

*Full Length Research*

## **Assessing the Role of Elders in Preserving Peace and Security: A Case Study in South Wollo, Ethiopia**

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The paper tried to show the overall role of elders in preserving peace and minimizing conflict in wollo and forward some recommendations in addressing ethnic conflicts. To meet the objectives various methods like interview, participant observation, focus group discussion and case study are involved. The study also reviewed past literature on the role of elders to shed lights on how they maintain peace and security in the dynamics nature of the state. Peoples in Ethiopia are ethnically heterogeneous, having multiplicity of languages and cultures. Hence, the country presents a mosaic of nationalities and has a long history of rich culture and strong social values. Apart from this the study reveals that peoples in wollo has distinct way to resolve conflicts arise mainly for control over resources, such as grazing land, water points, cultivable land and day today social interactions.

**Key words:** Elders, Role, South wollo, peace and security

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Most developed countries have accepted the chronological age of 65 as a definition of 'elderly' or older person. The term 'elderly' or older person has different meaning in different countries; it is mainly explained and is related to chronological age, functional age as well as retirement age. According to the UN definition, older persons are those people whose age are 60 years and over. The definition has gained acceptance in Ethiopian context as it coincides with the countries official retirement age (Eskedar Sibuh, 2015).

Africans, as any other people elsewhere, have their own philosophy of life. They have a distinct culture by which they see and interact themselves. For instance, individualism is a philosophy of life in the West as communality is in Africa. Collective mode of living is a peculiar identification of Africans in general. In fact, this mode of living is a different version of life rather than connoting backwardness and/or primitiveness which

might be wrongly perceived by some westerners. The communal life in Africa, on the other hand, has an implication in conflict and its resolution. The issues of security, peace and conversely conflict are communal matters in Africa, unlike in the West. Thus, the priority of African traditional conflict resolution mechanisms is to bring about collective social stability and harmony. They do not simply focus on the punitive measure nor do they merely settle the conflict. They rather strive to bring about sustaining peace among the disputants thereby the prevalence of enmity and hatred within as well as across communities would permanently be vanished (Tsega, 2002).

Like other African countries, Most Conflicts in Ethiopia easily be handled at the grass-root levels by the societies themselves without the direct intervention of the government. After all, Ethiopia is believed to be the home of more than 80 ethnic groups. They have their own

distinct languages, and cultures. These various ethnic and cultural groups for so long years have developed their own unique political or administrative, economic, social and judicial systems. They had been able to sustain themselves without necessitating to have copied the Western modes of governance nor is their mechanisms of conflict resolution (Assefa Abebe, 2005).

Indigenous conflict resolution through by Elders or shimgilina in Ethiopia has been applied both in formal courts and traditional justice processes and in relation to interpersonal and community based conflicts. Under the Constitution, its application is however, restricted to matters of personal law and therefore its application in other matters relating to conflict does not have any legal recognition and enforcement, as the indigenous institution of conflict resolution is subordinate to the formal court (ibid, 2006).

In Wollo, Elders participation in socio economic as well as cultural activities of the peoples in the form of Abagar and shimgilina in community living in the wollo by practicing their own way of conflict settlement. Customarily they have their own indigenous way of conflict resolution mechanisms aiming to address the cause of conflict and seek to build solidarity and belongingness for themselves and for peaceful and good relationship within themselves and their neighboring societies (Meron Zeleke, 2010).

In recent years the conflict resolution mechanisms by Elders have been weakened partly because of the failure of the members of the community to strengthen their role of resolution of conflicts at the community level (Asnake, 2010). Therefore, the undermined and eroded status and functions of the elders give rise to the absence of well performing institutions which is a sufficient condition for violent conflicts to arise. In view of these the main objectives of this paper is to explore and magnify the overall roles of Elders so as to make them reinitiate in preservation of peace and security in Ethiopia in general and in south wollo in particular.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The research employed a qualitative study based on the examination of both primary and secondary sources. To this accomplishment primary and secondary data sources were used for the study. The study used Secondary sources from published and unpublished works have been consulted, crosschecked and reinterpreted. The researcher also used his own experience and observation to analyses and uncovers the underlying issues in the way of peace building through elders. Through this observation the researcher observed the role, the processes and procedures of elders' conflict settling and preserving peace among the target society. In addition, to get data on past events and scenarios and

even on the current reality, the researcher conducted key informant interview and Focus group discussion with twenty one elders practicing conflict resolution and preserving peace and security in their entire life. Hence, this study employed these methods to supplement the findings obtained through various means.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Data gathered from both primary and secondary sources through Key informant interview, Focus group discussion and document analysis is presented, analyzed, and interpreted in relation to the main research objectives stated so far.

### **Maintaining peace and security in Ethiopia**

To become an elder one must pass through all rites of passage from birth to old age. The focus group decision participant agreed that Elder in wollo have the wisdom to distinguish right from wrong. Among the qualities he or she should be mature, able to discern, reflect, choose, reason, and think critically. Moral qualities are an important criterion in an individual's initiation into elder hood. African elder hood is not a single event. It goes through stages. For instance, among the shimagles or elders, after marriage and greater than forties is promoted to a stage of elders or shimgilina. One is recognized as a full person.

In wollo, Elders make sure that community customs and practices respected so as to foster harmony, order, and peace are passed on to new generations. They are the teachers during initiation of reconciliation where they teach young initiates moral values such as peace and justice, humility, gentleness, truthfulness, cooperation, and unity. They also teach their family members how to keep peace and harmony among themselves. Peace is understood also in relation to nature and thus to God. Elders use their reconciliatory and mediatory powers to unite people with their ancestors. They rule with reverence to God. They preserve God's creation. As I observed during and before the study, Elders offer sacrifices and prayers to God on behalf of their community. Usually the sacrifices offered in the form of tea, bread, roasted grains, goats, sheep, oxen and cows.

Elders are instrumental in creating harmonious relationships between people and God. Elders also make sure that people are united with God by making sure that they do not destroy his creation. In the traditional structure of the people, the elders are charged with the responsibility of not only leading but also of judging. Smaller conflicts and differences are usually handled at lower ranks or at an individual level. However, conflicts that could potentially multiply – maybe involving warriors, especially from different clans may warrant the

intervention of the elders. Serious issues are usually discussed under a Loip tree, far from home interference. Word is sent around inviting all the elders to the meeting. Those who for very clear and understandable reasons cannot attend the meeting must apologise. Unexcused absenteeism is not expected, and is not taken lightly. The first people to arrive usually wait and discuss general issues until most of the invited are present. To mark the beginning of the meeting an elder stands and says the opening prayers. It is interesting to note that during the meeting itself only one man can be standing at a time. There is no chairman, yet the coordination and flow of events is classic. This shows that all members are at the same level – contributions are therefore possible from all. The final decision is made at the end of the meeting after having reached a consensus. One good thing about such meetings is that all members have a roughly equal opportunity to contribute. In most cases, the decision of the elders is final. If the offence was serious, the offender is asked to give a cow (heifer) to the offended party. Normal relationships are expected to resume after this. It is important to mention that elders do not usually expect a compensation to participate in such meetings. Every meeting concludes with a Mayian prayer. There is a general belief that acting contrary to what was agreed in the meeting might bring a bad omen or a curse. People take the elders' resolutions very seriously.

In present day Africa, the traditional system of elderhood has undergone drastic changes due to the introduction of western education, western style governments and legal systems, and new religions. However, in many parts of the African continent, elders are still consulted in matters pertaining to customary law – these often concern marriage or land matters. In villages and rural areas in general, problems and disputes are taken to the elders before they are taken to the police or other legal bodies. Many political leaders recognize the importance of the elders. They realize that the current political system must borrow from the old ones. Elders should be allowed to play a bigger role in building the society as far as peace and reconciliation are concerned.

Maintaining peace is among the main roles played by traditional elders in many African societies. Their influence goes a long way in resolving disputes between family members, within and among communities, and occasionally across state lines. But as the nature of conflict changes, their ability to lead effectively is threatened. In some places, fighting has pushed people out of their homelands, displacing them to camps, lands, and communities in other countries. When problems arise among their community members, leaders find themselves under the jurisdiction of foreign cities and towns rather than in their homelands, where they have a say. Challenges like this one were discussed in the study with key informants on how their role in conflict

management is changing in today's social, cultural, and political environments. Participants came One major area of focus for their discussion was how to adapt to changes—to both the nature of dispute and to the current actors involved in conflict resolution—brought about by contemporary approaches and sustain peace in local, national and internationally.

In Ethiopia, the emergence of organizations, decentralization of judiciary and local government structures has gradually diminished the roles and authority of traditional leaders and role of elders time to time. Regardless of formal government relationships, elders feel it is their role to create an atmosphere that helps remove animosity, fear, and mistrust, eventually leading to conflict resolution.

The Elders systems that empower them originate in pre-colonial times and vary from one society to another; some leaders trace their roots directly to God, some serve as proxies for infant kings, and some are queens who have proven to be just as effective as male leaders.

### **Preservation of peace through elders in wollo**

The key informants in the study described that the peace and security preservation mechanism through Elders is a complementary role in keeping the peace and stability among the peoples in the study area. Despite the role it plays and legal recognition it has, the government of the state gives less regard to it. Members of this tribunal perform their duty permanently at least seven days a month but without any allowance and budget from both the people as well as the administration for the activity they conduct. As a result the elder traditional tribunals or shimagles sometimes become less sensitive to the cases brought before them. This condition leads them to some irregularities in their activity among themselves and the conflicting parties.

Elders in South Wollo are practitioners in reconciliation, springing their authority from being delegates of their communities and making actions accountable to them. Shekh Hassen Aragaw, one of the key informants, discusses the qualities of elders in Wollo and expected skills to peace and the role they play in maintaining peace is as follows:

*“We elders kept our own traditional conflict management mechanisms to sustain peace in place and these values and norms were not disrupted. These have ultimately enabled us to reconcile our people and have nurtured mutual trust and dialogue for long period. We have shown our efforts to long lasting peace of the country by confronting the challenges we face for a decades”.*

In Amhara region, particularly in south wollo disputes that are not resolved may be taken to the formal: court. However, the government's justice court does not remove from the disputants' minds what may have been a long-running feud between them. For example, according to Assefa (1995:60), a murderer was sent to prison. Immediately after his release from prison he sent elders to the families of the murdered man to prevent the blood feud from continuing. But the elders finally settled the dispute by deciding that the murderer must give four thousand *birr* to the victim's family as blood compensation. As key informants from kutbaer woredas stated, elders also resolve disputes to preserve peace between individuals and groups. For example, when an individual violates the rule of *Iddir* or other social and economic organizations the wrongdoer is ordered to stand in front of the group and his case is discussed. Ultimately he or she will be fined or ordered to apologize.

### **Elders Decision making and its enforcement**

When conflict happens, after a long discussion with the disputants and among themselves, the Elders announce their decision to the disputants. If the disputants accept the decision it will usually be reduced to writing. If one or more of the disputants refuse to accept the decision there is no direct mechanism to enforce compliance. However, traditional sanctions will be imposed on the disputants. The social and cultural sanctions available include prohibiting attendance at cultural and social festivals and prohibiting the community from collaborating with the disobedient disputant, unwillingness to support them in time of wedding, funeral ceremonies and other labor sharing activities

As I observed in recent years, in almost all cases of ethnic conflicts, the Government took a leading role in handling them primarily. However, the government could not address such conflicts before they reached the level of violence. Government officials both at regional and federal level started to talk and take action on specific conflict cases when a conflict occurred and this resulted in the so called 'fire brigade approach'. In addition they should take consult with elder in preserving long lasting peace.

### **Desirable of Elders in Maintaining of peace and security**

Elders handle cases of diverse nature ranging from civil to criminal matters. Although article 34 (5) of the constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia limits the right of the customary and religious institutions to handle only private and family matters, they operate in more diverse domains than they are mandated

to. Everyday experience in Ethiopia clearly shows that such institutions are indeed handling criminal cases, including cases of murder.

As Informants outlined ,The factors led away from the state legal system with its limited capacity and western, individualistic operational logic, do not only cause a lack of trust in the state system, but are at the same time pull factors towards the religious and Elders institutions of conflict resolution. These institutions use different procedures such as oath taking, swearing, blessing and cursing, which are of a transcendental nature. The society has more moral ties with the religious institutions of conflict resolution than with the state legal system where one can get away with committing a crime and denying it. Elders have religious attachment than the ordinary citizen .The verification at the faith-based institutions of conflict resolution is entrusted to the third party who is believed to be transcendental. (Meron Zeleke, 2010) Based the discussion and interview, the main motives why people turn to the elders' to maintain peace and security are:

- They focus on re-establishing social harmony and reconciliation of societies
- The fear of bureaucratic nature of state legal system and its mechanisms
- The of the sheikhs' court.
- Elders proximity to the community ,procedural flexibility and their willingness regardless of age, sex, religion and ethnicity

Undoubtedly, Informants highlighted that the state legal system usually operates under the western legal system's logic of penalizing a guilty party lacks the ability of securing sustainable peace and allowing the parties to reach reconciliation. While Elders works for sustainable peace with penalizing parties and keeping the mutual interest of disputant parties. As I observed in years, when peoples completing a trial at the formal court, they still tend to bring their cases to the elders again to reach reconciliation. The strong socialites in the study area and the strong social structure of kinship strengthen the social accountability of the elders. Despite their contribution for long lasting peace and security, the role of elders' involvement in social, economic, cultural and political aspect of the community diminished time to time.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The writer argues that Elders should play a proactive role in preserving peace by managing ethnic conflict and bringing sustainable peace to the society. Therefore, the paper recommended the following major role that Elders should play in addressing conflicts and preserving peace and security in the study are and nationwide:

- Promote, enhance and facilitate the societies to work together with elder so as to enable communities to handle their social problems by themselves through their own traditional mechanisms that have been practiced by them for years
- Initiate the elders by improving their food security , agricultural productivity and diversify livelihood options for them and people living in conflict areas,
- Support or use existing public media especially radio programs to educate people about the role of elders for peace and promotion of peaceful solutions for conflicts
- Education and training about peace and security that can comprise all activities which improve attitudes, knowledge and capabilities for conflict management; peaceful coexistence and practical multiculturalism principles.
- Working in partnership with government, especially at local level, to promote democratic election procedures, reforms of legal system, the establishment of integrated education systems, appropriate language policies and human rights legislation
- Enable the elders for the realization of their material and social desires. This makes them to leftover their time in sustaining peace and security by tackling the sign of conflicts at beginning.

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