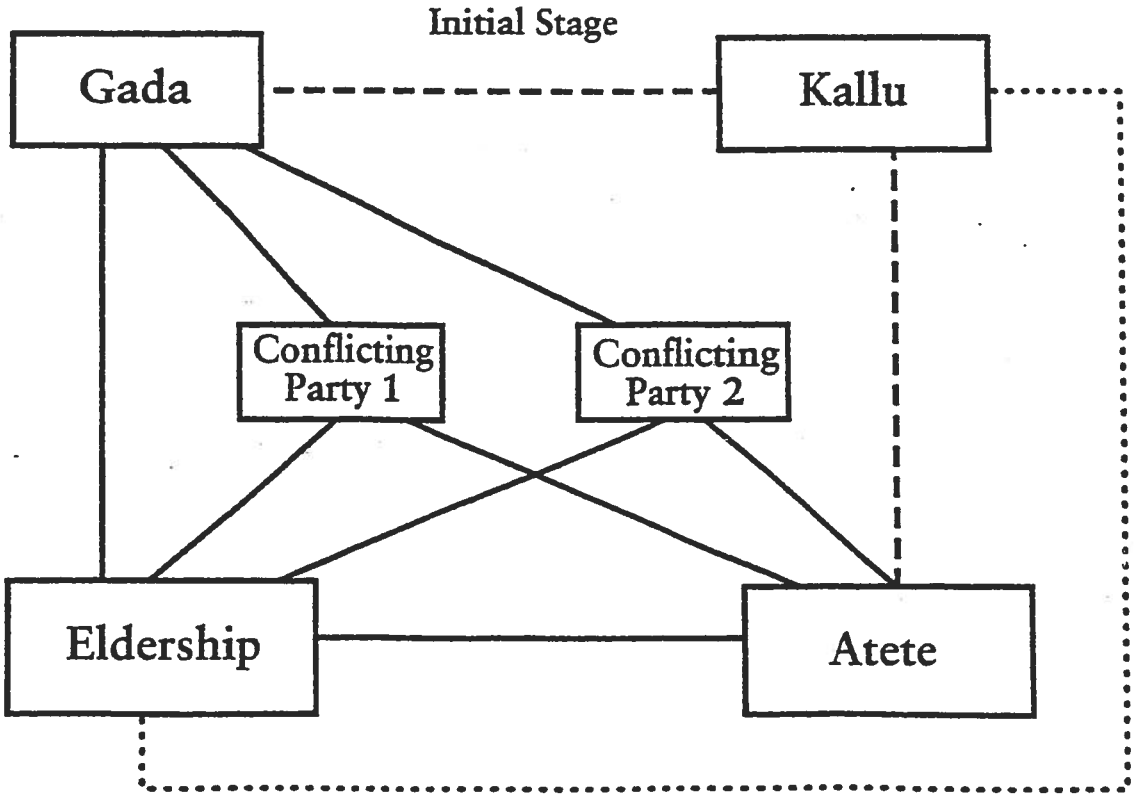
The role of Oromo women in the resolution of social conflict takes place mostly in the form of activism. Women, as the voice of conscious and revered in the society as sacred (*woyyu* — partly divine), are situated in the social system to challenge the status quo. They raise consciousness and mobilize the attitudes of the society to take the necessary steps toward resolving the conflict at hand.

The Role of Women in Peacemaking in Intrawomen Conflict

In Oromo society, men usually do not get involved

FIGURE I

Multi-Party Intervention System



NOTE: The unbroken lines indicate direct interactions between leaders of each institution; the broken lines denote indirect interaction between the parties in the conflict dynamic.

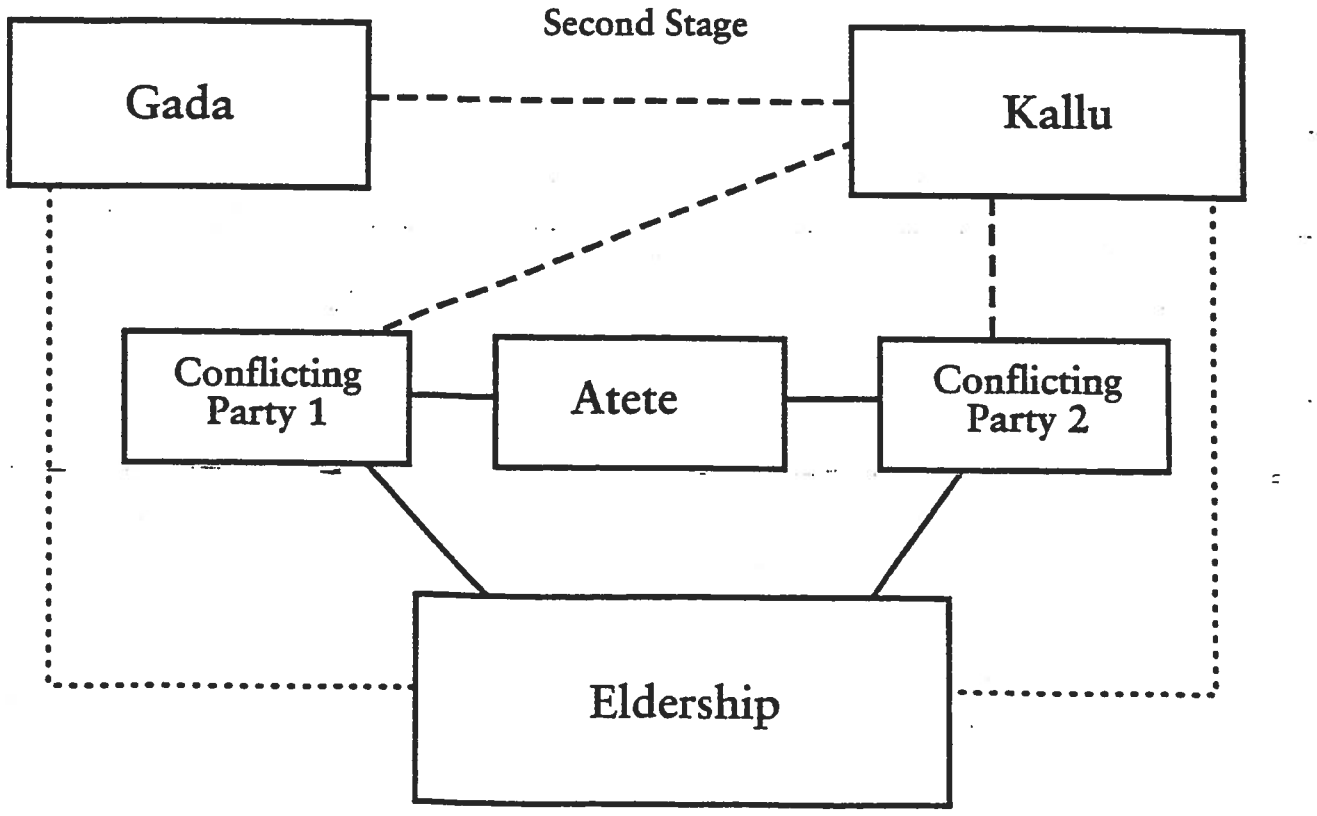
in resolving intrawomen disputes. For example, a grieved woman can call an *Atete,* and the women in the neighborhood usually respond; then she can put her case to the assembled women. Based on the evidence presented, they proceed to examining the complaints (Baxter, 1977).

The Role of Women in Peacemaking in Male-Female Conflict

In Oromo traditional settings, the male-female conflict usually is limited to domestic situations, for it is against societal norms for men to be in conflict with women outside of the immediate family. The exception is the conflict which occurs between the women and their outside male lovers. However, the most common male-female conflict is the one which involves husband and wife. In the case of grievances which a wife may level against her husband, she declares *Atete,* as described in the above-presented description from the fieldwork of Baxter. The basis for grievances which receive positive responses from the women are those which have been prescribed by the larger society. Three areas are worth mentioning: physical abuse; negligence; and improper treatment during the special period in the woman's life-cycle (e.g. pregnancy, suckling, or illness). Once a woman registers complaints on such grounds, and once the women in the neighborhood accept the allegation to be credible, they organize themselves as the *Atete* and march to the house of the husband and hang a *sinque* (a tall, thin wooden rod which women use as the symbol of their power and authority). Once that step is taken, the women will not depart until the concerned man - submits and sends elders to make peace. Usually, their demands are met without resistance, wrongs are corrected, the resolution of the problem at hand is celebrated, and the man whose behavior was in ques-

FIGURE II

Multi-Party Intervention System



NOTE: The unbroken lines indicate direct interactions between leaders of each institution; the broken lines denote indirect interaction between the parties in the conflict dynamic.

tion and his family are blessed and the process of conflict transformation is completed. Of such occasion, Baxter (1977) reported:

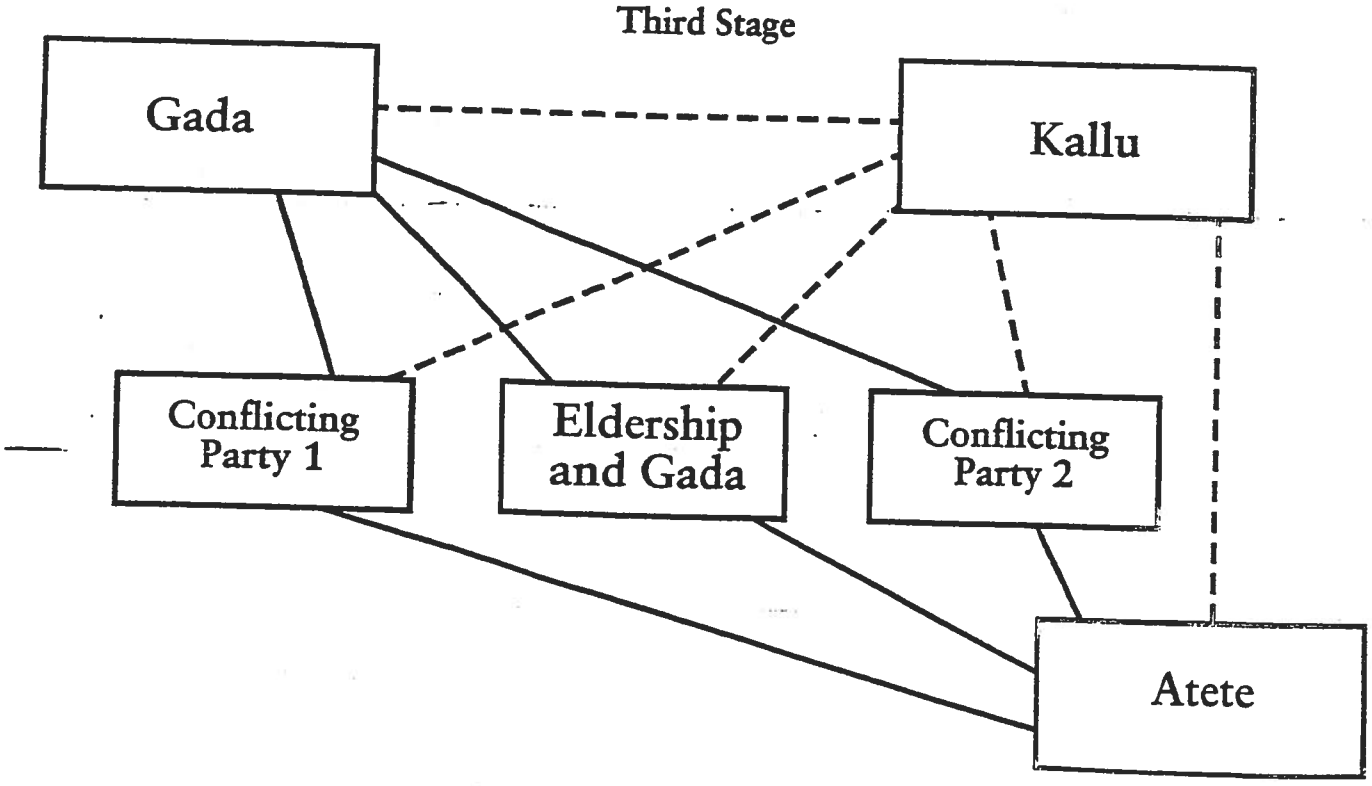
> The husband appeared apologetic and repentant and eager to please from the moment the *Atete* appeared. He found a sacrifice and a day was arranged for the *Atete* to return and celebrate. They did and the whole occasion had the air of a party, at which the husband played anxious host, rather than of a punishment (P. 5).

The Role of Women in Peacemaking in Intra-Oromo Conflict

When Oromos of different family or community engage in a conflict which may lead to violence, all four institutions discussed in this essay — the *Gada*, *Kallu*, *eldership*, and *Atete* —work in concert to stop the conflict from escalating and then to find some resolution through appropriate mechanisms, so that *arara* (reconciliation) may take place. The women's role is very pivotal in halting the conflict immediately. They make distress calls (*uuu—uuu—uuu*) to all the neighborhoods in the surrounding area, organize themselves in the form of a human chain, physically enter between the conflicting parties, and lie on the ground. Women are the only group in the entire society who have such a status of being *woyyu* (sacred) with the authority to prevent violence and potential death. No one in Oromo society would pass over a chain of human bodies created by women and attack the other party, for no one would dare to attack women or disregard their will in such matters. Once the fighting is halted, the elders in the community approach the parties and initiate the peace process. In case of a conflict which has cost human life, persons who represent the

FIGURE III

Multi-Party Intervention System



NOTE: The unbroken lines indicate direct interactions between leaders of each institution; the broken lines denote indirect interaction between the parties in the conflict dynamic.

Gada system also become involved in conjunction with elders. Under Oromo indigenous law, no one has the authority to rectify the loss of life (*guma*) without ratification by an authority of the *Gada* system. Also, those persons who are priests in the *Kallu* institution play an important role in exerting their moral authority in halting the conflict and moving the parties toward the road of peace and reconciliation.

Thus, we can summarize, by using schematic diagrams (Figures I-III), the stages of conflict resolution in cases of intra-Oromo conflict when violence (real or potential) is involved.Essentially, this process involves three major stages. Initially, (Figure I), when the leaders of various organizations become aware of the evolving conflict, they usually contact the women in the community who take the dramatic steps by sending the distress call (*uuu—uuu—*). Next (Figure II), the women organize themselves and physically intervene by forming a human chain and lying down on the ground between the conflicting parties. In effect, such dramatic actions by the women also puts pressure on the leaders of the three institutions (namely, the *Eldership*, *Gada*, and *Kallu*) to move with some urgency in paying attention to the conflict at hand. Usually, this act will separate the conflicting parties. Finally (Figure III), once the conflicting parties are separated and the fighting has stopped, the elders will commence their work of peacemaking. In case of loss of life as the result of the conflict, the *Gada* institution becomes involved.

Women in Peacemaking Mission in Interethnic Group Conflict

A brief discussion of the Oromo's relationship with other ethnic groups helps clarify the role of women in Oromo interethnic conflict.

The Oromos are ambivalent about war and peace when it comes to other ethnic groups. On one hand, they have been known to act as fierce warriors in defending their basic rights (Hassen, 1983; 1990). On the other hand, there is a consistent pattern in Oromo history which shows that once the conflict at hand is over, they are willing to make peace and treat the former enemies as good neighbors or even as legitimate members of Oromo nationhood (Bariso, 1988). For example, after they prevailed over the Christian Abyssinians and Islamic forces led by the Afar and Somali coalition during a 16th-century conflict, the Oromos accepted the two Abrahamic religions (Christianity and Islam), intermarried with them, and focused on cooperation and horizontal relationships which involved commerce and exchange of cultural habits as opposed to seeking domination and control (Levine, 1974; Hassen, 1981).

Women play critical roles as intermediaries between the Oromos and their neighbors. Tadesse Bariso (1988), an Oromo anthropologist from the Guji area wrote the following on this subject:

> Among the Guji and their neighbors, it was a matter of mutual agreement between the groups through the intermediacy of women (p. 41).

A very interesting case which shows how women became involved in an interethnic conflict has been reported by Professor John Hinnant from his fieldwork among the Oromo Gujis. In this case, both the Oromos and the Sidamas (one of the ethnic groups which neighbor the Oromo country) sent five elderly women each to mediate in a particular conflict. Below is the narration as presented by Hinnant (1971):

> When a battle had continued for 3 or 4 days, the old men on both sides decided that since many people were being killed and the crops needed tending and the children were starving, they should send old women to the other side to begin peace moves with the senior men there. They would send five very old women. The five old women went to where the senior Sidama men were having a meeting called songo. They go and stand quietly until asked who they are. They say that Gujis are dying and that they are killing Sidamos who might even be their soda (in-laws). So they want to end the conflict. The Sidama tell them to return to their country. The next day the Sidamo send five old women who say that the Sidamo agree with the gujis and where should they make the appointment to kill the oxen and end the conflict? The Guji discuss and name a place and time. The Sidamo women go. The next day both sides come together and kill two oxen, pouring the blood on both sides of the boundary. Meanwhile the warriors on their sides of the boundary spears raised. The two sets of five women stand before them [illegible] leave threats behind. The old men hold [illegible] — any bone — and another breaks it. Then all eat

the meat together as a sign of peace (p. 154-155)."

Women in Making Peace between the Divine and Human

In addition to playing a critical role in peacemaking, women play important roles in serving as intermediaries between the divine and the human. In particular, women organize themselves and pray for mercy and forgiveness in case of drought. Typically, they march, singing "*arrarro Rabio*" (Oh our God have mercy on us and give us rain) to the nearest river and plead with the Creator for rain. While by the river, they put (tap) grass on the water. Since women take their status as *woyyu* (sacred) very seriously, they undertake these sorts of activities of their own volition; they are not ordered by men in the community. In fact, men regard the women as the segment in society the universal Creator will give special recognition to, and, as such, *Waaqa* is unlikely to ignore their petition for mercy and reconciliation.

The significance of this function of women relative to resolving social conflict lies in the fact that it is another set of activities full of symbolism and ritual which serve as another powerful source of legitimation and reinforcement about the special roles women as *woyyu* (the sacred) play — their authority to speak out and lead in resolving social conflict.

Conclusion

I have argued that to the extent many indigenous cultural systems have invested more in resolution of social conflict through mediation than the Western ever has, it is very important to include perspectives from such indigenous systems. I have further suggested that the field of conflict resolution, as it evolves, has an unparalleled opportunity to provide cultural parity. It is in this context that I have attempted to share with the readers of this journal the experience of an indigenous people in the Horn of Africa with respect to conflict resolution — particularly the role of women in conflict management and resolution. Research and oral tradition show that Oromo cosmology links all the creatures, human and nature, that are the creation of *Waaqa* (the supernatural), and, therefore, all have the right to have a fair treatment on this earth. In Oromo mythology, women are considered *woyyu* (sacred—partly divine) and as such command considerable respect in the society. This linkage of the origin and status of women to the divine gives them special status to provide leadership in the management and resolution of social conflict. In making this presentation, there was no claim that the Oromo women have been treated with equality in all respects nor the suggestion that the Oromo system of conflict is perfect. Simply stated, the effort has been to demonstrate that different societies have developed their own systems of conflict resolution, and it may be useful to study them and explore ways of incorporating rather than treating peoples in developing societies with disdain.

As we, scholars, practitioners, activists, educators, and leaders for social change, justice, and peace, embark on this new road — the exploration into the field of conflict resolution — there are many difficult issues we have to confront honestly and constructively. I wish to highlight three. First, as indicated in the article, there are not many studies done in the area of indigenous systems of conflict resolution. The little pieces of information available on this subject are in the form of anecdotes or simple references to their existence. Thus, what is needed is a disciplined methodological approach in describing and analyzing these systems. Second, in doing so, one may come across practices which may stand in contradiction to the current Western value system — particularly among the "more enlightened" humanist groups. Indeed, some practices which one may uncover on such a road of discovery could be in violation of basic human rights. Should then we avoid recording such practices in our studies or should we present them as part of historical processes in that social system and then share with such societies alternative (e.g. in particular instances) practices which enhance human equality and dignity? Third, based on past experiences, paradigms which have not been rooted in cultures which are owned by the grass-roots populace have failed dismally. The best examples are the Modernization theory and Marxist-Leninist model (Seligson and Passe'-Smith, 1993; Isbister, 1995). Is it not then, reasonable, to have some concerns that conflict resolution, as a new paradigm emerging from the post-Cold War West, might face the same fate?

Notes

* *Sources of Information for this work*: The information for this work came from the data I have been collecting for a book on the Oromo indigenous system of conflict resolution. In writing this article, I have utilized the relevant information from the following three sources: (1) Information which I have been able to gather through interviews from Oromos in exile who are knowledgeable about Oromo culture in general, and the system of conflict resolution in particular; (2) information which has been taken from anthropological studies on Oromo culture; and (3) information which I have been able to reconstruct from my own personal memory and experience.

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[1] In fact, conflict resolution is becoming one of the fastest growing cottage industries around the world. It seems that the West, as the influential source of power and legitimacy, has once again set a new agenda and a new paradigm for the global community.

[2] John Burton (1996), a leading intellectual figure in the field of conflict resolution, defines human needs theory as:

...the notion of human needs that separates power theories from conflict resolution theories.

The idea that there may be more fundamental human needs that are inherent, needs that will be pursued by any means available including the risk to life, has emerged only in recent years. The power of human needs has helped to redefine power political thinking (p. 30).

[3] A case in point is the proposed declaration currently under consideration by the *Organization of American States (OAS)* to grant fundamental rights to the indigenous nations in all the states in the Americas. The document relative to this proposition contains sections relative to the need for incorporating the indigenous system of conflict resolution into the legal system which affects their affairs.

[4] For the definitions developed by ILO, indigenous organizations, and scholars, see Julian Burger, pp. 6-11. (The full citation of Burger's book appears in the reference section).

[5] This is a summary of the UN definition relative to indigenous peoples. For the sake of convenience, I have borrowed the summarized text from Wilmer's article which was published in *Peace and Conflict Studies* (June 1996). The full citation appears in the Reference section. The full text of the *UN Working Definition of Indigenous Peoples* has been published *U.N. Economic Social Council Commission on Human Rights, Preliminary Report on the Problem of Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations* (U.N. Document E/CN.4/Sub.2/L.556. Chapter 11).

[6] I have elaborated on this topic in a chapter which will be published in a forthcoming book edited by Professor William Zartman of SAIS/Johns Hopkins University.

[7] The data for this section comes mainly from the three major southern Oromo "Federations": Arsie, Borana, and Guji. However, I have incorporated relevant information from the works which have been done on other Oromo groups. For example, Knutsson's research on Shoa Oromos (Central Oromia), while the work by Bartel's (1983) was on Wollega (Western Oromia). I have found both of these works very useful for my research.

[8] Once again, it is necessary to point out that it is not my intention to validate this type of husband-wife relation (the notion that one party has exclusive rights to discipline the other parity). However, it is significant to point out that in some societies where such limits have not been imposed by the societal values and marriage covenant, women get battered physically and abused psychologically. In the case of the Oromo society, at least some clear limits were set relative to her physical safety and psychological welfare between the relevant parties, families and communities. Once again, the relevant point is the importance of worldview in curtailing abuse and violence against the members of the society.

[9] Based on our analysis of the *Gada* system and the way the conflict resolution features have been integrated into the political system, we can suggest tentatively that the *Gada* system resembles a model for which Professor John Burton has been advocating. See his conception of this type model in John Burton (1987), Conflict Resolution as a Political System, Occasional Paper. Fairfax, Virginia, Center for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University.

[10] Arsie is one the largest branches in the Oromo nation. The Arsie branch used to be in one Province known as Arrusie. The Province was divided in 1960 by the government of the Emperor Haile Selassie regime. The Arsie population is located in the south-east of the Oromos country.

[11] Professor Baxter (1977) correctly identifies various meanings associated with the concept of *Atete* in his article. However, all of them confirm the special sacred authority for the female gender in the Oromo society.

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