

Managing Disputes¹ in Everyday Life: The Case of Avoidance in Context of the Arsii Oromo Culture, Ethiopia

Mamo Hebo²

Abstract

When norms for resource exchange are violated and the essences of social relations are challenged, disputes often emerge among people. These disputes have to be handled through one or more of the various dispute management strategies. This paper discusses one such strategy among the Arsii Oromo called hammeenna - which approaches the concept of avoidance in its essence. Hammeenna refers to the situation where disputants engage in mutual avoidance by refusing talking to each other, and severing channel of communication and resource sharing. Data generated through case studies and in-depth interviews in the Arsii Oromo villages and towns revealed that: (1) People routinely employ avoidance as strategy for managing disputes. (2) Almost all the dispute cases that resulted in avoidance occurred among people with prior intimate relations who are involved in breach of promises related to informal resources exchange or mutual obligations (or expectations). (3) Avoidance serves as moral and social pressure imposed on (or felt by) a wrongdoer. (4) Avoidance may have two simultaneous consequences: in the short term, avoidance curtails avenues of cooperation and solidarity. This is important particularly in a setting where social solidarity and informal exchange of resources is so essential for people's everyday life. On the other hand, avoidance manages a dispute from developing into a violent conflict. It contributes towards conflict resolution and people's long-term co-existence by maintaining 'cracks' caused by a dispute narrow enough to be mended.

Keywords: *Arsii Oromo, avoidance, dispute management, hammeenna, informal resource exchange, social relationship*

¹ Dispute and conflict are conceptually differentiated along such variables as extent or degree of violence, emotions and sentiments, the relationship and size of the people involved. Yet, the two concepts are often interchangeably used, and are explained with the same or similar conceptual and theoretical tools. In this paper I use them interchangeably when referring to the literature and theories but limit my discussions to dispute when I refer to the case studies in the context Arsii Oromo culture.

² Addis Ababa University, Associate Professor at Department of Sociology & Social Anthropology
E-Mail: mamo.hebo@aau.edu.et

Introduction

Ideally, culture provides the blueprint for a smoothly oiled social machine whose parts work together under all circumstances. But human society is not like a rigidly constructed machine. It is made of individuals who have their own special needs and desires. Personal interests, competition for scarce resources and simple accident can cause nonconformity and disputes [...] (Spradley and McCurdy 2006:261)

No matter how strong society's cultural ideal of peace or serenity may be, disputes or conflicts cannot be totally avoided. As Avruch correctly writes, "conflict is a future of all human societies and, potentially, an aspect of all *social relationships*" (1998:24, italics added). Yet, the way each society understands conflict and, manages it may differ. The Oromo cultural ideal of peace, *nagaa*, strongly presents in the Arsii's rhetoric of social life and social relations. In this regard, while violence (e.g. murder and revenge) is an extremely controlled behaviour; other forms of disputes commonly occur in everyday rural life characterized by intricate social relationships and interdependence. These relationships are either kinship- or friendship-based ties. Such relationships entail both material and social (and moral) values.

In this context, the following discussion emphasizes the notion of social relationships, in view of the interdependence they create and sustain, and their links with disputes and how they are handled³. Social relationships involve a great deal of reciprocity (see e.g., Sahlins 1968; Cronk 2006) and of social capital (see e.g., Hsung, Lin and Breiger 2009; Ostrom and Ahn 2003; Putnam 1993). Social capital, among other things, is about connections and trust among people in a network; it is all about "goodwill, companionship and mutual sympathy" (Hanifan 1920 in Ostrom and Ahn 2003:22). It also "fundamentally concerns the distribution of resources on the basis of exchange" (Hsung, Lin and Breiger 2009: xxi). Social capital is built and used through reciprocity, doing for others what that have done (would be done) for us. It is through reciprocity, particularly in its generalized form, and social capital that "people mobilize resources to deal with daily life and seize opportunities" (Cote et al. 2009:40). As Putnam argues a "society that relies on generalized reciprocity is more efficient than distrustful society" and, that "trust lubricates social life" (1993: 3-4). This 'lubrication' serves to reduce 'friction' and its consequences.

The above points suggest, among other things, the role of others in one's life and livelihood. It also alludes to the potential linkage between social relationships on one hand, disputes and their handling on the other. It follows that the wider the networks: (1) the greater the social capital (or interdependence) and; (2) the greater the possibility for diversity of interests. This is evident in Augsburg's argument that "the greater the interdependence, the greater the potential for conflict" (1992:97).

In these linkages, one could observe potentials for both dispute and the need for its settlement. On one hand, disputes (and avoidance) are about the trust turned into distrust between people in established relations. Disputes challenge people's lifeline by stifling social life, squeezing social capital or constraining avenues of resource exchange and,

³ See Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* (1940a) and analysis of the same ethnography by David Jacobson (1991).

eventually reducing the efficacy of social relations. On the other hand, people would have a long term vested interest either in maintaining these lifelines, or in reducing damages a dispute could cause to them and, in re-connecting them when broken. In this, we could observe potentials for (interest in) dispute management in the short term and its eventual settlement or resolution.

The above analysis focuses on the role of material and social interest in causing dispute on one hand and, facilitating its management or settlement on the other. This goes partly with the definition of conflict in the literature (e.g. Spradley and McCurdy 2006) as a clash of interest, and involving two assumptions: (1) the importance of “diversity of interest” and “scarcity” of resources, (2) where the goal of parties is to defeat or annihilate the opponent. The importance of resources as causes of disputes notwithstanding; however, the other assumption associated with this needs to be qualified. Firstly, material interest is just one dimension of social relationships as there are also social and moral dimensions embedded in those relationships. Secondly, disputants’ goal may not always be to ‘defeat’ or ‘annihilate’ the opponent. The goal rather could be to apply some pressure while still keeping avenues for the re-connection of temporarily broken ties. That is what dispute management through avoidance largely intends to achieve.

This perspective is particularly important in understanding disputes and their handling in non-western societies like the one under consideration in this article. In this regard, Black’s view of conflict as ‘a clash of right and wrong: a matter of morality, justice’ (1998: iii), reflects an aspect of such perspective. The moral dimension is embedded in trust, sympathy, goodwill and what is right. It is about how these guide values and practices associated with resource exchange or reciprocity and; how they influence people’s reaction when these values are violated. This dimension resonates well with the Arsii Oromo’s conception of social relationships. The Arsii engage in meticulous processes in order to ‘find out the truth’ (*dhugaa baasuu*)⁴ and mend broken links (Hebo 2006; 2008).

The concept of *dhugaa* is central to the Arsii Oromo’s understanding of a dispute and its handling. *Dhugaa* stands for right, righteous act, justice, true and truth (see Hebo 2006). It also suggests about obligations (duties). *Dhugaa* is rooted in the Oromo moral and ethical spheres of life. The Oromo say, *dhugaan ta waaqaat; dhugaan ilma waaqaati*—truth belongs to God; truth is the son of God. The Borana Oromo would say, *aadaa namatu tolche; dhugaa waaqatu tolche*, literally, ‘culture is created by human beings; ‘truth’ is created by God’ (Fekadu, personal communication, September 2013). By extension, violation of truth/right offends Him (God) as the triumphant of justice pleases Him.

In case of dispute (and subsequent avoidance), the parties invoke both issues of right and wrong; of the truth that is violated, on one hand, and the material interest at the center of

⁴ However, it is not always easy to get the truth revealed, and justice restored. It requires patience; it takes time. In the Oromo notion, right/truth (*dhugaa*) and wrong/falsehood (*dhara*), always compete and exist in perpetual struggle with each other; they also possess quite contradictory characters. In contrast to *dhara*, *dhugaa* does not rush; it moves slowly and keeps a lower profile. It may be overwhelmed and squeezed by falsehood and appear ‘thinner’. But it never loses to *dhara*, as it eventually prevails.

the dispute on the other. Dispute settlers' too, first attempt to uncover the truth and; then, proceed to discussing the material interest. Justice is done and right is restored when truth is revealed; when the wrongdoer acknowledges his/her faults and; when the material thing is recovered or compensated. Yet, justice doesn't necessarily imply exacting punishment proportionate to the wrong done or compensation of exact equal value to the original material value. It is largely about truth and right. In essence, it is to enshrine truth and justice and, it is right.

Following the preceding conceptual discussions, subsequent sections of the paper present a short review of avoidance as dispute management strategy, followed by a brief presentation of the objectives and research methods. The main body of the paper contains a summary of the Arsii Oromo's sociocultural context and presentation of empirical cases of avoidance in the same context, which is followed by discussions and concluding remarks.

Avoidance as a dispute management strategy

Regardless of how disputes or conflicts are conceptualized, every society employs various strategies to handle them. These strategies range from negotiation whereby disputants engage in bilateral discussions, to a third-party intervention (including mediation and adjudication) and self-restraint through avoidance (Black 1998; Bonta 1996; Gulliver 1979). The third-party intervention is perhaps the most widely used strategy of disputes settlement. Spiritual mechanisms (e.g. oath and swearing) are also employed in various cultures so as to uncover the 'truth' or to proclaim innocence (see Bartlett 1986; Ferraro 2006). The prevalence of (or preference to) a given mode of dispute handling may vary from culture to culture (e.g. Augusburger 1992).

This section focuses on avoidance as a mode of managing disputes. According to Baumgartner, avoidance is the handling of a grievance by the curtailment of interaction (cited in Black 1998: 79). This may range from disputants physically moving away from each other, permanently or temporarily, to refusing to talk to each other (e.g., Gulliver 1975; Hebo 2008). Avoidance, thus, may generally refers to a conscious action taken by parties in prior relationship to limit or severe their future interaction. It is often functionally explained as a strategy used to rest the dispute or prevent it from escalating.

Avoidance, compared to other strategies for dispute handling, seems relatively less studied in agrarian societies while its significance is well documented in among hunting and gathering societies. In these societies avoidance is attributed to their nonviolent behavior, small and flexible social organization and, the nature of their livelihood and resource holding. According to Black (1998:80-82), 'permanent' and 'total' avoidance is most likely in societies characterized by social fluidity and fragmentation, egalitarian or with no hierarchy and groups or individuals who are functionally independent. In this context, Black analytically categorizes hunter-gatherers together with modern urban societies. He describes these societies as having 'limited and focused interaction' thereby practicing avoidance. To the contrary, he predicts 'violence' and 'confrontation' in 'traditional villages and families' and 'in agricultural societies', where people share many activities with their associates, and where permanent and total avoidance is difficult or impossible (Black 1998:81-82). In this regard, Black's analysis tends to associate avoidance with the degree or intensity of social interaction. Cohen (1984) similarly attribute the decline of avoidance, and perhaps the rise of violence, to changes

of settlement (from nomadic to sedentary life) and livelihood (from food collection to food production) patterns.

These views obviously downplay the role of avoidance in agricultural or village communities like the one under this study. Black's analysis that 'sharing many activities' or 'having many involvements' may increase the potential for disputes in village-based agricultural societies seems sound; it resonates well with the argument: 'the greater the interdependence, the greater the potential for conflict' (Augusburger 1992:97). However, we cannot argue with certainty that these disputes necessarily lead to violence; as many of them may result in avoidance. Again, 'permanent' and 'total' avoidance, which Black associates with hunting-gathering societies, may not reflect the nature of avoidance in agricultural societies with greater degree of interdependence in that: (1) permanent avoidance may not be desirable in such societies and; (2) treating avoidance as 'permanent' tends to equate it with the concept of conflict resolution, which it is not.

In this paper avoidance (or *hammeenna*⁵) refers to scenarios: (1) when parties engage in mutual avoidance after experiencing a dispute and, when this contributes to preventing dispute from escalation; reducing the likelihood that a bad situation may develop into worse; (2) when a right claimant avoids an alleged wrongdoer (who would later reciprocates) and imposes moral and social pressure a means for pressuring him/her towards conflict resolution and; (3) when violators of norms avoid their counterparts in an attempt of 'face saving' because of the social and moral guilty they shoulder. In almost all cases, avoidance does not resolve conflict nor does it even settle a dispute. It rather manages disputes and, approaches Galtung's (1969) concept of 'negative peace': the absence of violence (see Avruch 1998:26). In this regard, avoidance is conceived as a 'temporary' strategy. This temporal nature of avoidance in agricultural societies, where individuals could engage in avoidance without necessarily leaving their place of residence, may be induced by intimacy and interdependence. This, in turn, may also enhance interest in dispute management (in short-term) and, its resolution (in the long term).

2. Research objectives and methods

The major objectives of this ethnographic research included: understanding the meaning and essence of *hammeenna* (avoidance) in the Arsii Oromo cultural context; examine factors that trigger the disputes that later lead to avoidance; examining reasons for people to choose avoidance as a strategy of dispute management; and examining effects of avoidance to the parties (both economically and socio-culturally).

Data were collected primarily through key informants' interview and case study methods. First, in-depth interviews were made with five key informants, all male, age range between 56-78. Informants were selected purposively based on prior field experience of the researcher in the area. They are local 'cultural experts' and, have extensive experience in dispute handling and reconciliation endeavors. Second, 20 cases of avoidance, which engaged over 90 people were collected over several years since

⁵ Among the Arsii Oromo, the term has multiple references. These include: (1) the state of avoidance (refusal to talk to one another) whereby disputants sever social relationship and cooperation; (2) a wrong position (place) where one can easily or unexpectedly be hurt or in a state of risk; a hostile or rough terrain.

2014; the most recent interviews were made in August 2024. Cases were collected through snowballing strategy. I also came across some of the cases by sheer chance. Cases were collected from villages and towns in Dodolla, Kokossa, and Kofale districts, West Arsii Zone.

Many of the cases lack details, for a lengthy analysis, as disputants were reluctant to provide information to the depth that we would have liked to explore. Yet, sufficient information was gathered on the nature of pre-avoidance social relations between disputants, causes of disputes (or avoidance), and reasons that led a disputant (s) to opt for avoidance as dispute handling strategy. From among these cases, four are selected and presented in this paper based on their relative depth and, since they also reflect the essence of majority of cases.

The research setting and the context of everyday life

This article emerged from my long term research experiences in neighbouring districts of Dodolla, Kokkossa and Kofale, currently in the West Arsii Zone of the Oromia National Regional State, Ethiopia. Mixed farming constitutes major source of livelihood in the area. Combination of cattle, enset (*Ensete Ventricosum*) farming constitutes major feature of Kokkossa and Kofale districts. Cereal crops (e.g. barley and wheat) are important crops in Kofale and are emerging as such in Kokkossa (Hebo 2006). Dodolla is known as a major wheat producing area. Livestock, cattle in particular, are almost equally important in all parts of these districts as they hold central place in the Arsii's economy and socio-cultural ideology. The Arsii Oromo in the area predominantly follow Islam religion.

The Arsii Oromo follow patrilineal descent system and, patrilocal residence pattern. Clans (*gosa*) are the largest functional level of social organization and, are largely territorial units. Each clan is an exogamous unit and, marriage establishes both a social (*sodaadhan*- in-laws) and ritual (*buna-kill*a, literally coffee and coffee-bowl) links between members of different clans (see Hebo 2013). Clans are subdivided in a segmentary fashion into lineages (*balbala*); followed by sub-lineages (*ardaa*). The *warra* (extended family) and *mana* (nuclear family) constitute lower levels of social organization.

Settlements are permanent and attached to specific land: a valuable possession. In a typical rural settlement, the proximity of dwelling units usually corresponds to descent proximity among residents. People, thus, interact and cooperate in their daily life in the context of both closer or descent relations and neighborliness.

A closer observation of everyday socio-economic life of the Arsii Oromo villagers in the area would soon reveal the pervasiveness of people's cooperation and interdependence. Long list of materials is exchanged. Pack animals are borrowed and lent (*ergisa*) for transporting people or materials. Sometimes a horse is borrowed from someone; a saddle and its accessories from another person. Plow oxen are borrowed: sometimes oxen from one person and, plow sets from another; one ox from one person and another from another so as to pair them up. Household utensils also widely circulate among women. People may borrow a cattle kraal, together with livestock, in order to fertilize their piece of land. Above all, money is borrowed and lent (*liqaa*); things are sold and bought for a later pay (*huunjjoo*); gifts (*gumaata*) are exchanged and, assistance (*gargaarsa*) in cash or in kind are provided to people when they are in need (see Hebo 2013). The situation,

indeed, corresponds to Coleman's conception of generalized reciprocity and social capital:

Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that would have not been attainable in its absence....In a farming community...where one farmer got his hay baled by another and where farm tools are extensively borrowed and lent, the social capital allows each farmer to get his work done with less physical capital in the form of tools and equipment (quoted in Putnam 1993:4).

In this context, literally no individual (or family) is totally independent and self-sufficient at all times. People's material-based differentiation is not only relative but also temporal. Today's giver is tomorrow's receiver and; everyone, someday, has something to seek from others and, something to offer to others. The Arsii Oromo's idiom that *namni namaan nama ta'a*, 'a human being is human being because of other human beings' (Hebo 2013:21), captures the essence of these pervasive reciprocity and interdependence. These 'other human beings' are kins and friends in our context, from whom a person has a right to expect help; to borrow money or material. People are engaged in moral and social obligation to help or to lend hands to each other. It is wrong for a person to say 'I don't have this thing when he in fact has it'; it is also wrong for people to fail to reciprocate or re-pay their debts. When these rights and duties are violated, dispute could emerge and constrain further cooperation. The settlement of disputes is also sought and discussed in the context of existing relations and the social and moral obligations they entail.

My emphasis on the context of everyday life alludes to the importance of social relationships and interdependence for life and livelihoods. It also suggests its potential for disputes (and avoidance) and its implication for dispute settlement.

Avoidance in everyday life among the Arsii Oromo: Cultural Context and Cases

The cultural context of avoidance

Among the Arsii Oromo *hammeenna* (avoidance) result from *wal-dhaba* (misunderstanding or disagreement) related to a failure of one or more party to fulfill a social obligation or to re-pay one's debts. It could be 'public' or it could exist in a subtle state where disputants tend to deny that they are having troubles in their relationship. I found it imperative and illustrative as well to start this section with a short but powerful, Arsii Oromo folktale about two intimate ducks, who at one point in their life engaged in mutual avoidance. The folktale narrates what happened in the olden days: 'in days when everything spoke'; and it goes: a man came across two ducks sitting along a river bank, silent and turning their backs against each other. Suspicious of the state of their relation, the man engaged them in a conversation:

Man: 'Hello you guys [ducks]; why are you sitting silent and turning you're backs against each other?'

Ducks: 'We are not in good terms (angry at each other)'.

Man: 'If you are not in good terms, why are you sitting together (next to each other)?'

Dukes: 'We have no one else for us but one for the other.'

This folktale frequently appears in the Arsii Oromo's dispute settlement settings, particularly when dispute involves relatives or intimate friends. It is employed to soften stance, facilitate discussions and promote reconciliation by downplaying the conflict and, emphasizing on the importance of past and future relationships between disputants. The folktale, when interpreted in the context of Oromo culture, reveals a number of fundamental premises. First, we observe dual and, contradictory relationships: prior intimacy and/or interdependence overshadowed by the present dispute and the subsequent state of avoidance. This created an ambiguous relationship where the parties are physically together, yet emotionally apart. That is, dissatisfaction with each other's behavior and curtailment of interaction is evident; yet, complete separation (or total breakdown of their relations) didn't happen. Prior intimacy and interdependence as indicated in-'we have no one else for us but one for the other' contributed to prevailing situation thus created.

Second, the parties' act of 'turning face away from each other' or 'turning back at each other' is an expression of prevailing dispute and disputants' perception of one another. Such a posture could also be interpreted as a display of the relation and intention to 'declare' state of their relations to others, as a subtle way of soliciting for a third party's intervention⁶; an attempt at 'face saving' and, preventing or reducing confrontation. Face saving is important for a number of reasons. In face, feelings are displayed; and one can 'read', positive or negative signs of social relations: goodwill or ill will; love or hatred; peacefulness or aggression; acceptance or rejection; demand for a right and show of moral superiority or sense of shame, humiliation and admission of guilt. In case, if the 'negative signs' of face collide, it could lead to confrontation. Thus, the importance of avoiding face-to-face encounter for the people whose desire to communicate has already diminished or severed cannot be overstated. This is particularly relevant for the Arsii Oromo where people in the state of avoidance who often hair splittingly interpret each other's words, gestures and some simple acts (e.g., spitting). People in such a relation often keep physical distance, make careful choice of seats vis-à-vis each other at public gatherings and, avoid walking strait in a face-to-face encounter position. This obviously contributes to reducing violence or escalation of the problem.

The interpretations attempted above are good reflections of a picture of avoidance in the Arsii Oromo culture. At the center of a dispute may be a material or moral value or both. Decision to stay together, to refrain from violence, despite *garaa madaa* 'sour stomach' towards each other, may be influenced by either material interdependence or moral and social obligation or both. It is also evident that dispute could occur even among intimate and interdependent people and; at the same time the violent conflict could also be boiled down in the interest of long-term co-existence. Empirical cases of avoidance presented in the subsequent discussions were reflection of these scenarios.

⁶ The case of the man and dukes in this folktale a clear indication of this scenario

Cases of avoidance

In the discussions that follow, I present four cases of avoidance that somehow represent all categories cases on which I have sufficient collected information. Avoidance could start as a result of: (1) informal resource exchange and failure to re-pay or return. This involved money, land and cattle. Out of the 20 cases, most (11) of them, belonged to this category. (2) Six cases were related to failure to fulfill social obligations (or expectations) such as funeral attendance, funeral contribution, or gift to women upon childbirth. These expectations were largely based on norms of generalized reciprocity. (3) Two cases constituted verbal confrontations (e.g. insult) and gossips (defamation). (4) One case was about a dispute settlement related to a land claim that failed to reconcile the parties.

Resource exchange, failure to re-pay and avoidance

Case 1: Mr. R vs. Mrs. B

Mrs. B is Mr. R's mother in-law. She borrowed 500 Birr⁷ from Mr. R, promising to re-pay it upon receiving her turn of the *equb*⁸. When she received her turn of *equb*, she failed to re-pay the money. Subsequently, Mr. R made several requests to get the money back, but in vain. This resulted in Mr. R stopping talking to his mother-in-law and his brother-in-law (Mr. TK). In the meantime, Mr. TK accused Mr. R's son (about seven years of age), of stealing a radio and, asked Mr. R through a go-between, to retrieve the radio from his son. Mr. R says:

I made utmost effort to persuade my son to tell me the 'truth'. My son strongly denied that he had stolen the radio. I trusted my child and communicated the same to my in-laws through the go-between. However, they already convinced themselves that my son had stolen the radio. They blamed me for not making genuine efforts to retrieve the radio. They claimed that I was avenging them for the misunderstanding that existed between us.

Leaving aside the validity of the allegation, one thing is clear: escalation of avoidance, if not violence. Mr. R's son, who regularly visited his grandmother's home, despite a problem between her and his father, has now joined his father in avoidance. The expansion of avoidance does not seem to end here. A few months later, Mr. R's wife, Mrs. W, went to visit her mother in the morning, but did not return home in the evening. Her parents refused to send her back (detained her according to Mr. R) blaming their son-in-law for disrespecting them. Mr. R explained what happened as follows:

That was the most serious measure they took to break me down. They wanted to twist my hands to force me to kneel down in front of them and beg for forgiveness. But I was determined to resist the intimidation. I endured a difficult one week with my children because what they did was not right. My children secretly carried letters between me and my wife. Finally, my wife decided to return home when she understood that her situation was not contributing to the solution of problem. She told her mother that it was time for her to return to her home and children. Her mother was angry at her but couldn't keep her by

⁷ Birr is Ethiopian paper currency; One USD ranged between about 21 Birr in 2015 and 84 Birr in 2024. Average exchange rate between 2015-2020, when most of the data were collected, was about 27 Birr for one USD.

⁸ A rotating money pooling system whereby lots are drawn on a weekly or monthly bases until all members receive money pooled equivalent to their respective contribution.

force.

It is evident that his wife, somehow, cooperated with her parents' interest and acted 'hostage' for a week, hoping that could solve the problem. When this did not happen, she changed side, choosing her home and children. Her action, however, expanded the circle of avoidance again, as she also now joined it. Her parents' attempt seems to have accidentally ended in expanding the avoidance, contrary to forcing their son-in-law into submission and reconciliation.

In the meantime, one significant incident happened; Mr. R's father-in-law passed away. Mr. R and his wife rushed to the funeral, hugged other family members, and shared the grief together. The 'family' was incidentally re-united during the funeral period. Unfortunately, the union was short lived, at least partially. While avoidance between Mr. R's wife and her parents ended with the incidence; Mr. R re-instituted avoidance with his mother-in-law and brother-in-law after the end of the funeral period. Given the complexity of this case, I asked a key informant, who was well aware of the case, for his comment. And he commented:

Both had some truth; both also made some mistakes. First, it is wrong for the mother-in-law to refuse to return the money, which she had borrowed promising to return it. It was also wrong for her to intimidate her so-in-law for requesting her to return his money back. If she couldn't re-pay the money, she should have shown humility. That is why I said he has some truth. Second, it is wrong for him to pressure his mother-in-law so much and so persistently. Mother-in-law is Wayyuu (sacred); she deserves respectful treatment. As a mother-in-law, she could expect even more. That is why I said she too has some truth.

The above analysis is a very precise assessment of the situation, which almost replicates disputants' perception of their respective rights and, complaints against each other. The mother-in-law openly complained about 'disrespect' and harassment from her son-in-law. She downplayed the importance of money and blamed her son-in-law for 'showing more respect for money than to his mother-in-law.' Interestingly, Mr. R also made almost similar kind of argument. He said: 'the issue is not about money; it rather is about truth and treatment.' He said that his mother-in-law borrowed the money promising to return it; it wasn't a gift. He blamed his mother-in-law for humiliating him. He further said that "I could have abandoned the claim for the money had my mother-in-law treated me the way a son-in-law is treated'.

To sum up this case, a few points could be gleaned out: Social relationship seems to be a central element. First, kinship relationship, affinal in this case, formed the basis for the money to be informally lent and borrowed. When the essence of this informal exchange was violated, dispute/avoidance was generated. Although each side tended to deny the significance of money in the dispute, it is undeniable that it constitutes a major element, at least as a trigger, in the whole picture.

Second, the nature of their relationship, which embeds both social and ritual, seems to have complicated the matter and fueled emotions and expectations on both sides. This is evident in the assessment above, given by a key informant, which distributed responsibility, so to speak, between disputants. This style is quite common in the Arsii dispute settlement whereby both parties may be blamed for what happened; they both feel victorious at least partially and not a single party may totally be determined a loser and humiliated. Given the nature affinal relation that carries rights and duties, mutual

expectations fueled the emotions and, each tended to overemphasize the moral superiority (right) it has over the other.

Third, the same relationship contributed for the reduction of violence, which could have damaged their long-term relations. Mr. R did not resort to violence even when his wife was 'held' by his in-laws in the same village. As he put it: 'you could be hurt but still have patience when dealing with *soddaadhan* (in-laws). He neither took the case before elders nor the court because accusing a mother-in-law is a serious violation of moral and social codes.

Finally, this case revealed complexities of avoidance. It showed how the field of avoidance could wax and wane; it is temporal in nature and there is possibility that it may not be total and permanent ex-communication. Critical moments in life could override avoidance and bring people together either temporarily or reunite them for a longer term.

Case 2: When money and moral at stake (Mr. T vs. Mr. H)

If someone told you that so-and-so are best friends; and they stayed as friends for so long time; you should assume that they have never engaged in borrowing and lending money from each other (Interview with Mr. T, Dodolla, July 2015).

Mr. T and Mr. H had been intimate friends for over seven years. They belong to the same clan, and their friendship began when both were university students in the late 1990s. A challenge to their friendship began towards the end of 2012 when Mr. H's brother accidentally killed a person from his own lineage and, run away from the village. For him to return to the village, his family and broader relatives had to compensate the victim's family and perform purification and reintegration rituals in accordance with the *gumaa* custom of the Oromo. It was in this context that in 2013 Mr. H solicited contribution from Mr. T, who responded by contributing 400 Birr. In the same context, Mr. H borrowed additional 600 Birr from Mr. T, promising to return it in about three months. Mr. T explained what happened afterwards:

*Mr. H failed to re-pay the money he borrowed on time. I waited for a few more months and called upon him to pay the money. He kept on postponing the date to pay back. Then, I met with him in the summer of 2013 and informed him that I was preparing to get married and explained to him difficulties I was encountering to raise money and the number of cattle needed for bride wealth. I requested three things from him: to pay my money without further delay; to give me a cattle for *gabbara*⁹ to support my marriage and; to attend my marriage *Cidha* (ceremony). He failed to do any of these. In September 2014, I met him in person again. I asked him if he could pay my money back. He said he would return it when he got it. I said to him: that amount of money could be lost; or it could be stolen. You lowered yourself for such meagre money, that you reduced yourself to a little man's position.' I told him that I lost the money but you lost my trust, my respect and friendship. Since then, we have never spoken to each other.*

Mr. T's request for *Gabbara* was made not only in context of friendship but also in the context of the support he provided to Mr. H (400 Birr) as indicated above, for which Mr.

⁹ *Gabbara* refers to bride wealth, often made in cattle and transferred to the girl's parents. Part of the bride wealth is raised through contributions made by a groom's friends and kins to support his marriage. The system of contribution appears a generalized form of reciprocity but approaches balanced reciprocity; the two forms of reciprocity being viewed along a continuum.

H has a social obligation to reciprocate. Mr. T did not take the case before the court because of the informal nature of money transfer. Nor did he present the case before the elders or Mr. H's relatives for the reasons he indicated as follows:

Mr.H is proved to be untrustworthy person. A friend who failed to live to the expectation of friendship does not deserve any respect. Taking him before Jaarsaa (elders) is like giving him a respect; like seeking reconciliation with him. I don't respect him anymore (tuffachu). He failed all the test of friendship. He failed to even attend my marriage ceremony, which doesn't cost him any money.

Mr. T considered avoidance as a means of 'hurting' his opponent and, a burden (more of moral) that his opponent will have to endure carrying in his head. Mr. T insists that *hammeenna* would continue even when he got his money back, unless Mr. H sincerely apologized. This suggests the place the notion of truth has in this culture, as apologies in the Arsii Oromo context often involve offering truth to the right claimant and, restoring it for the sake of *waaqa*. Thus, social and moral issues viz. respect, trust, friendship and truth- tend to prevail in Mr. T's decision to initiate *hammeenna*. It is not to seek third-party's involvement for settlement. Mr. H's failure of 'friendship test', by failing to attend Mr. T's marriage ceremony, also seem to have complicated the relationship.

To summarize, this case depicts the importance (and problem as well) of social relationship and material interest. Obviously, Mr. T emphasizes on moral and social issues as triggers of this avoidance and contributor of its continuation. Yet, he also acknowledged the role of money in challenging friendship, by referring to an Oromo idiom, which goes: 'if someone told you that so-and-so are best friends and, they stayed as friends for so long time; you should assume that they have never been engaged in lending and borrowing money from each other.'

The disputants in this case were relatively well educated; both had bachelor degrees when this dispute occurred. One may think that they had more interest in money. He seemed to be more likely to opt for formal form of resource exchange and seemed to have interest in exploring all means in order to regain the money. Yet, Mr. T opted for avoidance, a strategy with moral and emotional overtone, but which doesn't help him get the money back. Education and career have also removed both from closer social networks in that both reside away from their clan territory. This might have also contributed for the avoidance to be protracted.

Burdens of social obligation

Everyday social life of Arsii Oromo mirrors the essence of 'high-context cultures.' High context cultures are group oriented, use indirect and subtle language in dispute settlement and, have high-collective normative expectations (see Augsburg 1992). These cultures are also 'more prone to misunderstandings and conflicts when culturally normative expectations and appropriate behaviors are violated.' (Augsburger 1992:94) Sense of shame and guilt haunt people when they fail to fulfill social expectations or norms of reciprocity. In the Arsii Oromo's context, these expectations may include failure to visit a sick friend or relative, provide gift to a woman upon child birth, attend friend or relative's funeral and provide moral and material supports and, attend marriage ceremonies or providing assistance for bride wealth transfer (see Case 2 above). The

following two cases provide a glimpse to disputes and avoidance that arise from these expectations.

Case 3: unreturned gift and avoidance as a face-saving strategy: Mrs. D vs. Mrs. B

I had many inconvenient days when I attended the market. Before, [prior to this dispute] I had never met B in the market by chance so frequently. But after she gave birth and I failed to deliver Gumaata to her, I often see her closer to me or walking towards me. I couldn't return her harka, [literally hand, but delayed reciprocal gift in this context]. I can't stand in front of her now. I turned my face away; I turned my back to her and pretended as if I was looking for someone. Dhugaa [narraa] qabdi (I owe her truth or she has a right to expect from me). I sometimes felt as if she was chasing me. The truth is that she was not following me. It was just by chance that I saw her in a nearby. She is an understanding woman, and know that I couldn't raise enough milk to deliver this time. She in fact wanted to greet me but I mistook her posture. Later on, I heard from our mutual friend that she was not angry at me. That was a great relief for me and, in the next market day, I looked for her and exchanged greetings. I apologized explaining about my problems to her.

Gumaata refers to the practice of contributing money or food (mainly milk) by network of relations to individuals upon (1) injury (2) circumcision and, (3) child delivery. It circulates among people in the context of kinship, family and friendship ties (see Hebo 2013). The case of this young woman could speak for several similar stories. The fact that her friend, from whom she had been hiding, was not purposely following her is revealing. It was the burden of social and moral obligation that was haunting her. Yet, there are instances when those who claim some right or a return of gift from their relations, deliberately exert a moral pressure on them.

This case also reveals that what is sought, at least sometimes, is not necessarily a return or re-pay of a material thing. Acknowledgment of the 'truth' and proper apology appear to be sufficient. The phrase *dhugaa narraa qabdi*, 'I owe her the truth', says a lot in this regard. We also understand in this case that those who failed to discharge their social obligation take the initiative to settle the case. Similarly, they may initiate avoidance too, in order to save face.

Case 4: I failed twice: I didn't attend his father's funeral; nor did I give him *maaskoo* (Mr. M vs. Mr. D)

This case presents a context similar to the preceding one. An informant narrated the power of mutual expectation in causing avoidance between friends, and how he intended to settle the matter.

*D and I were good friends. We used to visit each other on moments of happiness and, during times of difficulties until this incident happened. I failed to attend his father's funeral and could not give him *maaskoo*. I was not in the village when his father died. After I returned, I didn't visit him because I couldn't raise *maaskoo* [money to support the grieved]. Now almost seven months have passed since his father has died and it was no more proper to visit him. I have been avoiding him since then. I heard from other people that he asked about my whereabouts; whether I was fine. Of course, he knew that I was fine and around. He was just indicating that I wouldn't have missed his father's funeral being around and in a good health. I knew that he was indirectly expressing his dissatisfaction (*komii*) with me. Once we met in the market by sheer chance but he did not talk to me. Now I have already sent *jaarsa* [literally an elder] or intermediary to get it settled. I heard that he was positive about my*

request for reconciliation. I will have to apologize sincerely. It may not be proper to give him maaskoo now. But we still can eat and drink together in the town for the reunion.

Attending funeral and providing moral and material assistance are among vital reciprocal expectations among relatives, friends and neighbors in the Arsii Oromo custom. *Maaskoo* is crucial for funeral related resource transfer that could help a bereaved family cope with the crisis. The contributions are made both in cash and in kind. Women contribute food items, which is served to funeral attendants and bereaved family members. Men contribute money, and transfer it to the senior male of the bereaved family or individuals in charge of managing the funeral (see Hebo 2013). Traditionally *maaskoo* was more of a generalized form of reciprocity while recently people complain about it becoming a calculated and more of a balanced form of reciprocity. But funeral attendance still is a show of solidarity and involves a lot of emotions. Not to attend a funeral or failure to provide material assistance to funeral of a person in the intimate relation risk heavy emotional burden.

In this case, we observe a right claimant exerting an indirect moral and social pressure on his friend. Avoidance was initiated and solution is also being sought by the person who felt sense of guilt and moral burden. In this case, Mr. M is seeking for reconciliation with Mr. D. After he used avoidance to cool down the emotions for several months, he is now ready to offer an apology to settle the issue. He is also alluding to treating his friend with 'foods' and 'drinks', since it is too late for attending a funeral or making funeral contribution (*maaskoo*). This suggests the importance of being on time for a certain actions and expectations in cultural context.

Discussion of cases

Almost all cases of avoidance involved relatives or people in hitherto intimate relations: lineage members, friends, and in-laws. Intimacy facilitated informal resource exchange, mutual obligation and expectations. It also tends to fuel emotions related to failure to provide or re-pay. A focus on 'truth', over material things, at least rhetorically, should also be understood in the context of these intimate relations and, the social and moral dimensions that they entail.

Avoidance could be initiated by either party in a dispute. Cases of avoidance that begin at a dyad level could later involve supporters on both sides. In almost all instances of disputes that involved material exchanges and, in cases that involved values (e.g. honor and dignity), avoidance was initiated by the aggrieved party. On the other hand, in the cases where issues of failed social expectations or obligations involved, avoidance was largely initiated by those who failed to fulfill their social expectations.

Most of the cases included in this paper suggest that avoidance is an expression of anger, a moral (emotional) and social burden imposed on the wrong doer. Right claimants are said to feel comfortable with the state of avoidance in that they do not take troubles trying to avoid their counterparts. They even sometimes pretend to 'want to talk' to them. Such a posture puts more pressure on and increase inconvenience to the violators, who, in turn, attempt to minimize such a burden and inconvenience by 'cooperating', so to speak, with avoidance, by 'properly' avoiding facing right claimants. This differential impact of avoidance on the parties was thus expressed as: 'when two people in the state of *hammeena* meet face-to-face, it is the one who is the cause for the problem who changes the course' and; 'when two people in the state of *hammeena* meet face-to-face, it

is the one who was the cause of the problem who can't look straight forward.' (Interview with a key informant, Dodolla, July 2016)

Avoidance could suggest right violator's lack of moral strength and courage to face a right claimant on one hand, and right claimant's anger and lack of respect for the right violator. It seems to be a show of moral superiority on the side of those who claim some rights from others. Therefore, avoidance is not a desperate measure taken by desperate individuals who fail to retrieve their material or moral worth, but a complex strategy with moral, social and material dimensions.

Avoidance as discussed in this paper is a temporary strategy. Even those individuals who were very emotional about what their relations 'have done to them' and, who doubted that they would ever reconcile with them, acknowledge about the temporal nature of avoidance. It may take time but it would end at one point through a third-party intervention or when disputants negotiated and make settlement, or when incidents or crisis bring them together.

Concluding Remarks

Avoidance (*hammeenaa*) goes with some central ideals of the Arsii Oromo's conception of conflict (dispute) and its management and resolution. Dispute settlers often employ what they varyingly express as *dubbii bulchuu* (delaying or postponing the issue); *dubbii shamsuu* (letting the matter rot) or; *dubbii bilcheesuu* (making the matter cooked or fermented). These actions obviously serve to cool down tempers; make emotions wane and; give way for exploring for sufficient information as much as possible. This is in line with the picture of avoidance in the literature -as a strategy to rest a dispute and prevent escalation of conflict. However, this is largely an etic perspective (a latent consequence) and perspective of a few analytical leaning elders (cultural experts) in our case.

In our context, avoidance is not merely about how disputants feel about each other and, act (or avoid to act) towards each other- and is a conflict management strategy. It also serves as a way to convey the state of their relationship to others, a subtle form of compliant, and an indirect way of seeking third-party's engagement, as an indirect call for conflict resolution. Both contribute for people's long-term co-existence.

The two-person relationship, the dyad, is the primary human relationship. The dyad offers the deepest support, the fullest authenticity, and therefore the greatest risk and the most dangerous potential for hurt and alienation. The concentration of both person's emotional needs into the smallest possible system makes the dyad the maximally threatening interaction that is inevitable unstable and essentially in need of the third pole to provide support and stability (Augsburger 1992:153).

Avoidance involves social, moral (emotional) and material dimensions. It occurs among people with prior intimate relations; emerged from exchanges and expectations that takes in the context of these relations, based on trust and morality. Social relations (intimacy) and the emotions and expectations related to these relations explain major dimensions of avoidance. It provides contexts, obligations and expectations for resource exchange. Informant's expression that 'how could I say no to him?' when deciding to lend money to a friend informally explains the moral and social obligation that social relations incorporate.

The emotional aspect, as also suggested by Augsburger, plays an important role in the

dyad's inability to resolve the problem either through negotiation or by directly presenting it to the third party's intervention. One informant expressed: 'it is easier to accept a stranger's ill deed to you than from a person you closely now.' Dispute between individuals in closer social ties appear to be emotionally more engaging and more difficult to accept and is difficult to share with others. How can I tell this to others (*kuni waan namatti himannimit*); what would other people say about us if they heard about this? (*namni maal nuun jedha*) are among expressions used to explain why disputants engage in avoidance instead of presenting the case to the third-party. The importance of others' opinion, attitude and views is apparent here, which are significant elements of 'high context' cultures.

In the final analysis avoidance manages conflicts (short term), facilitates conflict resolution by putting pressure on people to seek for conflict resolution. It indirectly calls for conflict resolution through a third-party by making the scars narrow enough to be mended. The nature of social relations (moral and material-interdependence and mutual indebtedness) and permanency of settlement could enhance people's interest in the long-term coexistence and limiting violent measures that could cause deeper wounds to their further relations. In the short term, however, avoidance impinges cooperation and mutual interaction, with serious repercussions to villagers' socio-economic life in the context of permanent settlement and dense social relationships.

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