

# Folklore: An Instrument of Conflict Prevention, Transformation and Resolution in the Ethiopian Context

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## Abstract

The article assesses the role of folklore in the form of verbal, ritual and material objects as a means of customary dispute prevention, transformation and resolution in selected ethnic groups in Ethiopia. Samples of oral narratives in the form of proverbs, myths and legends from the Amhara, Tigray, Oromo and Issa linguistic groups are found to have cohesive functions that reiterate harmony among the respective communities and individuals prior to conflicts; conciliatory and mediatory functions during inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic or personal conflicts; and lastly, compensatory functions after conflicts. The familiarity of the content in the narratives and the beauty of the language of the mediators, usually the elders, transform the state of enmity into the state of tolerance and recompense. The pre-reconciliation, reconciliation and post-reconciliation rituals usually accompanied by animal sacrifice, as well as the venues of the rituals (usually river banks and under trees), create a local colour that foreground a feeling of exoneration, absolution, communalism as well as commitment to discontinue blood feuds. The material objects mostly used during the reconciliation rituals, such as *Tabots*, *crosses* and other relics of the Orthodox Church, *Kalacha*, *boku*, *Chachu*, *Siniqee* and *Hanfala* of the Oromo have a frightening effect on the people who want to redress damages by force. The widest usage of folkloric elements for conflict prevention, resolution and transformation is found to have a consoling and therapeutic effect on the material and psychological dimensions of conflict. On the other hand, it is suggested that concerned bodies should preserve and make use of such rich folkloric heritage that conform with the constitution of the country and international human right conventions.

## Introduction

Folklore is a difficult concept to define. Bascom (1953) and Utley (1965) limit the meaning of folklore to verbal heritage while others such as Leach (1949), Dundes (1964) and Dorson (1972) extend the meaning of folklore to encompass all verbal, material and ritual components of an unsophisticated culture. This article takes the broader meaning of folklore that encompasses the sum total of all material and spiritual components of culture that form a certain community. Society and folklore are two faces of the same coin. There is no society without folklore and vice versa. Once certain folklore is created by a given society, it does not remain as a passive object (mirror) that reflects society; it is rather a mould that shapes a given community to behave in a certain way. Malinowski (1926) as cited by Bascom (1954: 344) summarises the function of myth:

It [myth] expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital

ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.

Malinowski's summary of the function of myth equally applies to the function of folklore in general. Folklore shall be understood as a living matter that can influence a certain cultural community while itself being continuously influenced by practices of society. Since folklore is the foundation of culture, the basic causes and solutions of conflict are imbedded in it. Conflict and conflict resolution endeavours are major components of folklore. The basic understanding of folklore leads towards a better understanding of conflicts and their corresponding solutions. Researchers of conflict resolution must explore the basic qualities of folklore in order to identify lasting solutions for multifaceted conflicts. Accordingly, this article attempts to identify the conciliatory functions of folkloric elements in the form of oral narratives such as proverbs, myths and legends, and rituals and folk objects of the Amhara, Tigray, Oromo and Issa ethnic groups in Ethiopia.

### **Problem statement and research questions**

Various scholars have attempted to collect and classify the folklore of Ethiopian ethnic groups in different contexts. Most of the investigative endeavours are, however, related to folklores of specific ethnic groups. The researchers have never attempted to assess and compare the function of various folkloric elements of various ethnic groups for conflict prevention, resolution and administration. Most of the investigative works are also concerned with the assessment of other cultural and moral functions of the Ethiopian folklore. The current study, therefore, is anticipated to fill this gap.

This study tries to answer the following critical questions:

1. What are the folkloric elements that contribute to the peaceful coexistence of the people of Amhara, Tigray, Oromo and Issa ethnic groups in Ethiopia?
2. How do the ethnic groups use folkloric elements to address multifaceted conflicts in their respective communities?
3. What common features exist within the conciliatory functions of the folkloric elements of the ethnic groups under investigation?

### **Aims and objectives**

The major aim of this study is to describe and interpret the folkloric elements – oral narratives, folk objects and rituals – in the light of the conciliatory practices of Tigray, Amhara, Oromo and Issa ethnic groups in Ethiopia. It also aims to verify a major organisation of ideas and values related to the

prevention, resolution and administration of conflicts that exist among the people of the ethnic groups. In order to meet these general objectives, this article has intended to:

- investigate ways in which the folkloric elements are used to prevent conflicts;
- assess the way in which deviant behaviour is ridiculed or chastised by the folkloric elements;
- examine the means by which peaceful conduct is rewarded and belligerent conduct corrected;
- discover the manner in which the folklore of the stated ethnic groups redress the psychological wounds of victims of conflict;
- identify the relationship between the individual conflicts and those of the community.

### **Research methodology and data analysis**

The folkloric elements selected for the current study are from archival written forms. The proverbs are taken from students' theses, articles and books stated in the respective discussions in this study. The myths and legends as well as rituals and folk objects are taken from articles, books and internet archives. I have translated and summarised some of them as they are indicated in the analysis section of this study. The folkloric elements are taken from the Amhara, Tigray, Oromo and Issa ethnic groups in Ethiopia that inhabit different parts of the country: Tigray the northernmost part of Ethiopia; Amhara, central and northern Ethiopia; Issa southeastern Ethiopia as well as Oromo the central, eastern, western and southern parts of Ethiopia. The study employs a method of critical discourse analysis to inspect how some of the Ethiopian folkloric elements contribute to the prevention, resolution and administration of disputes.

### **Analysis and interpretation**

#### *Proverbs*

This article assesses the functions of oral narratives in the form of proverbs, legends and myths for conflict resolution. Proverbs are "short and pithy sentences forming a popular saying, and expressing some result of the experienced life in a keen, and lively fashion" (Coyle 1991: 80) Elders use proverbs to advise, ridicule, chastise, prompt and disapprove of disputants while they reconcile multifaceted conflicts. The beauty of language and the infused wisdom in proverbs makes them special tools of conflict prevention, resolution and transformation. Before conflicts, elders utter proverbs to warn people not to engage in conflict. Bamlaku T., Yeneneh T. & Fekadu B (2010:92), for instance, noted the significance of Issa women using proverbs to prevent the eruption of conflicts:

*Guul lagama gaaro daqaal sokeeye* Conflict never ends and there is not success and prosperity through (it.)

*Nabad waxaad ku wayday daqaal kuma helaysid* You cannot achieve your goal through conflict instead of peace

*Dagaal dad umbao ku baaba'ee dad kuma dhashaan* In conflict people perish but do not reproduce

Through these proverbs, Issa women warn their husbands, brothers and sons not to engage in open hostilities or confrontations. Proverbs are not only used to warn people not to engage in physical confrontation. Tadesse (2004:113) notes some Oromo proverbs highlight alternative ways of solving conflicts:

*Marii'atan malee maratan biyya hinbulchan* It is possible to administer people by discussion but not by force

This proverb underlines the importance of discussion as the best way of solving conflicts. Moreover, the significance of discussion is summarised in the following *Issa* and Oromo proverbs respectively: “The solution to a conflict is talking about the conflict, (Mesfin 2006: 5), and “*Mamaaksi tokko dubbii fida tokko dubbii fixa*” (One proverb causes a topic of discussion and the other ends it) (Tadesse 2004:59).

These proverbs train young adults to be peace-loving and communicative. They also discourage aggression. In modern theories of conflict resolution, the importance of discussion is equally emphasised. Moreover, proverbs suggest alternative ways of preventing conflicts. Some proverbs suggest non-reactive behaviour in response to provocative remarks, while others recommend avoidance from belligerent adversaries as can be observed in the following proverbs. Of the two proverbs below, the first one is an Oromo proverb that recommends silence while the second one is an Amharic proverb that underlines avoidance as a means of preventing conflict.

*Nama dubbii nama dhibe cal'dhisan dhiban* When a person troubles you with a disappointing word, trouble him with silence (Tadesse 2004:64)

*Lenegeregna sew jerbahin sitew* Give your back to a belligerent person(translation mine),

After an outbreak of conflict, proverbs are stated to facilitate reconciliation. In the Tigrigna language, elders say “*Neger bi'erki, mengedi biderki*”, which literally means culminating disputes through reconciliation is as convenient as travelling at the time of dry season. Another Amharic proverb discourages the value of bearing a grudge and retaliation: “*Eshohin Beishoh Aswegid*”, which means to avoid tit-for-tat. In Tigrigna, some proverbs warn elders not to distort justice. An example of such a proverb is “*Bila'e Nikersika, Fired Ninebsika*”, which means to do justice for your soul as you eat for your bodily comfort. This warns elders that if they corrupt justice to comfort their secular life, they will experience spiritual damnation. Thus, it is possible to argue that Ethiopian proverbs encourage reconciliation, justice and fair play between disputants and elders.

### **Myths and folktales**

Through myths and legends, elders advise, ridicule, chastise, and disapprove of disputants who demonstrate aggressive conduct. They convince community members to support the existing communal order through myths and legends. In most of the legends and myths, the victory of good over evil, weak over strong, virtue over vice, soul over body, darkness over light and truth over falsehood is either explicitly stated or implied. Myths and legends encourage peaceful coexistence among youngsters. Some myths are purposefully told during peace forums and blood feud cleansing rituals. Others are stated in different contexts. The two myths discussed below are narrated to influence disputants at blood feud cleansing rituals.

Birhan (2011) notes a narrative that explains how a traditional conflict resolution mechanism of the Amhara ethnic group started. Its basic storyline is translated and summarised as follows:

Once upon a time, there lived two men, one with a large plot of land and the other without land, in the area called Amare. As per the request of the landless man, the landlord offered him a small piece of land. While the landless man dug in to build a house on the small plot of land given to him as a gift, he found a potful of money buried underground. He went to the house of the landlord, told him the story and requested that the landlord should take the money. The landlord, however, said that the money was not his own; he had already given him the plot of land and did not want to go back on his own word. He, therefore, refused to take the money. The man who found the money then said that he did not want to take the plot of land at all if the landlord refused to receive the money. Then, a night of betrayal and cruelty set in which changed the minds of both men. The landlord decided to receive the money, which was found on the land offered to the beneficiary. On the other hand, the man who found the money, the tenant, thought that he should own the money. He, therefore, decided to tell the landlord that what he had found buried in the field, was not money but ash. At dawn, the two men met on the way to each other's house. Then, the landlord said that his ox had died the previous night; he was becoming gradually poorer and the money was his grandfather's money. The beneficiary, in turn,

said that the stuff found in the pot was not real money, it was just ash. In the ensuing quarrel, both men attempted to throttle each other. Finally, conciliators handled the case and decided that both parties deserved the money, which was divided equally between the two men. From that time onwards, the system of reconciliation has continued until now.

This narrative justifies the very reason of the emergence and existence of the traditional conflict resolution mechanism in the locality, which is led by elders. It also implies that the only way of solving conflicts is reconciliation that places disputants in a win-win position. Another lesson that can be drawn from the myth is that greed, which is initiated by supernatural forces is contaminating. The myth, therefore, discourages greed as it is one of the root causes of conflict. It also encourages selflessness.

In the same case study, Birhan (2011) depicts another myth that encourages disputants to abide by communal decisions. Its basic storyline is translated, summarised and interpreted as follows:

Once upon a time, there was a man and his extremely handsome young son. For his marriage ceremony, the young man straightened his hair and wore smart clothing and a fine body lotion that exaggerated his looks. The father was highly concerned about an evil eye that could be cast on his son while the celebrants blessed the young bridegroom before his departure to fetch his bride. Then, the wise father thought of something that could divert the attention of all the celebrants away from the young bridegroom. The wise father deflected the attention of the celebrants by saying: "My kinsmen please get a look at that acacia tree! Look at it please." All the celebrants cast their eyes on the green and beautiful acacia tree as the young bridegroom left the house unnoticed and galloped out of sight on his horse. By evening, the acacia tree, which had been extremely green and beautiful in the morning, was found to be dried up due to the power of the celebrants' gaze, which had been cast on it. The wise father instructed that the tree be chopped down and used as firewood to cook the food for the feast.

Elders tell this myth whenever the families of the slain as a result of conflict refuse to reconcile themselves with the families of slayers disregarding of the elders' interventions. Whenever all members of the community and elders repeatedly request families of the slain for reconciliation, it is thought that the obstinate individuals or groups will be in the gaze and attention of the entire community that can dry up an acacia tree let alone delicate human flesh. This is assumed to be extremely dangerous for the defiant. The myth creates a feeling of awe on disputants and persuades them to be ready for reconciliation. Such myths facilitate the resolution of endless blood feuds. Very severe conflicts are resolved through the medium of myth.

The next point of discussion is an Oromo folktale entitled “The Dogfight”, which is narrated by Mohammed and posted on *www.ethiopianfolktales.com*. It is summarised as follows:

Once upon a time, a dangerous conflict occurred in a village. First two dogs fought. Then, the two boys who owned the dogs fought due to the dogfight. At the sight of this, their mothers began fighting. Their husbands then also fought. Finally, the clan of both men involved in the fighting fought and that resulted in the death of eight men from each side. If the villagers had accepted the advice of a very wise old man called Robele Megera, who repeatedly told the people to stop the fighting from the beginning, both clans could have prevented the loss of lives. Even after the loss, the elders did not know how to solve the blood feud. Either each group had to compensate eight hundred heads of cattle or kill eight more people from each clan in retaliation, which would be very costly for both clans. An old man who was a passer-by saw the case and rendered his advice. He told them that if they continued to fight, it would be a disaster for both parties. In order to avoid further loss, he advised that the disputants should take a silver necklace from each group and throw the jewels into a river as a final resolution. Then, he advised, that they all needed to forgive and forget.

This narrative underlines the communal life of a community. An attack on one member of a group is regarded as an attack on the whole community. When one person is attacked, a solution must be sought by the whole community. Otherwise, blood feuds plague the entire community. Formal courts punish criminals for their wrongdoing. Other clan members will continue to fight since a solution is not given to the psychological issues and concerns related to a conflict. Folkloric elements such as the “the Dogfight”, however, address such issues by addressing the source of the conflicts. This story teaches members of a community to feel that the best way of solving a conflict is discussion and reconciliation. It also highlights the fact that if a slight conflict within a community is not addressed in time, it can cause a disaster upon the entire community. This story is told by elders in order to educate younger generations about the significance of peaceful ways of conflict resolution that heal the attitudinal, moral, psychological and economic damages caused by conflict.

### **Rituals and folk objects**

Rituals and folk objects are essential components of peace building and reconciliation. According to Hoebel (1966) and Lewellen (2003), rituals are manifestations of a certain culture with a specific purpose. They are special means of creating collective feeling, exoneration and mutual trust among members of a community. In blood feud cleansing rituals of many ethnic groups in Ethiopia, both relatives of the slayers and slain accept the decisions of the elders offered at peace rituals. The slayer’s relatives feel that they have cleansed themselves from moral pollution and spiritual damnation. Families of the victims also feel that the murdered persons and their families are already honoured as per the requirements of the culture which they think is absolutely necessary. Thus, no individual tries to disturb the balance that is achieved through rituals. The majority of the ethnic groups in Ethiopia have their own blood feud cleansing rituals. Like rituals, artefacts (folk objects) are related to conflict resolution. According to Diakparomre (2009), the Urhobo Society of Niger Delta in Nigeria appropriates visual symbols and rituals to attain the support of ancestral spirits and divinities

to resolve various types of conflicts because artefacts symbolise commonly celebrated myths, customs, shared beliefs and communal responsibilities of the living and the dead. The community uses artefacts to build and regenerate communal consensus, solidarity and allegiance. Similarly, the Ethiopian people relate some artefacts with gods and spirits. They show respect to and are in awe of these artefacts. Therefore, the conciliatory function of artefacts is significant.

The followers of the Orthodox Church have been using sacred relics for conflict resolution purposes for centuries. In order to prevent conflicts of various kinds, religious leaders carry artefacts and plead with disputants not to physically confront one another by uttering the names of various saints, martyrs and angels. To illustrate this point, this article translates, summarises and evaluates Birhan's (2011) case study, which portrays a magnificent religious ritual practiced by both Christian and Muslim elders to cleanse blood feud among disputing parties of the Southern Wello Zone. In the pre-conciliation stage, the religious leaders are followed by many people in a procession to the victims' homestead attired in their own respective formal dresses and bearing their own spiritual relics. In order to influence the victims' families to be ready for conciliation, Christian elders bear *tabots* (models of the Ark of the Covenant), crosses, big richly coloured umbrellas, dome-shaped canopies, a picture of Saint Mary and cistern cymbals. Muslim elders carry bows and arrows. The priests and sheiks pray to their respective spirits to soften the hearts of the disputants. They also request disputants to stop blood feud by calling on the angels, martyrs, saints and God (Allah). The elders tell stories from the holy Bible and holy Koran that underline the importance of peace and forgiveness as well as the avoidance of feelings of vengeance and violence. Elders shower words of encouragement and blessing when disputants show any sign of readiness for reconciliation. If disputants refuse to reconcile, they face words of curse that are supposed to influence the body and soul of the insolent disputants for seven generations. The disputants, almost always, prefer to enjoy the blessings of religious elders and avoid the damnation of curses than to avenge the blood of their loved ones. After agreement is reached for conciliation, all the adults in the community gather at a ritual site which is usually a dried river basin or the top of a cliff. Then, one of the relatives of the slain slaughters an old barren black ewe, which is brought to the ravine by the assassin's relatives. Then, the sheep is held upright by its four limbs facing north. While the victim's family stands to the right of the sheep and murderer's family to the left, they pierce her belly from both sides with knives. After that, all the disputants plunge their hands through the holes on each side of the belly and shake each other's hands inside the stomach. At the same time, they wobble their hands until the blood and ordure inside the viscera is dragged out. This symbolises the union and reconciliation of both parties from the bottom their heart. The carcass is left to be eaten by wild animals. The agnates of the slain feel that they have shed the blood of their enemy, while the slayer and his relatives feel that they have cleansed themselves from spiritual and moral pollution. The peace ritual is culminated by oath-taking sermons



where religious leaders dictate to disputants to say an oath that threaten bad luck, death, spiritual and moral damnation for anyone who dares to ignore the reconciliation and initiate violence in the future.

Yilma's (2011) case study describes a conflict resolution tradition among the Wulaita community found in the Southern Nations and Nationalities Regional State. This article translates, summarises and reviews the ritual component of the study as follows.

When a person from this community commits murder, his relatives immediately look for elders who can stop the cycles of conflict due to blood feud. The local elders plead with the victim's family for reconciliation again and again because the victim's relatives do not show their willingness easily. After the victim's relatives express their willingness, the elders order the relatives of murderers to bring barren old sacrificial animals, a cow and a sheep, as well as a very fat bull for compensation to the ritual site called *Gutera* (a square). The infertility of the animals signifies the discontinuance of revenge, grudge and feud among the relatives of the slayer and the slain. During the ritual day, elders as well as all the relatives of both slayer and slain appear at the ritual site. To avoid any confrontation, the elders sit between the disputants. Next, one of the elders orders the young people to dig a *Huluqa*, a burrow, through which the murderer should crawl like a snake and pass from one end to the other, pleading for mercy and reconciliation. The *Huluqa* is dug on the side of a mound or an anthill with two holes, an entrance and an exit.

After the *Huluqa* is prepared, some of the elders secretly order the murderer to come to the site. Then, the murderer appears before the public with his face painted by *Shalla* (chimney soot) and his whole body covered by *Qoneshe* (dried banana leaves) in order to demonstrate the regret and humiliation he feels. This demonstrates that his murderous act is as dirty as the soot and as ugly as the dried banana leaves. With his two hands, the murderer drags a sheep and a cow that are too old to bear any offspring and mutters "*weqi*" (I am guilty I plead mercy), while looking down at the ground due to ignominy. Then he/she repeats the term "*weqi, weqi*".... and passes through the burrow (*Huluqa*) crawling like a snake. His passage through the tunnel symbolises his death. The murderer's self-humiliation influences the relatives of the victim to consider him as a dead person.

After this humiliation, one of the conciliators requests the closest relative of the victim, usually his father, to pardon the murderer, for he has already demonstrated his regret with full humility. Then, one of the victim's close kin expresses his pardon, for it is difficult to refuse while the elders are begging for reconciliation in such a ritual. Considering the regret of the offender's relatives, the victim's elders stand up and express their appreciation and confer a blessing upon the person who expresses words of pardon. One of the elders slaughters the sacrificial animals and paints the forehead of all the attendants of the ritual with the blood of the animals using his index finger. This is assumed to cleanse the blood feud. In order to strengthen the effect of reconciliation, one of the elders offers a

local drink made of honey in a *Buda* (traditional container made of a horn) to all participants of the ritual and they all drink in turn. This symbolises a genuine reconciliation between the disputants. Then, the fathers of both the slayer and the slain or any other close relatives of the two are seated side by side. One of the elders covers them with a sheet of cloth. Then, they hug each other and drink honey juice from one *Buda* (horn container) at the same time. This signifies a complete union of the families of murderers and victims.

Temesgen (2011) assesses a blood feud cleansing ritual of the Doko-Gamo ethnic group that lives in the Southern Nations and Nationalities Regional State. This article translates, summarises and reviews the ritual component of the study as follows:

When a murder case is reported, elders from the murderers' clan must initiate reconciliation with the relatives of the slain as quickly as possible. Their request does not get a positive response from the victims' relatives immediately. The elders from the slayer's side have to carry stones, as a sign of humility, and go to the homestead of the slain and implore for mercy and reconciliation for six consecutive Fridays. After the sixth Friday's request, the victim's relatives usually indicate their readiness for reconciliation. Then elders from the Bola Dona clan, who are honoured to possess hereditary spiritual powers to reconcile conflicts, organise a ritual on the seventh Friday. The Bola Mido elders, accompanied by the whole community, take the murderer to the ritual place. Bola, a spiritual leader, shaves the head of the murderer in a grotesque style known as *Gosha Mido*, which literally means mad man's shaving style. This denounces murder as an act of a mad person. The murderer paints his whole body with soot and wears an old leather rag that highlights the heinousness of murder. At the ritual site, the blood money collected from the murderer's relatives is strewn up into the air. When it is scattered, the victim's relatives jostle each other to gather as much money as possible. When *Shale*, an elder, slaughters a barren cow, he mutters: "Let our sin be as barren as this infertile cow; let it be culminated here; it will not come again since we are feasting together" (Temesgen 2011:99).

A nephew of the slain kills a sheep to demonstrate the innocence of the victim and to symbolise the death of the slayer. Finally, the murderer bows down until he touches the ground near the feet of the brother of the victim and begs for forgiveness. Then the murderer and the brother of the slain embrace and kiss one another to signify the end of hostility. Finally, they bite the livers of the sacrificial animals in turn and drink *Tela* (local beer) from the same container at the same time. This marks the end of the hostility and the blood feud.

Mulugeta (2011) states that the Oromo clan of the Adea Liben district has its own special mechanism of the blood feud cleansing ritual, which is called *Seareguma*. This article translates, summarises and reviews the ritual component of the study as follows: When a murder case occurs, elders carry

sanctified artifacts – *Boku*, *Kalacha* and *Chachu* – and request the victims’ family for reconciliation. For the community, *Boku* is a sacred relic that was sent from heaven in the form of thunder to Oromo, a man who is believed to be the founder of the community. Then, Oromo is said to have cooled this divine artefact in a pitcher of milk and kept it in his house. It is believed to be a symbol of *Waqqa*’s (God’s) covenant with the founder of the community to preserve peace among the Oromo society. Therefore, one of the most respected elders holds it in the procession. The other holy relic is a *Kalacha*, a phallus-like object worn on the brow of elders. It is also supposed to bear the spirit of *Waqqa* (God) to infuse peace and mutual respect among the Oromos. Like *Boku*, *Kalacha* is believed to have come down from heaven for peace building. Thus, another elder wears it on his forehead in the procession to prompt peace in the minds of the victims’ relatives. *Chachu*, a sheath of *Kalacha*, is a third artefact that is assumed to be equally sacred and influential in the pre-conciliation rituals. The three sacred relics influence disputants to solve their conflict peacefully. At the pre-conciliation stage, a respected old woman, a young virgin girl, the two elders who bear the sacred relics and the disputant’s relatives stand in their respective positions. Then, the relatives of the slayer plead for mercy and reconciliation. For the love and fear of *Waqqa* (God) and the folk objects, the agnates of the slain agree to reconcile themselves with their enemies.

After the victim’s agnates accept the idea of reconciliation, the elders arrange another special ritual known as *buyaa*. This can be performed on any day of the week except on Wednesdays and Fridays. First, the relatives of the slayer and the slain, the most respected elderly men and women and youngsters gather in the house of the slayer. Under the guidance of *Abba Gedda* (the most respected elder), the participants of the ritual move at least five hundred metres away from the house towards a secluded ravine, usually on a river bank. Then, another authoritative elder known as *Wata* shaves the head of the slayer. Following this, the slayer slaughters a black goat, which is considered to be a symbol of restlessness and evil spirit. In order to eliminate the evil spirit that instigates conflict, the victim’s brother and the murderer pierce holes on the left and right sides of the belly of the goat through which they plunge their hands and shake each other’s hand inside the stomach. Then, the elders dictate both families of the slayer and the slain to say frightening swearwords so as to avoid holding a grudge and to seek retaliation. Then, all the participants of the ritual go to the slayer’s house to eat and drink together where they are accosted by two sisters of the slayer. While all the attendants of the ritual arrive in the house, one of the girls sips a honey juice and spits it on the celebrants while the other girl sprinkles water, which has been mixed with a bitter potion. While they do this, both girls jabber: calamity is gone; peace is restored. The honey juice symbolizes the sweetness of peace while the bitter potion connotes the agony of violence and blood feud. After the participants of the ritual take their seats inside the house, a bull is slaughtered and its carcass is chopped into small pieces, which can be swallowed in one gulp. Then, the slayer holds as much chopped meat as possible in his

two hands and offers it to the agnates of his victim each one in turn. The agnates of the victim bow down and eat the chopped meat from the hand of the slayer. The slayer, in his turn, eats from the hands of the victim's brother in the same way. The feasting on flesh symbolises the wish of familial relationship between the reconciled parties. Finally, the *Abba Gedda* elder orders agnates of both sides to say a concluding remark, "we have become one flesh", in unison.

According to Daniel (2002) and Tolosa (2011), *Siniqee* is a wooden stick, which is usually fashioned in a special way from the branch of sacred trees under which Arsi women congregate to conduct rituals of wellbeing, good fortune and fertility. Primarily, the women carry this sacred stick as a sign and cause of their inviolable dignity as married women. It is also their means of communication. When a woman is abused either by an action or word, the victim jabbars a scream locally known as a *Siniqee* scream as a call for support. In response, all women carry their 'sacred' *Siniqee* (stick) and assemble somewhere, mainly around the offender's homestead. There they chant ritualistic rhymes and boycott the whole community's daily activities until an offender becomes ready for peaceful dialogue, reconciliation and compensation. Finally, elders intercede and women are compensated for the damage done to one of them. *Siniqee* has another function. It is a sacred object that is used by Arsi Oromo women for intergroup conflict resolution. *Hanfala*, a soft leather waistband worn by married women, is another women's sacred object used for conflict resolution. When intergroup conflict is threatening to break out, the women will hold up their *Siniqee* and stand in the middle of the confronting men. They also loosen their *Hanfala* from their waist and lay them on the ground in the middle of the confronting parties to create a symbolic borderline that cannot be crossed by anyone. Since the sacred *Hanfala* is worn around the woman's waist, a part of the body which is near to the womb, stepping on it symbolises stepping on one's mother's womb, which is immoral. Disputants are also cognisant of the fact that ignoring the holiness of *Siniqee* and stepping on the sacred *Hanfala* would result in the women's ritual curse that pleads their *Waqqa* (God) to jeopardize the life, wellbeing and prosperity of disputants who ignore the women's request. Since women are regarded to be holy and nearer to God, no Arsi man dares to ignore a woman's request and suffer the consequences of their ritual curse (Daniel 2002; Tolosa 2011). The fear of *Waqqa* (God) and respect for the sacred material objects – *Siniqee* and *Hanfala* – play a significant role in the prevention, transformation and resolution of conflicts among the Arsi Oromo society.

Debebe (2011) studied a conflict resolution tradition of the Isa Community living in Diredawa Regional State. The ritual part of his study is translated, reviewed and briefly summarised as follows:

Since the Issa are communal people, the murder of one member causes disastrous conflict between the agnates of the slayer and the slain. Having recognised this fact, the community elders respond immediately to handle cases where murder occurs. If they encounter conflicting groups, they raise a

white banner and request disputants to stop only bloodshed. When murderers are identified either by self-confession or investigation, they are ordered, by the elders who administer murder cases, to handover a female camel, two cows and a 12m-long shroud for the burial ceremony of the victim. When a murderer identifies himself, the sacrificial camel is slaughtered by either a father, brother or any other close relative of the victim at the victim's burial place. When a murderer is identified through oath taking after the burial of his victim, the sacrificial camel is slaughtered at a place where the reconciliation ritual takes place. In both cases, the victim's male relatives chop up the carcass. Some portion of the meat is cooked and the remaining meat is left raw. Thereafter, they put both the roasted and the raw meat before the elders on the ground covered by the fresh leaves of a tree under which reconciliation takes place. Then, the victim's relatives offer the meat to all participants of the ceremony regardless of their age. This demonstrates their acceptance of the peace proposal offered by the elders.

After both relatives of the slayer and the slain agree to solve a dispute peacefully, a first phase of compensation is arranged within 15 days after a victim is buried. This community values camels very highly. In the first phase of compensation, the slayer's relatives have to bring 15 camels and the gun by which the victim was killed with Birr 1000 (approximately \$52 USD) tied to it. This demonstrates their readiness to pay full compensation. Then, the elders decide on the time when the full compensation should be given. Of the total number of camels taken from the slayers' agnates for compensation, the share of the victim's family is 15 camels only. The other 75 camels are taken by other members of the clan of the victim. After compensation is completed under the guidance and strict supervision of the elders, the slayer's agnates present a sheep to be slaughtered by a father or other close relative of the victim.

The meat of this sacrificial animal is left to be eaten by vultures and hyenas. This symbolises the avoidance of violence, bad luck and other devilish incidents. Oath taking and blessing are crucial components of the peace rituals in this community. The Issa believe that when their member takes an oath insincerely, madness, famine, pestilence and mutiny will be inflicted on all the relatives of the liar. They, therefore, urge a perpetrator to admit his guilt. Blessing is also a very important component of reconciliation. They start and finish their rituals with words that plead Allah to increase the fertility of the land, avoid conflicts and pestilence as well as render longevity for their leaders and eternity to their customary means of conflict resolution.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

The major causes and symptoms of conflicts and conflict resolution mechanisms are imbedded in folklore. Better comprehension of folklore leads to better understanding of conflicts. This in turn leads to identifying lasting solutions for multifaceted conflicts. Accordingly, this article attempts to uncover

the role of oral, ritual and material elements of folklores in Ethiopian customary dispute prevention, transformation and resolution mechanisms based on some case studies that depict folkloric elements related to conflicts. It shows that oral narratives in the form of proverbs, myths and legends from the Amhara, Tigray, Issa and Oromo linguistic groups have adhesive functions among the respective communities and individuals prior to conflicts. The oral narratives reiterate the importance of peace and highlight the consequences of belligerent conduct. This helps young adults to avoid confrontation. During intra-ethnic or personal conflicts the oral treasures facilitate the conciliatory and mediatory endeavours of the elders. After conflicts, elders apply oral narratives to persuade combatants to forget and forgive. The contextual familiarity and linguistic beauty of the oral narratives transform the feeling of aggression into tolerance and recompense. The animal sacrifice rituals redress the psychological dimension of conflict. The ritual sites (mostly along river banks and under trees) magnify the local colour that foregrounds a feeling of exoneration, absolution and communalism. They also bind disputants into commitment to stop blood feuds. The folk objects such the *Sinqee*, *Hanfala*, *Chachu*, *Kalacha*, *Boku*, of the Oromo community; *tabots*, the holy Bible, pictures of Saint Mary, crosses and luxuriantly coloured priestly clothes of Christianity as well as bows, arrows and the holy Koran of Muslim elders in some locations of the Wello Zone magnify the conciliatory role of rituals and oral narratives. The widest usage of the folkloric elements for conflict prevention, resolution, and transformation is found to be wide-ranging and effective. However, there are no provisions that legitimise the functioning of folklore for purposes of resolving multifaceted conflicts at this time. Therefore, religious elders, non-governmental organisations and formal state organs should do their best to preserve and appropriate folklore to address conflicts in conformism with the formal laws of the country and universal human rights conventions.

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