

Indigenous Values, Beliefs, and Systems for Peacebuilding: The Case of the Jarssaa Gurachaa Inter-Ethnic Indigenous Institution in South-Central Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study explores the role of indigenous values, beliefs, and systems in peacebuilding, focusing on the case of Jarssaa Gurachaa, an inter-ethnic indigenous peacebuilding institution among the Libido-Mareko, Meskan-Gurage, Oromo, and Silte ethnic groups in South-Central Ethiopia. The research employs a qualitative methodology, drawing on focus group discussions, interviews, and observations from multiple woredas in the Oromia and Central Ethiopia Regional States. It explores how the system, rooted in indigenous values and beliefs, such as Seera and Feroo, and ritualistic practices like Gudda, Qaala-Maala, and Hodaa, functions effectively in resolving conflicts and promoting social harmony. Furthermore, the study examines how indigenous values and beliefs in multi-ethnic settings contribute to peacebuilding. The findings reveal that these normative frameworks play a crucial role in sustaining peace by promoting social cohesion and addressing conflicts holistically, considering both immediate disputes and long-term relationships within and between communities. The adaptability of these systems, especially in multi-ethnic settings, ensures the resolution of conflicts without the lingering animosities that modern legal frameworks often fail to address. By focusing on reconciliation, collective well-being, and the preservation of social bonds, the Jarssaa Gurachaa system offers a viable alternative to formal judicial systems. This study also discusses how the values and beliefs within these indigenous mechanisms could inform contemporary peacebuilding strategies in Ethiopia and similar multi-ethnic societies, offering valuable insights into the integration of indigenous knowledge with modern frameworks.

Keywords: Conflict-resolution, indigenous peacebuilding, inter-ethnic harmony, Jarssaa Gurachaa, South-Central Ethiopia

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Introduction

Peacebuilding is widely understood as a multifaceted process aimed at preventing, managing, resolving, and transforming conflicts within society. Approaches to peacebuilding, nevertheless, are far from universal; as Walker (2004) and Avruch and Black (1991) noted, they are formed by cultural worldviews, historical paths, and social constructions. While Western peacebuilding approaches often emphasize state-centered apparatuses, formal structures, and individual rights, indigenous mechanisms tend to embrace holistic, relational, and community-anchored approaches that draw, as Avruch (1998) noted, on long-established values, beliefs, and cultural norms. Distinguishing these epistemological variances is essential for understanding how different communities construct and sustain peace (Munro, 2019; Battiste, 2013).

Ethiopia offers a unique context for observing such disparities. With over eighty ethno-linguistic groups, Ethiopia has historically relied on a variety of indigenous peacebuilding and conflict resolution institutions that function as locally entrenched instruments for governing social interactions and mitigating intra-group and inter-group tensions (Alula & Getachew, 2008). These mechanisms play an essential role in resolving conflicts where formal state structures often have inadequate influence or legitimacy.

One such institution is the *Jarssaa Gurachaa*, an indigenous inter-ethnic peacebuilding system practiced among four ethnic groups in South-Central Ethiopia: the Oromo, Libido-Mareko, Silte, and Meskan-Gurage. Located in a region traditionally marked by different types of conflict, the *Jarssaa Gurachaa* institution provides a culturally grounded system for regulating inter-ethnic interactions, maintaining peaceful coexistence, and averting cycles of retribution and revenge. Yet, despite its age-old importance, this system remains understudied in scholarly literature, mainly in respect to its core values, belief systems, and peacebuilding logic.

The scant scholarly works on *Jarssaa Gurachaa* indicate a wider gap in peacebuilding research. While indigenous mechanisms are recognized as important parts of local governance, their normative and epistemological frameworks, and conflict-transformation practices are rarely documented in detail. Research conducted in such areas tends to simplify indigenous peacebuilding systems as peripheral complements to formal systems, thus undervaluing their internal complexity and inter-ethnic applicability (Adjei, 2014; Richmond, 2010). This gap hinders the ability of scholars and policymakers to incorporate formal and indigenous systems into national peacebuilding agendas.

Against this backdrop, this article explores how the Jarssaa Gurachaa system works as an indigenous inter-ethnic peacebuilding mechanism, with a specific focus on the values, beliefs, and systems that reinforce its success. Based on ethnographically informed qualitative data, the article explores how indigenous norms, such as *Seera*, *Feroo*, *Gudda*, *Hodaa*, and *Qaala-Maala*, help to avert violence, uphold reconciliation, and sustain long-term social cohesion among the four ethnic groups. Accordingly, the study pursues two key objectives: (1) examine the indigenous values, beliefs, and systems embedded in the Jarssaa Gurachaa, and (2) evaluate the implications of these indigenous practices for contemporary peacebuilding efforts.

The significance of this study lies both in its contribution to the academic understanding of indigenous inter-ethnic peacebuilding systems and its practical implications for peacebuilding in Ethiopia and beyond. As global interest in alternative dispute resolution mechanisms grows, understanding the principles and practices of systems like Jarssaa Gurachaa can provide valuable insights into how traditional knowledge can complement modern approaches to conflict resolution (Adjei, 2014). This article, therefore, seeks to bridge the gap between indigenous practices and contemporary peacebuilding frameworks, offering a holistic approach to peacebuilding.

Literature review

Conceptual Framework: Indigenous values

Indigenous values constitute the moral and normative principles that guide behaviour, expectations, and social interactions within a society. These values, which originate from shared historical experience and are communicated through generations, signify, as Avruch (1998) elaborated, what societies, consider socially desirable, ethically right, and morally required. As De Leon (2021) indicated, in various indigenous communities, values comprise main beliefs such as social harmony, responsibility, reciprocity, respect, and the priority of communal welfare over individual preference.

In addition to influencing societal relationships, these values also support wider systems of communal governance and regulation. In the setting of indigenous peacebuilding, they form the moral foundation upon which conflict-resolution procedures are attached. They outline and define the ethical limits of conflict, expectations of proper conduct during disputes, and denote the qualities of a reconciled society. Accordingly, indigenous values are not abstract standards; they are operational norms that guide how societies negotiate restoration, address transgression, and re-establish relations after conflict.

Indigenous beliefs

Accompanying values are indigenous beliefs, which refer to spiritual, cosmological, and metaphysical understandings through which societies interpret human misfortune, actions, harmony, wrongdoing, and reconciliation (Smith, 2018). These beliefs, as Adjei (2014) noted, are entrenched in worldviews that underscore the interconnectedness of divine power, human beings, nature, and ancestors. In various indigenous cosmologies, moral wrongdoing or conflict is considered not simply as a social violation but as a disturbance of cosmic balance. Notions such as *Feroo* and *Tur* among the Oromo, *Libiddo-Mareko*, *Silte*, and *Gurage* traditions demonstrate how indigenous beliefs frame conflict as a spiritual and moral breach necessitating apology, ritual, and cleansing for restoration. In indigenous peacebuilding, belief plays an important role in legitimizing the process. It explains why certain actions are forbidden, why reconciliation is essential, and why some rituals must be executed to restore societal equilibrium (Ottoh, 2022). Without recognizing these cosmological perspectives, it is hard to comprehend the reason and procedures of indigenous peacebuilding mechanisms.

Indigenous systems

Indigenous systems are informal and formal institutions through which the societies operationalize their beliefs and values into concrete mechanisms of conflict management and social governance. These systems include councils of elders, community assemblies, customary laws, oaths, ritual practices, and sanctions (Sifuna, 2020). In Ethiopia, remarkable examples include the *Shemagelle*, *Songo*, *Gadaa* system, the *Ragaa-Magaa* system, and many ethnic-based arrangements (Alula & Getachew, 2008). These systems offer structured frameworks through which social harmony is restored, conflicts are mediated, and compensation is negotiated (Daniel, 2016).

These are not merely indigenous alternatives to the formal state system; they are adaptable and living instruments that reflect deep cultural legitimacy. The authority of elders, shared norms, communal accountability, and rootedness in local knowledge are the main reasons for the effectiveness of indigenous systems. They translate abstract values and beliefs into concrete procedures which guide how to maintain long-term peace, repair relationships, and handle offenses (Assefa et al., 2025).

Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding, in its broadest sense, refers to the processes aimed at preventing, managing, resolving, and transforming conflicts while promoting viable harmony

within communities. Peacebuilding works, mainly the writings of Richmond (2010) and Lederach (1997), differentiate conflict management and resolution from peacebuilding, highlighting lasting relational and structural transformation rather than short-term control of violence. In indigenous contexts, peacebuilding is about maintaining right relationships with oneself, others, and the environment. It encompasses justice, equity, and the well-being of individuals, communities, and the land (Greymorning, 2015; Smith, 2018). Spirituality is central to this process, providing a framework for understanding the root causes of conflict and guiding paths toward resolution; it emphasizes collective decision-making and community participation, ensuring that all voices are heard and involved in peacebuilding.

This participatory approach fosters a sense of ownership, cooperation, and shared responsibility within the community (Alfred, 1999; Greymorning, 2015). Thus, grounded in a holistic worldview, indigenous peacebuilding integrates justice, environmental stewardship, and spiritual practices to promote healing, reconciliation, and sustainable peace. Indigenous peacebuilding is therefore deeply rooted in the interaction of values, beliefs, and systems. This triadic interaction forms the conceptual architecture of indigenous peacebuilding and offers the logical framework for understanding institutions such as the Jarssaa Gurachaa.

Indigenous peacebuilding in cross-cultural scholarship

Cross-cultural peacebuilding works indicate that stark contrasts exist between Western and indigenous epistemologies of conflict, underscoring the need to study indigenous institutions within their own cultural context rather than through external normative frameworks. Researchers such as Huber (1993), Greymorning (2015), and Shook and Kwan (1987) contend that indigenous systems of peacebuilding are grounded in holistic worldviews that emphasize rationality, interconnectedness, and collective responsibility.

In contrast, Western peacebuilding reflects an atomistic paradigm that focuses on individuals as discrete, autonomous entities rather than as interconnected beings (Avruch & Black, 1991). This individualistic approach often prioritizes the needs of individuals over communal or societal needs (Galtung, 1990). Indigenous peacebuilding is deeply embedded in cultural traditions, drawing on ancestral wisdom and knowledge passed down through generations. It employs diverse methodologies such as storytelling, rituals, ceremonies, and communal decision-making to address conflicts and restore balance, prioritizing inclusivity, consensus-building, and the voices of marginalized groups (Greymorning, 2015; Smith, 2018). On the other hand, Western peacebuilding often focuses on resolving conflicts through institutional frameworks, legal

systems, and political negotiations, emphasizing top-down mechanisms to establish stability (Richmond, 2010; Munro, 2019). The Western approach tends to prioritize formal structures and processes over cultural values and community participation, relying heavily on expert-driven interventions.

While indigenous peacebuilding emphasizes community-centric approaches, collective decision-making, and restorative justice- focusing on repairing relationships and rebuilding trust within the community- Western frameworks often concentrate on structural and systemic issues, such as economic development, human rights, and democracy (Thornberry, 2002; Lederach, 1997). The comparison between indigenous and Western peacebuilding approaches highlights both complementarity and divergence. Indigenous methods offer valuable insights into the interconnectedness of peace, land, culture, and spirituality, emphasizing community participation, cultural preservation, and sustainable practices. Conversely, Western approaches contribute expertise, institutional frameworks, and technical skills to conflict resolution processes (Munro, 2019; Smith, 2018).

Interplay of indigenous values, beliefs and systems in peacebuilding

Though values, beliefs, and systems can be defined individually, their analytical power arises when they are understood as a cohesive trio. It is hard to fully grasp the concept of indigenous peacebuilding by examining cosmological logic, normative principles, or institutional structures in isolation. Instead, to form a consistent mechanism for maintaining social harmony and managing conflict, these dimensions function interdependently.

Values create the moral principles that shape societal expectations, guide individual conduct, and create the boundaries of standard behaviour. They define how persons should behave and how societies have to respond to wrongdoing. By entrenching them within cosmological and spiritual frameworks, beliefs provide metaphysical legitimacy to these values. Beliefs explain the consequences of violating values, in social, spiritual, and ancestral terms. They therefore offer incentives for obedience and greatly influence communal attitudes toward reconciliation. Via institutional practices, systems operationalize values and beliefs. Systems interpret cosmological and normative principles into established procedures for oath-taking, negotiation, mediation, community assemblies, and cleansing rituals.

In many indigenous communities, including Ethiopia, this triadic interaction manifests in the way indigenous mechanisms resolve conflict. As Adjei (2014) and Murithi (2008) noted, indigenous peacebuilding succeeds when value systems

offer the ethical foundation, belief systems provide cosmological legitimacy, and institutional systems create practical instruments for action.

Indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms in Ethiopia

As Murithi (2008) noted, indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms are locally organized institutions that function according to the customs and norms of a specific community. Abera (2000) and Dagne and Bapu (2013) contend that indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms have been a cornerstone of maintaining peace and order within various Ethiopian communities for centuries. These systems are often tailored to the specific cultural and social dynamics of the communities they serve, providing an alternative to the formal legal systems introduced in 1960. In Ethiopia, where ethnic diversity is vast and inter-ethnic tensions are common, these indigenous mechanisms play a crucial role in addressing conflicts that might otherwise escalate into violence (Daniel, 2016).

The diversity of Ethiopia's ethnic groups has given rise to a variety of indigenous conflict resolution practices (Ayalew, 2012). According to Daniel and Getu (2019), these mechanisms are deeply rooted in the cultural values and beliefs of the communities, which often prioritize reconciliation and the restoration of social harmony over punitive measures. For instance, the Gadaa system among the Oromo people is not just a method of indigenous governance but also a sophisticated means of conflict resolution that emphasizes dialogue and consensus (Girma, 2009). Similarly, the Shemagelle, Songo, Yejoka, and Ragaa-Magaa indigenous systems used by the Amhara, Sidama, Gurage, and Libiddo-Mareko people are based on the wisdom of elders, who mediate conflicts and ensure that the outcome is acceptable to all parties involved (Daniel, 2016).

These systems contrast sharply with the conventional conflict-resolution narratives and formal legal frameworks imposed by the state, which tend to be more rigid and less attuned to the social intricacies of Ethiopian communities. Formal legal systems often prioritize retributive justice, focusing on punishment rather than reconciliation (Abera, 2000; Dagne and Bapu, 2013). However, as Alula and Getachew (2008) noted, such an approach is seen as alien and potentially disruptive to the social fabric in many Ethiopian communities. As a result, indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms remain highly relevant and widely utilized, even in areas where formal legal institutions are present (Daniel, 2016).

Theoretical framework

Social solidarity

From a sociological perspective, Durkheim's (1912) theory of social solidarity can be applied to explain the cohesive function of the Jarssaa Gurachaa institution. The shared values and beliefs, in Jarsaa Guracha, serve as mechanisms for social integration. This reinforces Durkheim's argument that common beliefs and practices are fundamental to social order and solidarity. In this light, Jarssaa Gurachaa can be seen as a practical manifestation of social solidarity, wherein the observance of customary laws and collective rituals ensures both individual and communal well-being. Alula and Getachew (2008) further support this by noting how indigenous systems create networks of trust and cooperation, essential for effective peacebuilding.

Cultural relativism

Cultural relativism, as theorized by Geertz (1973), stresses that each culture must be understood within its context, without imposing external standards of judgment. The Jarssaa Gurachaa system exemplifies this principle by grounding its peacebuilding methods in the values and beliefs of the four communities. For example, the central role of *Seera*, or customary law, illustrates how indigenous systems maintain peace by prescribing moral behaviour and governing social relations. *Seera* provides a normative framework that transcends ethnic divisions, allowing for shared principles that are crucial for resolving inter-ethnic conflicts. This system's adaptability, as noted by Daniel (2016), demonstrates its enduring relevance, reinforcing the argument that indigenous mechanisms evolve to address contemporary challenges. Rather than being static relics, these mechanisms are dynamic, a testament to their cultural resilience and effectiveness.

Restorative justice theory

Restorative justice theory, which focuses on repairing harm and restoring balance within communities, rather than merely punishing wrongdoers, can help explain the Jarssaa Gurachaa institution. The indigenous belief in *Feroo/Fello/በረኛ*, that wrongful actions against people, animals, or the environment result in negative consequences, parallels the restorative justice framework, wherein the goal is to restore harmony through collective reconciliation. This belief system, deeply ingrained in the communities, serves as both a moral and practical deterrent to conflict, as individuals are acutely aware of the long-term consequences of their actions on future generations. As Osaghae (2000) and other scholars have argued,

the effectiveness of such systems lies in their ability to foster community-wide participation in conflict resolution, ensuring that peacebuilding efforts are inclusive and sustainable.

Method

The study employed a qualitative research methodology mainly for its ability to capture the society's attitudes, beliefs, and interactions within their natural setting, which is vital for understanding multifaceted social phenomena, particularly in peace and conflict studies. An exploratory research design was employed due to the limited available research on this specific indigenous inter-ethnic mechanism. From June 2, 2024, to September 25, 2024, primary data were collected through key informant interviews (KII), focus group discussions (FGD), and observations in the Dugda woreda and Adami Tulu Jido Kombolcha woreda of Oromia Regional State, and the Silte Zone, East Gurage Zone, and Mareko Special woreda of Central Ethiopia Regional State. These areas were purposively selected as they constitute the geographic and cultural spaces where the Jarssaa Gurachaa institution is actively practiced among the four communities.

The study population consisted of individuals who are frequently involved in the Jarssaa Gurachaa peacebuilding process, including institution leaders, government officials, local elders, and clan leaders. To select the participants, the study employed purposive and snowball sampling, based on two criteria: demonstrated involvement in local peacebuilding, and recognized cultural authority. KIIs were conducted using a semi-structured guide with 14 knowledgeable elders and government officials, offering deeper insights into the institutional procedures, ritual practices, values, beliefs, and perceived effectiveness.

Three focus group discussions, consisting of 7-9 members each, were conducted, at Batu City and Koshe Town, with Jarssaa Gurachaa elders, government officials, local elders, and clan leaders. FGDs generated collective reflections on inter-group relations and reconciliation norms. Furthermore, non-participant observations of community gatherings, peacebuilding and conflict-resolution rituals, with sessions lasting 1-4 hours, provided a first-hand understanding of the system and the community. Field notes documented gestures, procedures, patterns of social interaction, and symbols. Secondary data were collected through a literature review, which served to contextualize the findings and provide a theoretical framework for the analysis.

The researcher analyzed and interpreted the data gathered through interviews, FGD, and observation thematically. The data gathered were

systematically coded to categorize recurrent narratives and perspectives. Furthermore, this article triangulated the primary data with secondary data to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. All research ethics practices were maintained, including a briefing on the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and confidentiality of participant information. Participants named in this article have provided their consent.

Descriptions of the study area

The four communities that established Jarssaa Gurachaa are located in three Zonal Administrations and one Special Woreda across the Oromia and Central Ethiopia Regional States. The Libiddo-Mareko, Oromo, Siltie, and Meskan-Gurage ethnic groups share administrative borders and are interconnected through their cultural and historical ties, religion, and shared moral values.²

The projection by the Central Statistical Agency (2024) estimates a total population of 1,869,814 in these areas, with 920,674 men and 949,140 women. The populations in this study area are from the two major language families: Cushitic and Semitic. The Libiddo-Mareko and Oromo people speak Cushitic languages. Specifically, the Oromo speak Afaan Oromo; while the Libiddo-Mareko speaks Libitiso. Both languages are written in Latin script. The Meskan-Gurage and Siltie communities, on the other hand, speak Meskanigna and Siltigna respectively, which are categorized under the Semitic language family. These languages use the Ethiopic script.

The social organization of these four communities is profoundly entrenched in a complex clan system, which plays a vital role in indigenous peacebuilding. Each ethnic group is composed of numerous clans and sub-clans, each with a detailed role in preserving social order and resolving and settling conflicts. The clans trace their descent patrilineal, frequently evoking their lineage up to seven or nine generations. Even though drawing lineage through the maternal line is in general unsupported, some informal matrilineal practices are observed among these groups.

Religiously, Islam is the prominent faith among the four communities. Historical archives point out that Islam has been present in this area ever since the

²The indigenous peacebuilding and conflict-resolution systems of these ethnic groups are distinct and deeply entrenched in their social fabric. The Gadaa indigenous system of the Oromo, the Raaga-Maaga indigenous system of the Libido-Mareko and Silte, and the Feragezegna indigenous system of the Meskan-Gurage are the principal frameworks for resolving conflict in the study area.

9th century, with the establishment of ancient Islamic states such as the Makhzumite Shawan dynasty. Christianity also has a significant presence in the area. In addition, Waaqefannaa, the indigenous Oromo religion, has a small number of followers in the study area.

Findings

The Jarssaa Gurachaa institution

Jarssaa Gurachaa³ is an indigenous peacebuilding system established by four ethnic groups: the Oromo, Libido-Mareko, Siltie, and Meskan Gurage, located in South-Central Ethiopia. This indigenous peacebuilding system primarily operates in three zones and one special woreda within the Oromia and Central Ethiopia regions. In the Oromia region, Jarssaa Gurachaa serves the communities of East Shewa Zone, specifically in the Dugda woreda and Adami Tulu Jido Kombolcha Woreda, where the three Oromo clans Arsi Oromo, Gona Oromo, and Sodo Oromo clans⁴ are the founders of the Jarssaa Gurachaa institution. In the Central Ethiopia region, the Silte ethnic group in the Silte Zone, the Meskan-Gurage ethnic group in the East Gurage Zone, and the Libido-Mareko ethnic group in the Mareko Special woreda are collectively the founding peoples of the Jarssaa Gurachaa institution.

The relationship among these ethnic groups has made up a history of conflict, accommodation, and integration. They designed the Gurraacha indigenous institution to regulate their interaction and ensure peace and harmony. This institution has time-tested qualities in transforming conflicts in the region and realizing peaceful coexistence. According to elders, the Jarssaa Gurachaa system is a complex institution that integrates the values, beliefs, and social norms of these communities, providing a culturally appropriate framework for peacebuilding.

Regarding the origin of Jarssaa Gurachaa, there are differing perspectives among local elders on the precise timeframe of its establishment. Some informants assert that Jarssaa Gurachaa was founded long before Emperor Menelik and his army arrived in the region, in the last decade of the 19th century. In contrast, others believe that it was established during the early years of modern Ethiopia's formation, following the region's subjugation by Emperor Menelik.

³This indigenous institution is known as *Jarssaa Gurachaa* by the Oromo, *Pጥቂር ሽማግሌ* by the Silte and Meskan-Gurage, and *Lidaara* by the Libiddo-Mareko.

⁴Though they are part of the Oromo ethnic group, in the indigenous system they are considered as independent ethnic groups (ጥሑረሰብ).

Locally, the term “*Gurraacha/Hemichii/ ጥቁር*” (black) conveys deep meanings of reverence and fear. Among the four ethnic groups, “*Gurraacha/Hemichii/ ጥቁር*” signifies something sacred, pure, great, enigmatic, and terrifying. Especially for the Libiddo-Mareko and Oromo communities, it symbolizes the maker of all things, a godly entity who is considered omnipotent.⁵

Given these deep-rooted views and perceptions, it is customary for local people to treat grave issues as bound by the notion of “*Gurraacha/ Hemichii/ ጥቁር*”. The four ethnic groups in the study area have a belief that binding a conflict, challenge or problem to “*Gurraacha/ Hemichii/ ጥቁር*” is a requisite step to resolve the difficulty. Thus, when a serious conflict occurs, the affected actors or communities often implement rituals⁶ that bind the conflicting parties to “*ጥቁር/ Hemichii/ Gurraacha*” to ensure that this process will fortify familial ties, avert the conflict from being passed down to coming generations, and eventually guarantee a durable resolution. Hence, according to elders, the *Gurraacha* institution was named to designate the power of this institution in conflict resolution and peacebuilding among the four ethnic groups of South-Central Ethiopia.

Values, beliefs, and systems associated with the Jarssaa Gurachaa

Focus group discussants argue that the beliefs, values, and principles within the four communities, which the indigenous peacebuilding system employs during peacebuilding, take credit for the system’s success in maintaining the peace and harmony of society. As Geertz (1973) argued, cultural relativism reveals that each community’s culture, values, and practices should be understood in their setting and context rather than judged against external standards. The *Jarssaa Gurachaa* is a primary example of cultural relativism in practice, as it stresses the significance of local values and beliefs in maintaining societal harmony. This section discusses

⁵The Libiddo-Mareko ethnic group refers to this divinity as “*Hemichii Waha*” (the Black God) which, for them, personifies the conception of a celestial God similar to the Abrahamic religions'. Similarly, among the Oromo ethnic groups in the study area, this divine entity is referred to as “*Waqaa Gurachaa*” (the Black God), which correspondingly characterizes the omniscient and all-creating divine being.

⁶The Oromo community, after a serious conflict resolution process through indigenous mechanisms, conducts a final ritual by sacrificing a black cow. This act is believed to signify the end of the conflict and restore peace and friendship. By the same token, members of the Libiddo-Mareko, Meskan, and Silte communities also perform similar rituals by sacrificing a black goat.

the beliefs, values, and systems of the Jarssaa Gurachaa indigenous mechanism involved in the study area.

Seera

The Libido-Mareko, Meskan-Gurage, Oromo, and Silte, community members have developed a set of customary laws called Seera that prescribes and proscribes specific actions to keep peace and order in the study area. This Seera governs all the behavior of any member of the four communities and confines and controls all possible actions of the group at any level or individual. The local term “Seera” literally translates as “customary law,” which covers moral ideas about bad and good behaviour and actions, and explicit instructions. The four communities' Seera covers all aspects of social relations, including family administration, conflict resolution, marriage, animal husbandry, speaking style, dressing, and religious practices.

Even though the four ethnic groups in the study area have their own distinctive indigenous beliefs, customs, and values, their Seera are almost similar: they have their own Seera with merely insignificant differences. According to Jarssaa Gurachaa elders, the Seera which is used by the four communities to uphold peace, prevent and resolve conflicts, and manage community relationships is greatly influenced by the Gadaa system of Oromo, the Raagaa-Maagaa system of Libido-Mareko and Silte, and the *Feragezegna* system of Meskan-Gurage. Likewise, the Seera of the four communities is profoundly influenced by the local Islamic faith, which is the major religion in the study area.

Focus group discussants and informants from all four ethnic groups argue that these communities have a belief that abiding by Seera brings peace, stability, and prosperity to the community. Elders also say that Seera guarantees healthy livestock, adequate rainfall, lush pastures, bountiful harvests, and positive relations between Waqaa (the creator), people, and the natural world. In contrast, those who do not respect the Seera and act contrary to it may bring difficulties and problems to their families, themselves, their crops, and their livestock. Local elders advise that failing to follow these cultural practices can result in severe problems, as it is believed to disturb the ontological balance between humans, Waqaa, and nature.

Among the four communities, Seera serves to reinforce social solidarity within the communities. As Durkheim (1912) argued in his theory of social solidarity, the beliefs, norms, and values of a community help to maintain social order and cohesion. Thus, the Seera, which establishes norms for behaviour, plays an important role in fostering a sense of unity and collective identity among the members of the different ethnic groups. Seera also functions to reinforce trust and

cooperation within and among these communities, which is a form of social capital. As Alula and Getachew (2008) noted, shared norms and values create networks of trust vital for effective peacebuilding. The obedience to Seera and the respect for indigenous practices reinforce the social capital that sustains community resilience and cohesion.

Feroo / Fello / ቦረኛ

The notion of *Feroo / Fello / ቦረኛ* among the Libiddo-Mareko, Meskan-Gurage, Oromo, and Silte, ethnic groups reflect the deep interconnection between human actions and the natural world. *Feroo/Fello/ቦረኛ* akin to the idea of "bad karma," symbolizes the belief that wrong conduct toward fellow humans, animals, plants, and nature results in undesirable consequences. Furthermore, their connections with each other and with outsiders are understood as bases of either disaster or harmony. Elders in these ethnic groups state that *Feroo/Fello/ቦረኛ* is the result of unsettled offenses or immoral acts committed by individuals and/or their ancestors, leading to many forms of misery and sorrow such as anxiety, disease, poverty, and the absence of children or livestock.

Restorative justice theory, which stresses the restoration of balance and harmony via reconciliation, strictly aligns with the concept of *Feroo/Fello/ቦረኛ*. Furthermore, the conviction that *Feroo/Fello/ቦረኛ* is not a matter of coincidence; it is assumed to be the product of one's own or one's ancestors' immoral actions. In addition, this phenomenon is not limited to the lifetime of an individual but can persist across generations, possibly affecting descendants for up to seven generations.

Among the four ethnic groups, every creature is valued within the natural process. In these communities, the needless killing of animals, are believed to generate *Feroo/Fello/ቦረኛ* and are strictly prohibited. Such engagements are considered violations of peace and as sources of conflict (mainly criminal matters). Furthermore, when bloody conflicts, unnatural events, natural disasters, or other crises arise, the community frequently attributes these issues to *Feroo/Fello/ቦረኛ* or wrongdoing within the community. The process of addressing *Feroo/Fello/ቦረኛ* via indigenous practices reflects restorative justice doctrines, focusing on repairing relations and communal healing.

Tur (ጥር)

Tur / ጥር is a notion that has the opposite meaning of Feroo/Fello/በርኙ. Tur/ጥር accurately means “Good Karma,” but this Good Karma is not something attained by fortune or luck. Rather, Tur/ጥር is gained on the foundation of an individual’s and their ancestors’ genuine, moral, and good acts. Like Feroo/Fello/በርኙ, Tur/ጥር is not limited to the life period of an individual; but exceeds the life span of a person with the potential of manifesting the spirit of Tur/ጥር in the descendants.

Tur/ጥር and Feroo/Fello/በርኙ which states: “Do not do to others what you would not like yourself”. Hence, considerations of Feroo/Fello/በርኙ and Tur/ጥር in the peacebuilding and conflict-resolution processes are indigenous values that support the indigenous method of delivering “just” verdicts.

Gudda

Gudda is an Afaan Oromo word meaning a covenant or contract established concerning between two conflicting parties and their families to foster friendship, support, and trust. Among the four communities, this practice is vital for resolving conflicts and building sustainable peace. According to the Jarssaa Gurachaa elders, Gudda is usually executed at the end of a conflict resolution process to guarantee lasting harmony and friendship among the involved parties.

Informants in the Jarssaa Gurachaa indigenous peacebuilding institution argue that Gudda is often suggested by elders or concerned parties when substantial harm has occurred due to the conflict or when there is a risk of persistent conflict. The settlement of the conflict through Gudda is seen as important for averting future disputes and preserving peace within the community.

Even though the breach of Gudda is punishable by the community and Jarssaa Gurachaa, its implementation is more of a moral duty than a legal one. As the elders argued, people follow the principle of Gudda not out of fear of legal consequences but because of the fear of Feroo/Seffu/በርኙ. Furthermore, Gudda is entered through a pledge in the name of Waqaa (God) and is strengthened by various ritual activities, making any breach a serious offense believed to bring divine retribution. Consequently, Gudda is highly respected and feared among the local people, binding those who enter it as lifelong friends and family, referred to as “*የጥር ዘመድ*” (*Ye Gudda Zemed*).

This practice aligns with conflict resolution and peacebuilding theories by ensuring long-term harmony and preventing future conflicts. The community’s

commitment to Gudda highlights the importance of moral and spiritual dimensions in their peacebuilding and conflict resolution process. Examples of Gudda in practice include different scenarios. When a conflict results in death, the Oromo tradition involves slaughtering a black cow (Gurraacha) to conclude the Gudda process, while the Libido-Mareko, Silte, and Meskan Gurage communities use a black goat (Hemechaaa). The use of a black animal, symbolizing fear, adds gravity and respect to the reconciliation. For inter-ethnic conflicts, soil is used as a neutral medium for the Gudda process, symbolizing a shared origin, sustenance, and final resting place, making it a deeply respected element.

Hodaa/ልጦኛ

Hodaa/ልጦኛ, meaning invocation, is a critical practice within the Jarssaa Gurachaa indigenous peacebuilding and conflict-resolution institution. It is employed when one of the conflicting parties refuses to resolve a conflict through Jarssaa Gurachaa. The Hodaa/ልጦኛ system plays a vital role in preventing and managing conflicts, ensuring they do not escalate and are addressed where they occur. By invoking Hodaa/ልጦኛ, the elders initiate the conflict resolution process, transforming the attitudes and behaviors of the conflicting parties and laying the groundwork for effective resolution.

The type and magnitude of Hodaa/ልጦኛ depend on the severity of the injury and the willingness of the accused. In cases of homicide, Hodaa/ልጦኛ begins even before the burial ceremony. The elders of Jarssaa Gurachaa, who serve as information providers, help resolve conflicts involving death and significant damage⁷ based on the customary laws of the four ethnic groups and the original pact of Jarssaa Gurachaa. If the bereaved family refuses the elders' request for resolution, the elders take several steps. First, they send a delegation from the four communities to the aggrieved party, urging them to accept the mediation of Jarssaa Gurachaa and resolve the conflict according to indigenous customs and the local Seera. The delegation, composed of respected elders, pleads with the family to accept mediation, emphasizing the broader implications for the community and its relations with neighbours.

If the family agrees, the indigenous conflict resolution process begins. However, if the family continues to refuse, the elders persist in their efforts, employing different approaches to convince them. Should the family remain adamant, the elders report back to the Jarssaa Gurachaa council, which may then decide to socially ostracize the dissenting family and clan, isolating them from the community and its cultural framework.

The decision of the Jarssaa Gurachaa elders imposes a heavy social burden on those who refuse mediation. This social ostracization typically leads the dissenting individual or family to reconsider their stance, recognizing the negative social consequences of their refusal. While the conflicting party retains the right to take their case to formal court, any attempts at reprisal are countered by the ethnic group's collective responsibility to protect the plaintiff's property and family.

Hodaa/ልመና is highly feared among the four ethnic groups because it is believed to bring Feroo/Fello/በርኾ to the family and cause conflict with ancestral spirits, potentially leading to disasters affecting the land's fertility, livestock, and crops. This fear of invoking ancestral wrath ensures that no one willingly undergoes Hodaa/ልመና.

Qaala-Maala (ቃለ-መሃለ)

Qaala-Maala (ቃለ-መሃለ), meaning swearing, is another value and belief in peacebuilding and conflict resolution practice within the Jarssaa Gurachaa institution. This belief is used when disputants deny the facts, lack witnesses, or even after evidence has been presented. Qaala-Maala (ቃለ-መሃለ) is typically avoided due to the severe consequences of invoking a false oath, which are deeply feared among the four ethnic groups involved.

In the conflict resolution process, Qaala-Maala (ቃለ-መሃለ) may be invoked by either the prosecutor or the witness, although sometimes the accuser also takes the oath. The indigenous values of these ethnic groups discourage taking Qaala-Maala (ቃለ-መሃለ) lightly, as its consequences are believed to be dire. Therefore, individuals only agree to take Qaala-Maala (ቃለ-መሃለ) when they are certain of their position. Qaala-Maala involves various ritual activities and is an intimidating process, making it a powerful tool for revealing the truth.

The party opting for Qaala-Maala (ቃለ-መሃለ) may swear in different ways depending on the conflict's nature and complexity. However, the accuser usually has the right to choose the type of Qaala-Maala (ቃለ-መሃለ), as it is believed to facilitate an easier and more acceptable decision. If the prosecutor denies the claim and takes Qaala-Maala (ቃለ-መሃለ) the conflict resolution process halts, and the elders advise both parties to refrain from harming each other or speaking ill of one another, while they wait for the consequences of the oath to unfold.

Women play a significant role in the Qaala-Maala (ቃለ-መሃለ) ceremony, as a husband cannot take the oath without the presence and consent of his wife and children. The wife's consent is crucial, as she is believed to bear the effects of the

oath's consequences. If the wife refuses to consent, the oath does not proceed, as her refusal is taken as evidence against her husband. This collective involvement of the suspect's family in the Qaala-Maala (ቃለ-መገናኛ) process ensures that the truth is revealed, emphasizing the indigenous system's commitment to uncovering the truth through communal effort.

Application of key principles into peacebuilding

The Jarssaa Gurachaa indigenous inter-ethnic peacebuilding institution exemplifies the profound impact of indigenous mechanisms in fostering community peace and harmony. The core principles of Seera, Feroo/Fello/በርኩሽ, Tur/ጥር, Gudda, Hodaa, and Qaala-Maala form a framework that integrates moral conduct, communal responsibilities, and spiritual beliefs to address and resolve conflicts effectively.

The practical implications of these values extend beyond theoretical understanding, offering guidelines for behaviour and grievance resolution. Seera, in particular, provides a structured approach to conflict prevention and resolution by outlining acceptable behaviours and methods for addressing disputes. This culturally relevant framework underscores the importance of local norms and practices in crafting effective solutions tailored to specific community contexts. The acceptance and respect for Seera enhance the legitimacy of the resolution process and encourage adherence to agreed outcomes.

The concept of Feroo/Fello/በርኩሽ serves as a significant motivator by highlighting the impact of unresolved wrongdoings on future generations. This value reinforces the interconnectedness of individual actions and community well-being, emphasizing the necessity of ethical behaviour and accountability for sustained peace. The concept encourages adherence to conflict resolution processes and deters actions that might lead to future disputes, thereby preventing conflicts from escalating.

The principle of Tur/ጥር further emphasizes that ethical behaviour promotes prosperity and peace. It motivates individuals and leaders to act justly and uphold peace, fostering trust and cooperation essential for effective peacebuilding. Tur/ጥር illustrates the promise of future prosperity and well-being that can drive engagement in and support for peacebuilding efforts. It creates a culture of integrity and mutual respect that underpins long-term peace.

Gudda ensures that disputes are resolved with a binding commitment to mutual support and harmony, preventing future conflicts and fostering enduring

relationships between previously antagonistic parties. It demonstrates the role of formal agreements in stabilizing peace and ensuring that resolutions are upheld over time. Gudda provides a tangible mechanism for reinforcing agreements and maintaining peace by establishing clear expectations and obligations.

Hodaa highlights the role of community enforcement in upholding peace, serving as a last resort to encourage mediation and dispute resolution. It helps manage conflicts before they escalate, demonstrating how community norms and pressure can effectively support peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts. Hodaa mobilizes community support and enforces adherence to resolutions, showing the effectiveness of communal intervention in managing disputes.

Qaala-Maala offers a high-stake method for establishing truth and accountability, deterring dishonesty, and ensuring that conflict resolutions are based on accurate and sincere claims. It underscores the importance of rituals and oaths in validating conflict resolutions and enhancing the integrity of the process. Qaala-Maala serves as a deterrent against manipulative behavior, ensuring accountability for statements and actions.

Integrating these indigenous values into contemporary peacebuilding and conflict-resolution frameworks provides valuable lessons for global contexts. Emphasizing communal involvement and cultural respect can enhance the effectiveness of peace initiatives by ensuring cultural sensitivity and contextual relevance. The adaptability and moral grounding of these indigenous practices offer a model for addressing conflicts in a manner that respects local traditions and supports long-term resolution. The principles and practices of the Jarssaa Gurachaa indigenous peacebuilding institution demonstrate the effectiveness of culturally grounded approaches in maintaining harmony and addressing disputes. Their integration with contemporary methods can offer insightful perspectives for modern conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts.

Conclusion

The Jarssaa Gurachaa institution exemplifies the power of indigenous peacebuilding mechanisms in resolving conflicts and fostering social harmony. Its success in Ethiopia highlights the importance of cultural embeddedness, adaptability, and mediation in achieving sustainable peace. However, the challenges of integrating indigenous systems with formal state structures and

ensuring inclusivity must be addressed to maximize the potential of such mechanisms. The broader implications of this case study suggest that peacebuilding efforts in multicultural societies should prioritize cultural sensitivity, local ownership, and the development of hybrid governance models that leverage the strengths of both indigenous and formal systems.

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