Preventing inter-ethnic conflict: Evidence from the Gereb traditional institutions in Northeast Ethiopia

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Abstract

A review of major literature on conflict prevention reveals a lack of consensus on the subject matter. One strand of the debate revolves around whether conflict prevention should be limited solely to the early and non-escalatory stages of conflict, or it should also encompass the escalation and post-conflict stages. Other scholars question the feasibility of assessing whether preventive actions have made a difference. Additionally, examining the role of traditional institutions in conflict prevention introduces a third layer of complexity to the discussion as they are typically approached within the context of conflict resolution. This paper investigates the role of traditional institutions in preventing inter-ethnic conflicts, focusing on the case of Gereb in northeast Ethiopia. The study draws upon documentary materials spanning from 2006 to 2020 and interviews with 40 key informants representing all major stakeholders and FGD with members of the community in the locality. It discovered that local communities have their own concepts of peace, conflict, and conflict prevention. The paper argues that not only is it possible to measure conflict prevention interventions, but traditional institutions are capable of preventing inter-ethnic conflict and the Gerebs have successfully prevented inter-ethnic death and reduced conflicts from communal to individual levels. This suggests that the sustainability of peace hinges upon the local community's ownership of the peace process itself, highlighting the efficacy of a bottom-up approach in addressing conflicts across Africa.

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Introduction

Africa is endowed with indigenous/traditional institutions involved usually in conflict resolution and conflict management, as much of literature in the subject says so (Mutisi & Greenidge, 2012; Ohajunwa & Mji, 2021). Existing research has to a large extent focused on the conflict resolution role of traditional institutions (Maraire, 2024; Olawale et al., 2024). Likewise, a number of studies conducted in Ethiopia also revealed a similar pattern whereby an over emphasis is given to conflict resolution role of traditional institutions (e.g., Epple & Getachew, 2020; Alula & Getachew, 2008; Gebrie et al., 2012; Meron, 2015). Specific to the *Gereb* traditional institutions,[3] several researchers from different disciplines have addressed this institution clinging to their conflict resolution aspect (Kelemework, 2013; Shimels & Tadesse, 2008; Degafi, 2001).

A bird's eye view of these research outputs signaled that research on traditional institutions in Ethiopia is often analyzed from the conflict resolution perspective.[4] The existing literature, however, does not specify whether these traditional institutions employ terms such as conflict resolution in their daily interactions, necessitating a localized understanding of what conflict, conflict resolution, conflict prevention, justice, and even peace entail.

On the other hand, the realm of conflict prevention is overwhelmingly dominated by international actors, usually with western notion of conflict and conflict prevention. Conflict prevention policies and frameworks are predominantly associated with governmental and non-governmental organizations rather than one grounded in local actors and agencies. These include the UN system, international financial institutions, regional organizations, and major governments through bilateral development and security assistance (Lund, 2009). This approach is evident in the literature's understanding of conflict prevention

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[3]The *Gereb* traditional institutions are institutions found along the boundary of Afar and Tigray active on conflict prevention, management, and resolution of intra-communal and inter-communal nature.

[4]In the study of non-state normative orders, scholars employ various terms to describe systems operating outside state mechanisms. Commonly used labels include popular dispute resolution mechanisms, traditional institutions of conflict resolution, traditional justice systems, customary dispute resolution mechanisms, restorative justice, alternative dispute resolution, and traditional methods of conflict resolution. This research adopts the term traditional institutions for two primary reasons. Firstly, while 'customary' emphasizes practices rooted strictly in established customs, 'traditional' highlights the enduring nature of these institutions without focusing solely on their customary origins. Secondly, 'traditional' encompasses a broader scope, including both conflict resolution and prevention, acknowledging that these institutions operate on principles beyond mere custom.

tools and the metrics used to evaluate concepts that have been shaped by and designed for international actors dealing with intra- and interstate conflicts. This coupled with the observable gap of research on African and indigenous perspective of conflict prevention calls for research on the subject matter that is least addressed. By drawing up these gaps this research set out to explore the role of traditional institutions in conflict prevention.

This article begins by delving into the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of the research, thereby establishing a robust framework for subsequent analysis. It proceeds to delineate the research context and articulate the methodological approach employed in this study. Following this, the discourse scrutinizes the conflict prevention strategies implemented by the *Gereb* institutions, with particular emphasis on the interventions they employ. The analysis further explores the deterrent effect of the *Gereb* regulations in comparison to state-based criminal justice systems, subsequently examining how the *Gereb* institutions, in collaboration with state entities, address the root causes of conflict. Finally, the article evaluates the efficacy of the interventions orchestrated by the *Gereb* traditional institutions.

Conceptual and theoretical frameworks

I began my research with a focus on the literature around conflict prevention (Carment & Schnabel, 2004; Lund, 2009), conflict emergence (Galtung, 1995; Kriesberg & Dayton, 2012; Riley, 2022) and traditional institutions and traditional approaches to peace making (Francis, 2013; Mac Ginty, 2008; Zartman, 2000) with approaches in the west academia. I conceptualize conflict prevention in a broad sense, encompassing not only the early stages of conflict but also efforts to forestall its emergence and reemergence. This definition aligns with frameworks proposed by the Carnegie Commission (1997) and the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS) Conflict Prevention Framework (2008), which is compatible with the concepts of the community under study. This definition covers two stages of conflict prevention. Conflict prevention before its emergence includes early warning and similar mechanisms of preventing conflict from its emergence and if conflict emerges, preventing its escalation and working on preventing its re-emergence.[5]

In the research area, I found a local term for conflict prevention: *gontsi mikilikal*. But the concept of conflict prevention is not limited to the early phases of

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[5]While debates persist regarding the definition of conflict prevention, the definition aligns with the approach commonly seen in health disciplines, where terms like malaria or HIV prevention refer to interventions that address ongoing cases while also seeking to curb future occurrences.

conflict; it also extends to preventing escalation (*keygafah mikilikal*) and re-emergence of conflict (*midrak gontsi*). Major peace activities of the *Abo Gereb (meaning father of the Gereb who lead the Gereb institutions)* encompass different phases: pre conflict, during conflict and after conflict. The plan and prevention activities are aligned with these three broad categories.[6] This conception of conflict prevention supports the broad definition of the concept.

As it is important to mention the community's conception of the emergence of conflict (Mac Ginty, & Richmond, 2013), there are two alternative words to the term conflict in the locality: *gontsi* and *gichit*. *Gichit* refers to a dispute that is conceived as a natural phenomenon whereas *gontsi* is something that can be and should be prevented. The respondents addressed the question whether conflict (*gichit*) could be prevented from emerging. They replied that 'even stones collide; let alone human beings.' These expressions imply even individuals or entities that are closely connected or dependent on each other may experience conflicts from time to time. For the community what should be prevented is *gontsi* (conflict), i.e. violent expression of conflict.

Amharic or Tigrinya literature on conflict resolutions use parallel terms such as the term '*gichit meftat*' and '*gontsi mielay*' respectively.[7] However, my interviews and subsequent discussions with *Abo Gerebs* and community members revealed a notable absence of these terms in their communities. Instead, the Abo *Gerebs* often employed the term *irqi*, which is commonly translated into 'reconciliation' in Amharic and Tigrinya literature despite its etymological differences in the two languages. The etymology of *irqi*, as described by the *Abo Gerebs* involves a process where the perpetrator is made naked (metaphorically exposed) before the community, prompting the wrongdoer to disclose the action fully and expressing remorse for the wrong deed. Theories about conflict and conflict resolution come from various fields such as sociology, political science, psychology, and international relations. The first group of theories focuses on specific causes of conflict, often aiming to examine root causes. Notable examples include structural functionalism (Fisher, 2011), a sociological perspective that posits conflict as a result of dysfunction or imbalance in social structures. On the other hand, social identity and psychological theories assume that conflicts arise

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[6]The local for terms to conflict prevention 'ጎንጺ ምክልኻል' (*gontsi mikilikal*) include preventing from its escalation (ከይጋፍሕ ምክልኻል *keygafah miilikal*) and preventing re-emergence of (ምድራቅ ጎንጺ *midrak gontsi*) whereas the major activities of the *Abo Gerebs* are categorized as pre conflict (ቅድመጎንጺ), during conflict (ኣብ ጎንጺ) and after conflict (ድሕሪ ጎንጺ).

[7]The parallel words Tigrinya and Amharic studies are ጎንጺ ምጃላይ and ግጭት መፍታት respectively.

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when individuals strongly identify with their own group and perceive other groups as threats or competitors (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Hogg, 2016). In contrast, constructivism emphasizes the role of ideas, beliefs, and norms in shaping conflicts. Accordingly, conflicts arise not only from material interests but also from differing perceptions, identities, and social constructions (Hopf, 1998). For resource scarcity theory (Maxwell & Reuveny, 2000), conflicts emerge due to competition over scarce resources. As resources become limited, tensions increase, leading to conflict. In contrast, relative deprivation theory (Smith, 2015) posits that perceived inequality and unfair disadvantage relative to others lead to conflict

The prevailing theories on conflict and peace fail to account for the diverse conceptions of concepts in Africa, often reflecting western perspectives, religious beliefs and cultural norms. Consequently, they overlook or sideline local voices, indigenous viewpoints, and unique epistemologies of indigenous peoples (Bowers, 2012; Maihāroa et al., 2022). In response to the Eurocentric Western nature of peace and conflict studies, there has been a critique and a move towards multiculturalism (Richmond & Mac Ginty, 2014; Sabaratnam, 2013). There is a trend of moving from empiricist positivist to more of a dialogical approach (Lottholz, 2017). There has also been a 'resurgence of interest in indigenous, traditional, and customary approaches to peace-making in the context of conflicts (Mac Ginty, 2008, p. 139). In this article, I adopt traditional and indigenous approaches to conflict prevention, allowing the findings to emerge organically from the data without relying on predetermined theories.

Case study context and methodology

To address the research gaps, the *Gereb* traditional institutions along the boundary of Afar and Tigray regional state were taken as a case study. Despite its variation in composition or structure, the *Gereb* institutions are accustomed along all the borders of the Tigray and Afar areas starting from the southern tip of Tigray regional state to northern east of Tigray regional state (Shimelis & Taddese, 2008). The *Gereb* institutions have also a role in intra-communal conflicts vastly in Wejerat and Alamata weredas. They consist of a council of elders from each ethnic group. The *Gereb* traditional institution establishes rules (locally called sirit) governing community resource management, utilization, punitive measures, and compensations. Representatives from the two ethnic groups are referred to as *Abo-Gerebs*. The study selected two wereda – Enderta wereda from the Tigray side and Ab'ala wereda from the Afar Regional State side for inter-communal conflicts whereas the Raya Alamata wereda for intra-communal conflicts. Enderta wereda is found in southeast zone of Tigray region whereas Ab'ala wereda in zone two of Afar regional state. Raya Alamata is found in Southern Tigray (see map below).
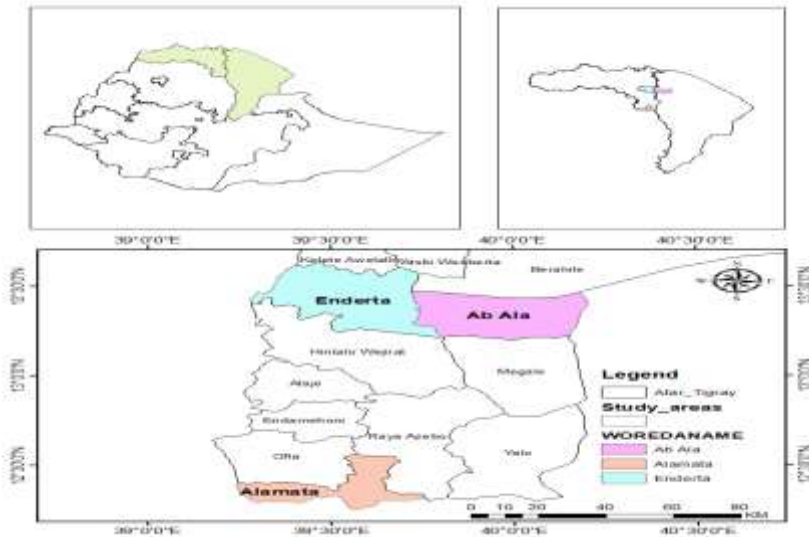
Figure 1: the research area

I am employed a qualitative research method. Data collection in the three weredas was conducted from January to March 2020. Overall, I conducted forty interviews with community representatives and *Abo Gerebs* (leaders of the Gereb institutions). Additionally, a total of six focus group discussions, consisting of 10-12 members each, were held with representatives of both communities of Enderta and Ab'ala wereda and Raya Alamata wereda for intra-communal conflicts.

FGD Number	FGD group	Number of participants	Number of FGD
1	*Abo Gerebs* of Enderta and Ab'ala wereda	12	1
2	*Abo Gerebs* of Raya Alamata wereda	10	1
3	Elders and clan leaders Ab'ala wereda	11	1
4	Elders, community representatives of Enderta wereda	12	1
5	Elders and community representatives of Raya Alata wereda	12	1
6	Disputants	10	1

Table 1: FGD participants

A fifteen-year compiled Minute of Discussion (MoD) of the *Abo Gerebs* is also used for triangulation.[8] All participants of the research were informed of the purposes of the research and they gave their consent. All protocols of research ethics were maintained including briefing about the purpose of the research, confidentiality of their information and voluntary participation; individuals whose names are mentioned in this document have provided their consent.

The field data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and key themes within the collected data. I systematically coded interview transcripts, focused group discussions, and the MoD to categorize recurring narratives and perspectives. Through an iterative process, I refined these themes to ensure alignment with the research objectives. Triangulation was used to validate findings by cross-referencing different data sources and perspectives.

Conflict prevention mechanisms of the Gerebs
Prevention is better than cure

As part of conflict prevention strategies employed by the *Gereb*, early identification of potential conflicts within the community serves as a key mechanism. In the pursuit of uncovering traditional conflict early warnings, I have asked a member of the Abo Gereb regarding the proactive measures they undertake to forestall conflicts prior to their emergence. The vice chairman of the Enderta and Ab'ala wereda *Gerebs* claimed that:

> *In the pre-conflict phase, our efforts are directed towards community education aimed at conflict prevention. We engage in careful planning to anticipate potential conflicts, discerning their temporal occurrences, and formulating corresponding solutions. For instance, we systematically explain the types of conflicts that emerge in the dry and rainy seasons. Our approach involves a comprehensive breakdown of the underlying causes of conflicts, categorizing them based on factors such as water resources, land utilization, reservoir management, agricultural yields, among others. Subsequently, we provide a structured series of instructional interventions designed to address and mitigate these identified conflict triggers at various*

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[8]The *Abo Gerebs*' minutes comprise a comprehensive record spanning 170 pages, encapsulating ten years' worth of monthly discussions and fundamental decisions made by the *Gerebs*. Within these minutes, each month's agenda is meticulously outlined, detailing the number of participating *Abo Gerebs* from each wereda, tasks carried over from the previous month, and forthcoming objectives. Decisions, reconciliations, concerning issues of each month are all mentioned in the minute of discussion.

intervals. This approach aims to impart a nuanced understanding of conflict dynamics and equip the community with proactive strategies for conflict prevention.

The activities of the *Gereb* are not limited to identifying and planning for potential conflicts; they also devise mechanisms for incidence-based information collection. Accordingly, every community member is required to report to the *Abo Gerebs* for any incidence of conflict and potential conflicts. The *Abo Gerebs* of each side also reports of any potential conflict to the other side. In instances where conventional communication methods, such as phones, are unavailable, an alternative is in place. The *Abo Gerebs* of the counter wereda takes proactive measures by dispatching a young individual to promptly inform the other *Abo Gerebs* of any emergent situations. This immediate relay of information enables the *Abo Gerebs* to swiftly discern the origins of potential conflicts. The chairman and the vice chairman of the Enderta and Ab'ala wereda *Gereb* institution mentioned that if an incident is reported they personally engage in on-the-ground assessments by physically visiting the affected areas. They recalled that when death of camel has happened, a cause of potential conflict,

This hands-on approach allows us to ascertain the cause of specific incidents, whether attributed to human actions, wildlife involvement like hyenas, or natural occurrences such as diseases'. By directly involving ourselves, not only facilitates a quicker solution but also works towards calming the community members, fostering a sense of reassurance and stability during potentially tense situations (interview, April 2020).

The question now is can we call this indigenous way of conflict an early warning system? In the conflict prevention field, early warning is more linked to the state, international organizations, or civil societies where their approach is designed and attributed to some modern technology in the process (Eze & Frimpong, 2021). In *Gereb* institutions, there are two mechanisms of early warning. The first is about collecting information about agricultural seasons and identifying any possible drought so that they would be able to prevent post-drought conflicts. Through this process, they would be able to prevent conflict in the areas where potential conflict emerges.

The second mechanism applies when there is any possible conflict and when intervention is needed from the *Abo Gerebs*. According to *Gereb* rules, any member of the community who becomes aware of a conflict is obligated to report it to the *Abo Gerebs* and relevant authorities (MoD, 2020). The *Gereb* traditional

rules mandates that any community member who observes conflict is obligated to promptly report to the *Abo Gerebs* and relevant government authorities. Failure to report conflict incidents results in sanctions. As per the *Gereb* rule, hiding information is punishable with a fine of 500 birr. According to the rules of the *Gereb*, punishment is not limited to hiding information; misinformation or disinformation is also punishable act.

Under this mechanism, there are two ways of reporting. The first is via phone calls where members of the community would report to the members of the *Abo Gereb* through direct communication. In such scenarios, the *Abo Gerebs* of the nearest location will arrive at the specific place to prevent escalation. Under this stage, if the conflict is not manageable by the *Abo Gerebs*, the police force of the wereda where the conflict has happened will intervene. The second method of information gathering involves the use of *tofegna*, which can be literally translated as runner or messenger. Elders or concerned individuals from either district utilize the messenger to relay precautionary measures or decisions to the other *Abo Gerebs* regarding potential conflicts or emerging situations. At present, the *Abo Gerebs* use messengers in case phone communication is not possible.

Extradition of perpetrators to the opposing sides

The *Abo Gerebs* pointed out a notable distinction between the pre-2006 period before they got de facto recognition and broad authority and after 2006. Prior to 2006, there was no practice of transferring offenders across districts. Alleged criminals/suspects after committing a crime would hide themselves in their localities. But lack of justice, even if reconciliation brings about communal peace festers vengeance. In other words, if an individual committed a crime in the Enderta wereda, the case would be adjudicated within Enderta and vice versa for incidents occurring in Ab'ala wereda. Per the rule of the *Gereb*, a slayer from either side will be transferred to the other side to build the confidence of both parties. Such practices help deter revenge attacks. The government justice offices on both sides (Afar & Tigray) cooperate in these cases, facilitating the extradition of wrongdoers.

The head of the justice office of the Enderta wereda claimed that there is no way to charge the offender by any of the regions if the conflict is ethnic based as the federal courts have jurisdictions over crimes 'falling under the jurisdiction of courts of different regions or under the jurisdiction of both the federal and regional courts as well as concurrent offences; crimes connected with conflicts between various nations; nationalities, ethnic, religious or political groups' (FDREHPR, 2021). It should be noted that while Art. 212 of the 2004 Revised Criminal Code of Ethiopia seems to leave the choice for the disputants (mainly the victims) to take crimes upon complaint to the forum of their own choice; there is no article in the

criminal code that permits the court or prosecutors to transfer criminal cases to the customary institutions.

Before 2006, one of the challenges for the *Gerebs* was that if an Afar person commits a crime, even if the crime happens in Tigray, the proceedings for reconciliation had been held in the Afar region and vice versa. This process had created a loophole for criminals to bypass the rule of the *Gereb* on reconciliation and compensations. The *Abo Gerebs* of Enderta and Ab'ala during the FGD mentioned that 'Within our established system, we implement a process where an Afar who kills a Tigrayan would be tried in Tigray, and reciprocally, a Tigrayan who kills an Afar would be tried in Afar'. Previously, an Afar who killed a Tigrayan was tried in Afar land within their own system, and vice versa. Criminals would either move to Arab countries or relocate to remote areas. However, during this time, if a herder becomes violent, 'they will bring him here to us.' The communities trusted the system, having no judges but the *Abo Ger*ebs. Therefore, in cases where an Afar individual is accused of taking the life of a Tigrayan, the case will be adjudicated by the Abo Gerebs in Enderta, and vice versa. A commitment to fairness and honesty underpins this mutually agreed-upon system, ensuring impartiality in resolving such serious matters.

Prohibition of carrying weapons

The Tigray administration and security office head explained that one of the reforms in post-1991 Tigray was that carrying guns in public spaces is prohibited except for security personnel whereas there is a culture of carrying guns in public by members of the community in the Afar region. Afar herdsmen usually carry guns for protection and axes and adzes for different purposes.

The secretary of the *Gereb* also mentioned 'carrying of axes and adzes and other materials for the herdsman is not only for the sake of protection'. For instance, in cases when a livestock's life is threatened due to an accident or sudden illness and when the meat of the animal is considered good for consumption, the herdsman is required to immediately slaughter the animal before it dies, following the religious ritual. For this, they need to carry knives and other tools. The problem, however, is that when a quarrel breaks out between two herdsmen, weapons, including lethal ones like Kalashnikov rifles, are used. The *Abo Gerebs* disclosed that major conflicts leading to death in the locality are often linked to conflict between herders over grazing and water resources, a pattern observed in other regions of Ethiopia as well (Bamlaku et al., 2015; Temesgen & Taddesse, 2021). One of the effective tools used to prevent conflicts in the locality, 'a perfect solution' to use the Abo Gerebs word, is a new rule prohibiting the carrying of guns and fighting instruments to grazing lands and water pools. As a result, scuffles that happened between herdsmen, as pointed out by one of the *Abo*

Gerebs, did not lead to death but only to body injuries in the last 15 years (Personal communication, 2020).

The prohibition of hue and cry

It is a culture in the community and anywhere else in Ethiopia that anyone who witnesses a crime shall make a hue and cry so that people and officials will be alarmed and detain a suspect fleeing from the crime area. In the tradition, all able-bodied men should join the effort. In fact, the criminal procedure code of Ethiopia stipulates the issue of hue and cry in the sense that 'an offense shall be deemed to be quasi-flagrant when, after it has been committed …. when a hue and cry has been raised.' Hue and cry (አውያት-awyat), a tradition of pursuing a criminal with cries and sounds of alarm, was the duty of any person wronged or discovering a crime to raise the hue and cry, and his neighbors were bound to come and assist him in the pursuit and apprehension of the offender. All those participating in the pursuit had the right to arrest the targeted individual. As part of this tradition, one of the reforms that the *Abo Gerebs* came up with was a new rule in 2006 to prohibit the culture of hue and cry as a means of calling on fellow villagers to chase the criminal. Per the *Gereb* rule no one is allowed to raise hue and cry. This is justified by the *Abo Gerebs* that hue and cry is a means of escalating conflict.

Deterrence effect of the *Gereb* rules and decisions

In criminological discourse, criminal deterrence is conceptualized as a multifaceted strategy wherein the certainty, swiftness, and severity of punishment collectively function to elevate the perceived costs associated with criminal behavior, thereby dissuading rational individuals from engaging in unlawful acts (Abramovaite et al., 2023). The Ethiopian criminal code recognizes deterrence as a means of preventing crime. In its preamble it stated that 'It [the Criminal Code] protects society by preventing the commission of crimes and a major means of preventing the commission of crime is punishment. Punishment can deter wrongdoers from committing other crimes.'

Severity of *Gereb* rules and decisions

Initial findings supported the assumption that harsh sanctions deter criminal behavior (Von Hirsch, 1999). The *Abo Gerebs* during the FGD described the severity of punishment in terms of graduating sanctions.

> *We teach the perpetrator to prevent the conflict from happening again, and the perpetrator cannot commit the crime again. The punishment becomes worse if there is a repetitive offense. The people have become the owners of peace, and we have no conflict again.*

The rules of the *Gereb* also hold accountable not only to the parties involved in a conflict, but also the kebele may be held responsible for paying punishments according to the *Gereb* rules. This mechanism is typically invoked when a kebele fails to bring a perpetrator back to the *Abo Gerebs*, or when violations of the rules persist. It underscores the community's responsibility in correcting and disciplining their perpetrators. According to the rules of the *Gereb* institutions, breaching a reconciliation agreement results in a penalty of 40,000 birr along with a compensation payment of 60,000 birr. The same penalties and compensation apply in cases of acts of revenge (rules, 2012).

In the Raya Alamata areas, even punishment in the traditional institutions doesn't prevent proceeding in the state institutions. Proceeding in the state institutions is a precondition to proceeding with the reconciliation process. Accordingly, a person is going to be punished both in the state justice machinery and *Gereb* traditional institutions. While the *Gereb* rules address reconciliation and punishment through monetary compensation, such as 80,000 birr for accidental homicide or 100,000 birr for intentional homicide, the state criminal law imposes penalties, including rigorous imprisonment or even death penalty for serious offenses.

Certainty of the *Gereb* rules

Research shows that certainty of punishment works as a deterrent (Killias et al, 2009). In the realm of *Gereb* traditional institutions, upon the consensus of the two communities, there is less probability of evading the rules of the *Gereb*. Per the *Gereb* rules, if an individual is not reachable, the kebele of the perpetrator is responsible for any punishment. Based on such rules, the *Abo Gerebs* mentioned that no perpetrator has evaded punishment or reconciliation so far. One of the reforms that the *Abo Gerebs* introduced, as mentioned above, is the extradition of criminals to other wereda to process reconciliation. One of the members of the *Abo Gereb* mentioned that 'when both *Abo Gerebs* reach a consensus, there is nowhere for criminals to hide, not even in the sky or the deepest pit, especially with modern technology at our disposal [referring to mobile phone and swift communication].'

Based on the rules of the *Gereb* 'everyone in the police, court, and security administration knows the *Abo Gereb* rules.' Individuals who commit offenses and successfully evade punishment frequently escalate their criminal activity based, in part, on the idea that evading arrest once indicates that punishment is unlikely to occur in the future (Lee, 2017). In the state led justice system, there is a difficulty in gauging deterrence because potential offenders must be aware of sanction risks and consequences prior to committing an infraction for sanctions to be effective.

The public tends to underestimate the severity of typical sanctions. This is hardly surprising given that the public is frequently ignorant of sentencing policies. It is also doubtful that potential offenders are aware of changes to sentencing regulations, thereby decreasing any deterrent effect. While ignorance of law has no excuse is the maxim of law, the Federal Negarit Gazette establishment proclamation makes a presumption that 'any natural or juridical person shall take judicial notice of laws published in the Federal Negarit Gazeta' (FDREHPR, 1995). With these assumptions, the FDRE criminal code (2004) enumerates a situation where a person is exempted from punishment upon ignorance. Article 91(3) states that 'in exceptional cases of absolute and justifiable ignorance and good faith and where criminal intent is not apparent, the Court may impose no punishment'. With all these exceptions and sub-exceptions, however, there is no situation where the community, perpetrators or the lawyers can know the degree of punishment in the criminal code, as it only puts a range of punishments. In the *Gereb* traditional institutions, the community members are aware of the rules of the *Gerebs*. During the FGD, all participants declared that they knew the punishment in the rules of the *Gerebs*. 'We know that the punishment for intentional homicide is 200,000 Kirshi (birr)' said the participants. The same applies to the punishment for trespassing on reserved grazing land.

Certainty in the community and by *Abo Gerebs* is expressed in four terms. First, it is less likely, and the community are confident that no conflict will remain unresolved, or a perpetrator will leave unpunished or unreconciled or pass through the process of the *Gereb* institutions. Second, it is less likely that a person will leave unhanded. Third, the community is knowledgeable of the punishment for their action and that the rules of the *Gerebs* are enacted by the consensus of the community. Fourthly, there is certainty that there will be no possibility to evade or abuse the system as the community and the *Abo Gerebs* judge and decide in the full process.

Celerity of the *Gereb* rules
Studies posit that the 'greater the perceived certainty, severity, and swiftness of punishment, the lower the crime rate will be (Kleck, 2014, p. 1015; Zettler et al., 2015). While international and national human rights laws emphasize access to speedy justice as a fundamental human right, and policy makers even acknowledge that 'access to speedy justice is crucial both for reducing crime and satisfying the interests of victims' the concept of celerity has been rarely tested empirically (Abramovaite et al., 2023, p. 1664). Besides, the celerity aspect of deterrence didn't get broad analysis compared to the other two (Nagin, 2013).

The swift intervention of the *Gerebs* is a guarantee for preventing the escalation of conflict. In the Raya Alamata case, for any reconciliation to precede,

the surrender of the suspect to the police is a must. Though in the Raya Alamata case, a case may take months, in the Abala Enderta situation, the maximum time for a decision is one month. The swift actions described such as prompt gatherings, immediate damage assessments, and rapid delivery of compensation illustrate how these institutions prioritize timely intervention to prevent tensions from escalating. By addressing grievances without delay, they create a sense of accountability and satisfaction among the affected parties, reducing the likelihood of retaliation or prolonged conflicts. The agreement between the Enderta and Afar communities to extradite criminals quickly further exemplifies the importance of celerity in conflict prevention. This immediacy contrasts sharply with the often-prolonged processes of formal legal systems, particularly in inter-ethnic conflicts, where procedural complexities can exacerbate tensions. The rapid response not only ensures justice but also strengthens inter-communal trust and cooperation, as seen in the shared commitment to locating fugitives and preventing the loss of property or life. This should not, however, be misconstrued that all cases submitted to the *Gerebs* would be settled within a month. There are situations where the reconciliation process may take more than one month.

Addressing the cause of conflict
Competition for natural resources has been identified as one of the major causes of conflicts in Africa (Fagbadebo, 2023). The adverse effects of conflicts on national security, economic growth, and development have been underscored by scholars (Olanrewaju, 2020). Moreover, competition over natural and other resources undermines governance and hence entrenches conflicts (Fekadu, 2017). However, it is not solely shortages of natural resources that poses challenges; rather, it is the manner in which they are managed and governed that could cause conflicts. The *Abo Gerebs* corroborate this perspective, affirming that natural resources regulation is a necessity particularly grazing land and water resources to prevent conflict. This subtopic explores the specific mechanisms and norms of regulation deemed effective by the *Gerebs* in maintaining resource stability and mitigating conflict risks.

Boundary issues
Border demarcation stands out as the primary cause of conflicts in Ethiopia, often leading to inter-ethnic or inter-communal tensions (Kassie, 2023). Following the adoption of the 1995 Ethiopian federal constitution, Ab'ala became integrated into the Afar regional state, whereas Enderta remained in the Tigray regional state. Nonetheless, the boundaries of the regions are not clearly demarcated (Assefa, 2020). Accordingly, the two neighboring communities reached an agreement acknowledging that there is no strict demarcation between them, except for

designated grazing lands and agricultural areas. The *Gereb* also imposes restrictions on new resettlements and house reconstructions along the border of the two wereda. The rule is 'no border except reserves and crops.'   Afar people go as far as West Tigray and Tigrayans enter as far as the tip of Afar Mile (MoD, 2020). Any claims that attempt to define the border between the two for grazing land and water resources are viewed as inaccurate and potentially inflammatory, capable of inciting conflict. Instead, they have cultivated a culture of cooperation that goes beyond traditional boundaries.

Rule on grazing land

One of the basic tenets of communal consensus between the two communities through the *Gereb* rules is that except for crops (*ziraeti*) and reserved grazing land (*hizaeti*). There is no restriction of movement of herds in between the two. The *Abo Gerebs* mentioned that per the consensus of the community and long stayed norms, the Endertas' can go up to Mile (far from the common borders of the two communities) whereas the Afars can go up to west of Tigray (again far from the common borders) for grazing. Reserved grazing lands are areas specifically designated for livestock grazing, with protective measures in place to ensure sustainable use and prevent overgrazing and land degradation. The establishment of grazing reserves aims to balance the needs of livestock farmers with the preservation of natural resources. Communities may allocate specific grazing areas for different seasons. During the wet season, the highlanders move to the lowland areas for cultivation whereas during autumn the lowlanders move to the highland for grazing. This has further cemented ties between the two people. Similarly, in the dry season, a group of Afar pastoralists take their herds to the highlands mainly for pasture.

Reserved grazing lands are regulated by the rules for reserved grazing land for each kebeles. These include guidelines on the number of animals each member of the community can bring to the reserve, rotational grazing practices, and penalties for violations. Grazing reserve wardens are assigned to oversee and protect grazing reserves to ensure that the land is used sustainably, and that rules and regulations are followed.

Except for such reserved areas, the community is free to use other areas for grazing. The same pattern of rules is followed for water use. The communities rely on natural springs, which are areas where groundwater emerges at the surface, and boreholes and wells drilled by individuals during the rainy season. The *Abo Gerebs* stated that boreholes and wells usually last for a year or until dry season comes. During the dry season, boreholes and wells will be clogged with soil. According to *Gerebs* traditions, at the end of the dry season, they place a staking stick to mark the area for planning to drill a well. The person who drilled the well has priority

right to use it. To avoid possible competition and restriction of grazing lands the *Gereb* also prohibited a new reserved grazing land between the two communities. Except for authorized persons, no person is allowed to carry a gun or similar instruments into reserved grazing land.

Gereb rules and community cooperation during times of drought and hardship
The community has a common saying for times of hardship: 'If the Afar faces hardship from our farming, we face hardship from their huts.'[9] During periods of hardship, particularly droughts, a modus operandi of reciprocal cooperation is observed, wherein the community overseeing the reserved grazing land often extends permission to communities facing hardship. Consequently, the reserved grazing land becomes accessible to the afflicted community. Beyond a communal solution, at an individual level, an institutionalized communal mechanism, known as the *fikur* system, manifests during drought periods, wherein individuals from drought-affected areas temporarily relocate their livestock to the custody of their designated friends[10]. No remuneration is required for this temporary relocation, and the livestock remain under the care of the host community until the rains return. This historical communal arrangement epitomizes a longstanding amicable accord between the two communities.

The rules of the *Gereb* have provided a rule of governing to oversee the communal grazing pastures. According to the respondents, the *Gereb* rules user-created agreements and norms for managing shared resources and claimed to pass down from generation to generation. The *Gerebs* are crucial in reversing the shortage of grazing land by regulating access to the communal grazing land and enhancing controlled use of grass land.

Are the *Gerebs* effective in conflict prevention?
Drawing insights from the minutes of the *Abo Gerebs*, observations made, and interviews conducted with community members, I have been able to ascertain the absence of death due to ethnic conflict within the two communities for several years. The documented minutes comprehensively record all instances of conflict between the two communities. Firstly, conflicts from 2006 to 2020 were mostly related to resources, and there has been a decrease in their frequency. Secondly, contrary to the number of conflicts, it can be observed that the number of conflict-related deaths has reached zero over the past 15 years. This is also well informed from the state institutions that the two communities have been notably harmonious,

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[9] The Tigrinya version of the phrase is 'ተፀገምዎም ካብ ሕሩስ ተፀገሙና ካብ ቆሉሽ' (tetsegimiwom kab hirus tetsegimuna kab tolush).
[10] *Fukur* literally means a loyal friend (Abrha, 2017).

incidents resulting in death have been absent within the locality for a duration exceeding a decade. The third inferences gleaned from the minutes posit that there has been no escalation of inter-ethnic conflicts. The *Abo Gerebs* described that the prohibition of carrying guns and related materials to grazing lands and water sources has curbed the escalation of conflicts. Gradually, both the community and the herders have also developed the understanding that any conflict will be handled according to *Gereb* rules.

A pivotal part of this harmonious relationship involves robust support extended to the *Gerebs*. This support is manifested in various forms, such as police collaboration in apprehending prepetrators, financial backing to cover meal and transportation costs for the *Abo Gerebs* during their monthly meetings. The same narration was revealed from the Ab'ala wereda security office head.

The district leadership actively engages in monthly meetings upon invitation, a notable achievement acknowledged and commended by higher authorities in both regions. The Vice Chairman of the *Gerebs*, Haji Dawud, claimed, 'We facilitated direct connections with neighboring kebeles (tabias) in both regions without waiting for a month. We also help people get to know each other, fostering communication and mutual understanding between the communities.' As a result, he continued, 'We have not had any deaths due to conflicts for a long period of time'. He also added, 'If there are situations of conflict, we deploy ourselves to the scene and engage directly with the individuals suspected of causing the conflict'.

The data in the MoD (2020) revealed that conflicts from 2006 to 2020 were mostly related to resources, but as stated above, their frequency has substantially reduced.

Conclusion

A review of major literature on conflict prevention reveals a lack of consensus on the subject matter. One strand of the debate of confusion revolves around whether conflict prevention should be limited solely to the early and non-escalatory stages of conflict, or it should also encompass the escalation and post-conflict stages. This research found out that local communities have their own concepts of conflict prevention which are broad so that conflict prevention encompasses not only the early and non-escalatory stages of conflict, but it also includes the prevention activities before its escalation but after it emerged escalation and post-conflict stages of conflict. The local conception is not limited to conflict prevention; it extends to the meaning of preventable and non-preventable conflict. Peace connotes inter-community and inter-personal peace whereas conflict is delineated into preventable (*gontsi*) and non-preventable (*gichit*) conflict, but no parallel concept of conflict resolution is found.

The controversy in the literature is not limited to the definition per se but of whether it is possible to measure effectiveness of conflict prevention interventions. Additionally, examining the role of traditional institutions in conflict prevention introduces a third layer of complexity to the discussion. The paper found out that not only is it possible to measure conflict prevention interventions, but *Gereb* traditional institutions also effectively prevent inter-ethnic conflict by establishing rules, norms, and swift intervention mechanisms. The data in this article illustrates that the *Abo Gerebs* have set up a robust system for sharing information and proactively addressing potential conflicts on a seasonal basis. In case of any conflict, swift intervention typically occurs within a month to resolve the conflict, showcasing the efficacy of their approach. The *Gereb* institution employs a community-based early warning system to identify and address potential conflicts before they escalate. This system involves ongoing monitoring of resources, climatic conditions, and social dynamics, with community members regularly reporting potential conflicts. This proactive approach allows the *Gereb* to implement timely interventions, thus preventing conflicts from emerging into violent conflicts. To address the underlying causes of conflicts, the *Gereb* traditional institutions revised the existing rules on grazing land, border issues and water pools. They achieve this through the establishment of codified norms and prompt intervention strategies, effectively precluding conflict escalation.

Consequently, conflicts between individual herders are contained and do not escalate to involve the entire community. Thus, no report of death related to inter-ethnic conflict is recorded in the community. This suggests that the sustainability of peace hinges upon the local community's ownership of the peace process itself, highlighting the efficacy of a bottom-up approach in addressing conflicts across Africa. The national, regional or international frameworks on conflict prevention should consider traditional institutions and need to look into the bottom-up approach of conflict prevention approaches. On the other hand, it demonstrates that traditional institutions are not static; they can adapt to new developments and evolve beyond their time-honored norms. The *Gerebs* accept that their de facto recognition and cooperation from the Government has been essential in the process. For future research, several avenues merit exploration. Examining the scalability of the *Gereb's* practices and conflict prevention to other regions could provide insights into the universal applicability of such indigenous systems. Additionally, examining the interplay between traditional and state institutions from the perspective of conflict prevention demands further research.

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