

# *TOLFENA CHAFFEE CHANICHO AS AN INDIGENOUS CONFLICT RESOLUTION METHOD: EVIDENCES FROM OROMO OF DIBATE DISTRICT, BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ REGIONAL STATE OF ETHIOPIA*

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Ethiopia is an age-old state and home to various ethnic groups This has made Ethiopia to be a country that encompasses diverse cultures. The ethnic groups which number about 80 have unique cultures, languages, religious values and life styles enriched over time. When conflict arises among the individuals or communities, they have their own indigenous conflict resolutions mechanisms; among this Oromo of Dibate District have their own conflict resolution methods.*

*The main objective of this study is to explore the roles of Tolfena Chaffee Chanicho institution in conflict resolution in the Dibate District. To conduct this research both primary and secondary sources were used. Among the primary sources' key informant interview and focus group discussions were used, and books, articles, journals and presenting papers were used as secondary sources.*

*The findings of the research show that the most common causes of conflicts in Dibate District are homicide, theft, robbery, rape, abduction, competition for grazing and farming lands, water, and hunting grounds. The conflicts may be intra personal or tribal. So, to handle such conflict the Tolfena Chaffee Chanicho has greater acceptance by the Oromo of Dibate District community as institution. The council of elders or selgie has got high respect and acceptance because of their fair justice. The decisions made by the selgie are wisely and meticulously.*

*Key Words: Tolfena Chaffee Chanicho, Conflict, Indigenous Conflict Resolution, Dibate District.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Conflict is one of the social events of human being that are inevitable at all but could be managed or resolved

through various mechanisms (Jemila, 2014:4). This is an indicative that, in any social structure, conflicts are arisen over different opportunities for an adequate reward. However, for any conflict that happens, we have

resolution methods. Conflict resolution methods may include negotiation, mediation, arbitration and reconciliation (Gebreselassie, 2011). In-depth understanding of the conflicts, indigenous conflicts resolution and management mechanisms, and designing holistic strategies and approaches for addressing the conflicts are very crucial (Mohammed, Habtamu & Ahmed, 2017).

In Africa, many customary conflict resolution mechanisms have been developed and employed by the society since ancient times (Gonfa, 2014). But the pattern and phases of conflict vary from community to community. In traditional African societies the understanding of conflict and its corruption was anchored on the disaffection between the humans and the supernatural. Thus, unless an ontological balance is maintained between the two parties, peace conflagration remained uncontrollable. From this point, it is important to stress that conflict, from whatever perspective, is inevitable (Olaoba, 2010).

Conflict is an inevitable phenomenon in human interactions. People experience conflict in their day-to-day actual life. Social, economic, religious and political issues are agreed to be at the heart of the source of human conflict. That is, differences in interest on these issues can cause conflict of various natures. Different society can also experience different nature of conflict depending on their socio-economic and cultural context (Esayas, 2015). In this respect, conflict had been prevalent in African society and had often had its origin in many aspects of their cultural life. It is obvious that conflict is a natural phenomenon in human society except that the approach to its perceptiveness, nature and management varied from society to society (Olaoba, 2010).

Conflict is as natural as the concept of peace contrary to the global or universal conception. Africans have particular ways of conceptualizing conflict. Olaoba (2010) also asserted that the sources or origin of conflict in traditional Africa societies are associated with their cultural life or heritages. Thus, Africans conceptualizes conflict as a natural phenomenon and are socially inevitable (Ajayi and Buhari, 2014). The same is

true among the Dibe of Ethiopia where this article has given due emphasis. In cognize of this, it is essential to explore indigenous conflict resolution mechanism in national context with a particular emphasis of the Dibe of Oromo people in which conflict is rampant and its resolution method is unique.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Indigenous conflict resolution and management are proven as less complex and time saving, and participating parties in conflict to solve their own problems and handle their affairs in a relatively more acceptable to them (Mohammed, Habtamu & Ahmed, 2017). Like other traditional African countries (Eskedar, 2017), different ethnic groups in Ethiopia have developed and practiced their own indigenous institutions and systems of conflict resolution (Daniel, 2016; Eskedar, 2017). Among the different ethnic groups of Ethiopia, the Oromo, as the major ethnic group in the country, with large number of population size and settlement area, hold variety of traditional knowledge and culture (Eskedar, 2017). Of the indigenous knowledge and traditions, the phenomenon and practices of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms is the one that studied by different scholars. For instance, Dejene (2002), Desalegn, Babel, Gupta & Seleshi (2005), Yonas (2005), Gemechisa (2014), Gonfa (2014), Jemila (2014) and Endalcachew, Gashaw & Zelalem (2015), Zelalem & Endalcachew (2015), Gumi (2016) and Shambel (2017) were attempted to explore the various aspects of indigenous conflict resolution system of Oromo who settled in Oromo Regional State. These previously conducted studies covered the mentioned area, but they provide very little evidences about the *Tolfana Chaffee Chanicho* conflict resolution system of Oromo who live in Dibe district of Benishangul-Gumuz region. Thus, most of the researches focus on the different section of Oromo people traditional method of conflict resolution, but the Dibe of Oromo customarily conflict resolution system has not been still studied in detail even though *Tolfana*

*Chaffee Chanicho* indigenous conflict resolution system is still functioning in the lives of the local people.

Oromo has rich indigenous conflict resolution institutions and system of justice administration which is crucial to maintain peace and order in the society (Gumi, 2016). *Tolfana Chaffee Chanicho* is one of the indigenous conflict resolution institutions widely practiced by the Oromo since the imperial regime in Dibate district, but its features, process and mode of conflict resolution has long been neglected in the literatures. Despite indigenous institutions, methods of conflict resolution have paramount significances in keeping social harmony and peace in society's ways of life (Shambel, 2017). The value and contribution of *Tolfana Chaffee Chanicho* indigenous conflict resolution method to peace and order has been underestimated due absence of studies carried out before. Therefore, this study explores *Tolfana Chaffee Chanicho* as an indigenous system of conflict resolution mechanism of Debate district.

### THE RESEARCH SITE

Dibate Woreda is bounded in the East by Guangua Woreda of Awi zone, in the West by Bullen Woreda, in the North by Mandura Woreda and in the South by Yaso Woreda of Kamashi Zone. The Woreda was far from Addis Abeba in 547 km, the distance from the capital of the regional state Asosa was 436 km and far distance from the capital zone of Gilgele-Ballas in 58 km. The total area of the Woreda is 368,289 hectares (Benishangul-Gumuz National Regional State, 2005). Most of the Woreda's climate is *Kola*/hot which has 29-32°C. Originally, Dibate and Mandura were sub-units of Guangua Woreda, which was part of Metekelawraja; in the 1960 these two sub-units were split off to form separate Woredas in order to strengthen government control over the local Gumuz people. Later the remaining parts of Guangua was transferred to Amhara when that region was organized in 1992. According to the informants, the name of the woreda Dibate comes from the Gumuz ethnic leader Dabaata. According to the 2007 national Census reported

in Dibate District, there were different ethnic groups found together; these are Amhara (26.3%), Agawu (2%), Gumuz (30%), Shinasha (16%) and Oromo (24%) live together. Concerning the District, the total population were 54,180 in which 27,112 were Male and 27,068 were Female. Of the total population urban dwellers were 4592 in which 2196 Male and 2396 were Female. The rural dwellers were 49,588 of which 24,916 were Male and 24,672 were Female. The majority of the inhabitants practiced Ethiopian Orthodox Church (45.84%), traditional believers (18.88%), Muslim (18.76%) and Protestants (15.47%) (Central Statistical Authority, 2012).

### RESEARCH METHODS

*Qualitative approach is crucial to examine indigenous conflict resolution as the method enables to have the critical and deeper understanding of the social phenomenon that is often cared out in a natural context. The approach also helps to dig the deep knowledge and skills used by indigenous conflict resolution institution (Daniel, 2016).*

*Validity of qualitative research does not transmit on tests for reliability and credibility that external to data collection and analysis. Instead, the strength personal respondent-researcher relationship is central to any measure of authenticity of data to the respondents' knowledge (Kathleen, 1992).*

Based on this premise qualitative approach is used in this study to explore *Tolfana Chaffee Chanicho* as an indigenous conflict resolution mechanism. Among the different part of qualitative research, ethnographic design has been applied as a method of inquiry. Ethnographic design is flexible and typically evolves contextually in response to the lived realities encountered in the field setting (Creswell, 2003).

Purposive sampling technique has been used to recruit participants who have experience and knowledge about research problem. *Selgie*/leaders, *Jarsota*/representatives of the community, defendants and plaintiffs were

included in the study. The above participants do have relationship, socially accepted, knowledge and experience and willingness to give information about the *Tolfena* institution, but females and youngsters were not selected as mediators. A total of Twenty-Eight participants were participated in the interviews and group discussions. Out of the Twenty-Eight informants, nine were participated in the interview while the rest nineteen were took part in the discussions. The required data for the research has been collected through a mixture of both primary and secondary source. The primary data were in Afan Oromo and then translated to English language. The researcher critically reviewed different books, Journal articles, internet website related to traditional Conflict Resolution Mechanism. The primary sources include, key informant interview (Nine representatives of the *Selige*), focus group discussions (three discussions and participant observation (ritual, attendance, praying, service to participants) (conversation, methods used, ways of decision, closing ceremony)

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researcher needs to consider ethical standard of the host community on which the research was conducted. Therefore, I considered the social and cultural norms of the host community on whom the research was carried out. The Zone, District and *kebele* governing bodies were contacted and permission was obtained from them. The objective and purpose of the research was clearly communicated to participants.

While writing the report, I was refrained from using unnecessary terminologies that may disappoint the participant of the study and I tried to avoid my personal biases. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, and therefore it was impossible to know who said what. The interest of the participants was given due place in the process.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Tolfana Chaffee

According to my key informants the term *Tolfana* is *Ormipha*/ Oromo Language in origin which literally means goodness, acting in a way acceptable. This is to notify that the *Tolfana* does all the good and acceptable. Whereas Chaffee refers to a green grass area that cover the land and which is very attractive one. According to oral informants the *Tolfana Chaffee* was instituted during the early days of the Imperial regime. At that time the area was not administrated by local authorities but rather by a *gult*/local governor who came from far of distances. This was resented by the local people. Hence, tribal leaders were secretly gathered and made an oath of premise. Finally, they went to the nearby administrator at *Sembosire*, a village which is found in district, and submitted their application to govern themselves by their own instead of representation by a *gult* governor. Their application was accepted by the governor and the *Tolfana* was instituted. This time onwards the *Tolfana Chaffee* became a place annually attended with warm cultural ceremony in commemoration of their success. (Dibate District communication office bulletin, 2010).

According to the informants, at the beginning the practice of Tolfena was started in a place called *Gafare* under the leader of Mr. Hafa Bidiqa. Later the place of institution transferred to a place *Tullu Dimitu* Under the organizer of Mr. Wiritu Tufa. But at the present the center of practicing the activities of the institution was at a place called *Chancho Kebele* between two streams where the land was covered by green grass and attractive area. Its full name is called *Tolfana Chaffee Chanicho* representing the symbol of *Tolfena*, the institution, Chaffe, a green grass and Chancho, the name of a place *kebele* near *Galessa*. Not only annual ceremonies but also assemblies by the *Selgie* to resolve conflict was often practiced. During the Darg regime the *Tolfana Chaffee* institution and its ceremonial activities were banned until it was reactivated again in 2015 (Ayalew, 2010). The individuals who made the *Tolfana* and engaged in the traditional conflict resolution are called the *Selgies*, which were representative of clan (Assefa, 2010).

**2. Structures of Tolfana**

Since time immemorial people were neither free from nor incapable of finding solutions to their conflicts. Even before the formal institutionalization of the *Tolfana Chaffee*, the people used to solve their conflicts by traditional means. The establishment of the *Tolfana* was based on Oromo clan representations that were called *Selgies*. *Selgies* are traditional Judges who seat on traditional courts to make Justice. They meet four times a year. (Informants, Diguma, Takele & Akalu).

Nowadays, the place where the *Selgie* assembly is made to make justice conducted on *Chaffee Chanicho*. Membership of the *Selgie* has no any unique qualification. Those who are descendants of the clan leaders succeed in generations being head. Hence, the system by which clan leadership is guaranteed work for entitlement of membership in the *Selgie*. The *Selgie* serve for life and could not be eliminated as long as they are head of their clan unless they request for retirement. (Gonfa, 2014).

The *Selgie* are usually divided in to four or more groups during Justice Provision. In addition to the *Selgie* there are other supporters named the *Jarsuma*. These are other local elders who resolve smaller case of conflict. Cases relatively complex ones are seen by the *Selige*.

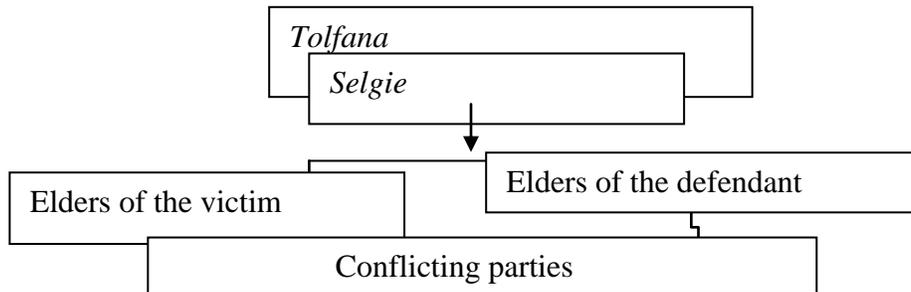


Fig1. Structure of *TolfanaChaffeChanicho*.

*Selgie* is the highest decision-making authority in terms of traditional conflict resolution. When the aggressor and the victim fail to resolve their conflict and if they believe the case has to be submitted to the *Selgie*, they apply their case and wait for the assembly to get decisions. The *Selgie* taking notice of the applied case, they make calls to defendants to come and defend their case; they arrange the date of assembly and organize sub-courts in which they are part. Two people would be selected on the victim side and two others on the defendant. These four people would be added to one or two *Selgies* as head of the team responsible to lead the process of reconciliation. (Gonfa, 2014).

**3. Procedures of conflict resolution**

The procedures of this traditional conflict resolution mechanism involve three stages. These are the pre-resolution, during and post conflict resolution. In the

first case procedures include like applying cases, taking appointments and calling the defendant. (Abu, 2012,). In the second stage the process involves presence on the assembly, selecting elders and practicing all the required acts of conflict resolution. But the third stage is about implementing the decisions passed by the *Selgie*. This includes preparing feast and paying compensation for the victim.

**3.1. Pre-conflict resolution**

Conflicts at any level cause corresponding physical or psychological damage. These conflicts could be resolved by the *Selgie* which has its own mechanism. Before the resolution is made there are certain activities that should be done. The first is to submit the case by either of the conflicting parties. This would be followed by notifying to the accuser the case and calling for attendance on the *Selgie* court. The conflicting parties

would select two elders each; whom they believe would witness the case and support their case. The conflicting parties need to know the date the *Selgie* would assemble and get prepared over the issue discussing the matter with representatives whom they selected in a way to win or minimize the loss at least. (Gonfa ,2014).

ዱርቢቃሬንቀነኒዳ - a girl is revered

ደርጋጐንቀነኒዳ - a boy is revered

ዱበርቲንኡልሬቀነኒዳ - a pregnant woman is revered

ኮርሚደላቀነኒዳ -a bull is revered

ቡርቂቱንቀነኒዳ - stream water is revered

አንዱሬንቀነኒዳ - a cat is revered

According to my informants Shibeshi, Hordofa and Ensermu, Then they divide up the cases among the groups. Four people representing the conflicting parties would be added to one or two *Selgie* and began to deal over the matter. When completing their blessing, they turn their face to the west and narrate cursing all forms of evil acts. Then they divide up the cases among the groups.

According to the *Selgie* members replied that the conflicting parties would sit on the left and right side in front of elders they have selected. The victim is the first to get the chance to present his case and the damage inflicted up on him. His speech would be followed by the accused who would present his case. At each point the *Selgie* and other elders would ask the conflicting parties to elaborate ideas till they understand it. When the *Selgie* and the elders understand the theme of the conflicting issue, the conflicting parties would leave the stage till the elders and the *Selgie* discuss the issue and reach final decision.

At last the conflicting parties are called back to listen to the decision. The elders tell the core idea of the conflict and as who was the victim and who the aggressor was, they explain the details of the cause and damage caused. Then they express that regretting for harms and

### 3.2. During conflict resolution

The assembly of the *Selgie* would start early in the morning. The *Selgie* would sit and check whether all those who submitted the cases have appeared. All the participation in the assembly would stand and face to the East for blessing by the *Selgie*. The proverb goes like this in Oromo Language (Gonfa ,2014).

accepting elders would be good to their future and encourage reconciling. If the conflict resolution succeeds, they bring together the conflicting parties, hold each other's hand and bless them. The blessing is to express their satisfaction over them and wishing them all the good in their future for they have respected elders and loved each other. (Gonfa ,2014).

According to the group discussion with the informants if the case is related to money or property and is a matter of expressing truth or denial and either of them or both refused to reconcile, there is another group waiting for it to receive them and perform self-condemnation. Here, there are different tools like sword, bullet, toothier, metal chain etc. The sword is put on the neck and say "let my neck cut off" (if I am talking false), he holds the bullet between his teeth and say "let it blast on my throat" (if I am talking false), he holds his tongue by a toothier and say "let my tongue stop talking" (if I am talking false), he ties up his neck and his hand by metal chain and say "let my hands and the whole body fail to function" (if I am talking false).

According to local informants many people who practiced this curse were fateful and it is rare to see people engaging in it. Sometimes, once they refused to accept decisions and referred to the condemnation stage,

they frustrate again and express their willingness to accept decisions. There are also other peoples who refused to attend the assembly despite the callings by the *Selgie*. The first absentee would be followed by another calling having postponed the case. If he/she repeatedly fails to appear he/she will be cursed by the group assigned to perform it for domination by all evils. (Abebe, Samson, & Tessema, 2008).

The *Selgie* conducts their conflict resolution throughout the day till all the cases are resolved. If the dusk comes before cases were seen, these would be postponed not for tomorrow but for the next *Selgie* assembly which may take months.

According to the evidence from the *selgie* members, Membership in the *Selgie* is not allowed for women. But women can bring their cases and could be brought themselves to defend litigation before the traditional court. In addition to this it does not have age specification to attend this assembly either being accused or an accuser. Informants told that the youth decide to accept curse but when asked to touch the instruments and practice the ceremony, he fails collapsed as they could not stand up to the psychological impact it imposes up on them.

#### 4. Compensation

In a conflict where a victim and an aggressor involve, the extent of physical or psychological damage or loss of property may determine the necessity and amount of compensation. Compensation for damage or loss among the Oromo people of Dibatie is common to see. (Birgit, 2001).

Compensation may be in kind or in cash. When the damage or loss inflicted is huge, it is payable to an amount of money ranging from 5,000-20,000 birr. Informants told that not all the cases are payable in terms of compensation. It is the level of damage and the need to make a just decision that determines it. (Assefa, Report of Ethiopian national workshop on peace and development 2007).

## CONCLUSION

An effort was exerted to show that the Oromo people of Dibatie District have their own traditional institutional mechanism of conflict resolution. For all conflicts happening in the community at any level, the *Selgie* deals over the matter, negotiate and reconcile conflicting parties. The people have special respect for the *Tolfana Chaffe Chancho* and the *Selgie*.

Conflicting parties obey decisions made by the *Selgie* with no hesitation because they believe that their life in the future would be bright. On the other hand, if they declined to respect decisions, they believe that their future life would be full of trouble. The conflicting parties solve their problems keeping them secret under the elders which increase their satisfaction over the *Tolfana* system.

The *Tolfana* is easily accessible to submit cases. It does not require lengthened time frame to provide justice. The local people can get the *Tolfana* in its own locality with no need expense for transport. Therefore, this traditional conflict resolution mechanism reduces costs, cut off bureaucracies and save time. In the post conflict resolution, the *Tolfana* enables the conflicting parties restore their old relations, eat and drink together and develop common understanding and trust to sustain their relations.

The *Tolfana* system is more preferred by the community hence, it can reduce the burden over the modern legal system. It is conducted by respected elders in the community and more likely to get the support of the community for implementation of decisions. The *Selgie* conduct it free and less likely to get corrupted which encourages public trust over it.

## FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS/RECOMMENDATION

In the above, I tried to mention about indigenous conflict resolution of the *Tolfana* institutions, mainly from this study, I had good opportunity to develop knowledge of conflict resolution mechanism among the communities and I add much information. For example,

before I employed this study I do not understand as *Tolfena* institutions important to handle conflict. I had the information *Tolfena* institution is serving for conflict resolution. Therefore, I want to invite the researcher who wants to set study further on the institution in the study area. In general, *Tolfena* is the higher/ top level traditional institution in resolving conflicts in the study area. If the government will give legal coverage, the institution will work effectively, unless we lost some Oromo indigenous knowledge in the study area. Researchers and other stakeholders like culture and tourism bureau and courts should conduct further researches to increase public awareness on the merits of the *Tolfana* system to enable it be preserved and transferred to the next generation. As Historian, from this study I recommend that indigenous institution should be due attention and incorporated under their own common rule and regulation.

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