

Conflict Resolution through Cultural Tolerance

Table of Contents

1. GENERAL BACKGROUND

2. THE INCORPORATION OF METEKKEL AND FORMS OF INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS

3. MICHU AS AN INSTITUTION FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

4. CONCLUSION

NOTES

REFERENCES

ANNEX: LIST OF INFORMANTS

CONFLICT RESOLUTION THROUGH CULTURAL TOLERANCE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE MICHU INSTITUTION IN METEKKEL REGION, ETHIOPIA

Abstract: Metekkel, a large territory on the northwestern part of Ethiopia's border with the Sudan, has been inhabited by the Nilotic Gumuz, the Shinasha, the Agew as well as the Amhara. Since the eighteenth century, these communities have further been enriched by the addition of the Oromo people.

The Nilotic groups in Ethiopia were marginalized politically and socially by the relatively organized communities in the highlands. They were dominated by the neighbouring communities, the Christian kingdoms of Ethiopia and the Sudan. They were considered as people with low social, economic, political and cultural development; they were given the derogatory name of Shanqilla, meaning dark skinned lowlanders, with the connotation of inferiority and slavery. Therefore, they had been subjected to various forms of aggressions and conflicts in Metekkel region. In the struggle for survival, the Gumuz lost their lives and they were displaced, limited to unhealthy spots from which they took refuge elsewhere. Since the Oromo settlement in the region, a traditional system of conflict resolution, known as *Michu* (literally friendship) has been instituted. It is a bond of friendship by which the Gumuz and the highlanders (Oromo, Shinasha, Agaw and Amhara) solve conflicts and establish cultural tolerance. Socio-economic conflicts and psychological as well as colour prejudices have been traditionally solved through the *Michu* institution. The study is an attempt to examine this traditional system of conflict resolution, mainly based on the living traditions of the people.

1. GENERAL BACKGROUND

1.1 Physical and Geographical Setting

Metekkel region is a vast territory in northwest Ethiopia bordering the Republic of the Sudan to the north of the Abbay River (Blue Nile). It is bounded to the north by Gondar, to the south by Wallaga and Asosa, to the east by Gojjam, and to the west by the Sudan (Berihun 1999, 73). Although the word *Metekkel* is derived from one of the seven Agew clans (Tadesse 1988b, 11), it is also the name of a 7000-foot mountain in Mandura District (Abdussamad 1995, 54). In the pre-1991 state structure, the Metekkel region, known as *Metekkel Awraja*, included Mandura, Dibati, Dangur, Guangua, Guba and Wanbara *waradas* within the Gojjam Administrative Region. At present, however, although it kept its former *waradas* with some rearrangements, it has become a zone within the Benishangul Gumuz National Regional State. Some parts of the former *waradas* mainly Guangua and a portion of Dibati *waradas*, however, were included within the Region Three Administration. The name *Metekkel*, therefore, is used in the study to designate all the former six *waradas* before the area was upgraded to a zone in 1991.

The region is a hot lowland with undulating plains and a thick tropical forest that receives heavy rainfall. The altitude ranges from below 600m to 2,731m above sea level. Much of it is lowland (54%) and temperate (43%), while highland is only 3% (Abdussamad 1995, 54). Surrounded on its eastern and southern rim by spectacular mountains and to the south by the Abbay River (Blue Nile), Metekkel forms a huge circular depression. It can be described as a hot, humid, flat and desolate region (Desalegn 1988, 3). It is broken here and there by numerous rivers, the most important of which are Alaltu, Ardi, Beles, Dinder, Durra, Dondor, Qarsa, Shar, all tributaries of the Abbay River. The region also consists of various high mountains such as Belaya, Dimtu, Gungum, Metekkel and Sanki, while Dora forms the major depression.

Much of the land is fertile, which makes the region attractive for different settler communities. The people practise shifting cultivation producing *tef*, *nug*, sorghum, maize, wheat and barley. Root crops such as onion, potato, yam and cassava are widely grown, which helped the highlanders to be self sufficient for most of their needs (Taye 1963, 28). Cattle, mules and horses comprise the most important animals kept by the highlanders while sheep and goats are largely produced by the Nilotic groups mainly the Gumuz (Tsega 1997, 98). The Gumuz live in the lowlands with primitive agricultural tools, which forces them to experience chronic food shortages. Most of the time they depend on hunting and fishing to supplement the wild berries, roots and the like that they collect from the bushes (Tsega 1997, 98; Desalegn 1988, 20).

Metekkel region is also rich in various natural resources such as gold, coffee, ivory, civet, animal skins and minerals. Marble is the most abundant mineral in the region. However, due to some inaccessible mountains and rugged geographical features, this wealth has not been effectively exploited. As the region is hot lowland, tropical malaria poses a great problem for the communities mainly in the Guba, Mandura and Pawi areas. Wanbara, Dangab and Berber areas are relatively free from malaria and thus they are very attractive settlement areas. Another important characteristic of the region is the absence of a well-defined infrastructure. As the region is remote and on the periphery, the scattered settler communities had little or no access to roads, schools, clinics, and so on, which greatly contributed to their low level of development. Even the most important towns are not joined together with roads mainly in the western part. Although there had been some progress to introduce facilities mainly after the Resettlement Programs of the 1984, it was confined largely to Pawi area. Because of famine, war and pestilence that swept the country in 1984 - 85, many settlers from Shewa and Wallo were hastily relocated to Pawi area, where some infrastructures were eventually established. There are all weather roads and electricity from Chagni to Pawi and other towns in that direction up to the Sudanese border. The route from Chagni to Bulan town, on the other hand, is very difficult and is only a dry weather road. There are no modern transportation facilities from Bulan to Wanbara, Berber, and Galessa particularly in the rainy seasons; there are no telecommunication and electricity services.

1.2 Peopling of the Region

Metekkel is a large territory making up nearly half the size of Gojjam with less than a quarter of a million people. It is sparsely populated with various ethnic groups (Desalegn 1988, 3). Most traditions suggest that Metekkel was originally inhabited by the Gumuz and other members of the Nilotic groups as well as the Shinasha. The Gumuz are one of the Koman branches of the

Nilo-Saharan speaking peoples located generally along the Blue Nile River and its tributaries (Ehret 1995, 108). Originally, they used to live in the Metekkel region up to the shores of Lake Tana. Apparently pushed further westwards by the Agew - a Cushitic speaking society in north central Ethiopia - they came to be limited to the hot lowland parts of Metekkel, which they presently inhabit (Tadesse 1988a, 11; 1994, 957).

Another Nilotic group, the Gebeto are also said to have occupied the Gumgum Mountain area. However, they were gradually limited to the Sudanese border both for economic and defensive reasons. Today they are largely situated in areas south of the Abbay River in the Benishangul region (Tsega 1997, 28).

The Shinasha or Gongga are another important community in Metekkel; they claim their original homeland to be the Biblical Canaan. They are said to have left their country in search of pasture and fertile lands and thus moved to Ethiopia. Through northwest Ethiopia, they reached Shewa where they settled; and again due to demographic factors they were forced to move into Gojjam and adjacent territories south of the Abbay River. They claim their founding father to be one Shao, who begot Ashinao, Assibo, Boro and Gongga. These descendants of Shao are said to have divided Gojjam among themselves with Ashinao taking Shashina; Assibo taking Assi; Boro occupying Bure and Gongga settling in Gwangua. Later some of these groups moved further west reaching as far as Guba, which they called Dogro (informants: Assege, Atomsa and Ayeru).

The Shinasha reference to Canaan and Shewa may only be indications of very early contacts with the Christian kingdom. What is very clear about their identity is that they are one of the several peoples of the Ethiopian interior speaking Omotic languages. Most probably, they are part of the Gongga population, which in earlier years used to live on both sides of the Abbay River. Because of the dynamic Oromo expansions and the political and demographic changes that swept the country in the sixteenth century, the Shinasha /Gongga living north of the river seem to have been cut off from the main body of the Gongga kingdom, which stretched up to the kingdom of Kafa in the south (Beckingham and Huntingford 1954, 75; Lange 1982, 12; Beke 1845, 94; informants: Ayeru and Deressa). Due to the Oromo settlement south of the Abbay River, other Gongga populations moved to Gojjam to take refuge and they increased the population of the Shinasha communities living north of the river up to Metekkel.

By the early seventeenth century, the Gongga population south of the Abbay River was already dominated by the Oromo, while the other cluster groups living to the north of the river were regular victims of slave-raiding expeditions of the Christian rulers and their local representatives. Therefore, pressed both by the Oromo and the continuous raids, the Shinasha/Gongga people living on both sides of the river had lost their independence by the early eighteenth century (Lange 1982, 12). Most of them moved to the remote lowland parts of Metekkel and further augmented the Shinasha population there. Indeed, the Shinasha of Metekkel today trace their origin to places like Bure, Gomer, Zigem, Shashina in Gojjam, and Horro Guduru and Limmu in Wallaga (informants: Ayeru, Morca and Deressa).

The Agew are the other major population group in Metekkel who, according to tradition, are said to have come from Seqota Lasta in the north. The Seven House Agew, named after the seven brothers: Ankasha, Azena, Banja, Chara, Kwakwra, Metekkel, and Zigem, are said to have come

down to settle in Gojjam, Agewmidir and Metekkel regions from Lasta. These names including those for the other minor groups such as the Bil (Belaya) and Gwagwsa are still applied to the places where these groups originally settled. Metekkel, however, is applied to the whole region including the Gumuz, Shinasha and Oromo settlement areas (Taddesse 1988b, 11). Although their tradition indicates that these settlements took place in the thirteenth century, Agew presence mainly in eastern Gojjam and Metekkel seems to have been earlier than that (Ibid.). Today, they occupy the fertile lands of Dangur, Belaya, Gwangwa, Mandura, Dibati and Wanbara *woredas* (Abdussamad 1995, 55).

In the continuous processes of raids, the Amhara - a Semitic speaking Christian society - gradually settled in various parts of Metekkel. Due to the rich natural resources of the region, a number of Amhara communities eventually moved in and settled. With the incorporation of the region in the last decade of the nineteenth century, they took control of western Metekkel as settlers, tax supervisors, administrators and religious preachers. In the twentieth century, their number increased remarkably as people from south Gondar, Gojjam and Wallo flocked there due to various reasons such as shortage of land and chronic famine. Due to landlessness because of the land tenure system and the inability of the Muslims to own *rist* lands in these provinces, they were forced to move and settle in Metekkel. Population pressure and environmental degradation were equally pushing factors. Other Amhara families flocked to Metekkel in search of fertile lands (Berihun 1999, 75). Other than the Emergency Resettlement Program of the 1980s, there were significant Amhara (largely Muslim) populations in Guangua, Mandura and Dibati *waradas* of Metekkel. Today, there are various places named after their settlements, such as *safara Wallo*, that is, Wallo (people from there) settlement area (informants: Ayyana and Mange; see also Berihun 1996).

The last but very significant population group that transformed the peopling of Metekkel are the Oromo, who since the eighteenth century have increasingly settled in Wanbara, Dibati and gradually in other areas. They moved to Metekkel from south of the Abbay River. Traditions indicate that the earliest movements were related to feelings of adventure among the youth. They continued the ancient customs of hunting big game and killing, which brought them honour in the society and special admiration from the women. After these feats of courage, they at first returned home. Such temporary visits gradually led to permanent settlements. There were two major routes for the Oromo expansion into Metekkel region. The first, which can be called the eastern route, started from the present day Limmu and Hebantuu areas in Wallaga to Dangab and Dibati parts, while the second route started from western districts of Wallaga and targeted Wanbara (informants: Dukkan, Bultum, Dibaba and Dirirsa).

Basing themselves in an area immediately south of the Abbay River, the Oromo of Limmu and Hebantuu continued their campaigns into eastern Metekkel, which eventually helped them to occupy Dimtu, Galesa, Berber, Mora and Qorqa districts. The Shinasha settlers of these areas offered little or no resistance and they were gradually incorporated by the Oromo. The Oromo expansion beyond the Durra River to the Agew territory, however, met with resistance. A certain Agew chief, *Azaj* Jangua is mentioned as having tried to check the Oromo advances into Agewmidir (Agew land) (Abdussamad 1988, 237; informants: Dukkan and Ayeru).

The second route and the largest settlement of the Oromo came from the west from Gidami, Mendi, Bojji, and Nejjo areas of Wallaga. Led by their respective clan leaders, they crossed the Abbay River at fordable sites and settled in the rich parts of Wanbara. The fertility of the soil and the suitable climatic conditions of Wanbara attracted more and more families from Wallaga. As the Gumuz and the Shinasha had long been limited to the lowland areas, highland Wanbara remained safe for the Oromo, who swiftly took control of it in the eighteenth century. In the next centuries, they gradually augmented their number and set up a formidable Oromo community in Metekkel (informants: Bultum, Dibaba, Atomsa, Dirirsa and Oljira).

In the late nineteenth century in particular, some external factors pushed the Oromo south of the Abbay River into Metekkel. Following the Shewan conquest of Wallaga in 1882, the *Gabbar* system was set up in various districts. The *Gabbar* system and the very oppressive nature of the settlers made life unbearable mainly in eastern Wallaga. Consequently, the people were forced to evacuate their localities and move to relatively safer areas elsewhere in Wallaga and largely to Dangab and Wanbara Districts of Metekkel. The Metekkel region was free from such type of exploitation until its final conquest in 1898. Even after its annexation, Wanbara and Dibati (Dangab) Districts continued to be ruled by a local Oromo chief, Biftu Anno, who was christened Gebresellasie and appointed governor of the region by *Negus* Tekle Haymanot of Gojjam. This further increased Oromo settlements there. Due to the severity of the *neffteñña* administration and the heavy taxation, the Oromo continued to increasingly settle in Metekkel (informants: Galata, Abebe, Atomsa and Dibaba). In the two major directions (see Fig. 1), therefore, the Oromo settled in various parts of Metekkel and thus enriched the ethnic composition of the region. These major population groups briefly stated above interacted to have a greater control over the natural products of the region.

2. THE INCORPORATION OF METEKKEL AND FORMS OF INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS

The abundant natural resources of the Metekkel region invited continuous and devastating invasions from the neighbouring communities, the Christian kingdoms of Ethiopia and the Sudan. It seems that even in the sixth century AD, the Axumite rulers might have had early contacts with this region. The Axumite source of gold, the land of Sasu, seems to have been located in this region up to Fazughli in the Sudan (Marcus 1994, 10; Tadesse 1988a, 11-12).

The first clear attempt to incorporate the Gumuz land (generally Metekkel) was made by King Zere Yacob (r. 1413 - 30), who made them tributary of the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia. With strong power bases in northern and eastern Gojjam, the Christian rulers undertook almost annual expeditions into Gumuz territory. After the wars of Ahmad Grañ, who had himself made significant advances into the area, and because of the dynamic Oromo expansion, the Christian kingdom shifted its centre of gravity to the Lake Tana region. Since then, many attempts were made to incorporate Gumuz land and to have greater control of the natural resources of the region. The Gumuz of the area around the Durra River put up a stiff resistance; but they could

not withstand the continuous and devastating campaigns of the much better organized Christian state. Particularly since the coming to power of Susenyos, these expeditions became a common practice (Taddesse 1988a, 11-12).

These campaigns affected not only the Gumuz and other members of the Nilo-Saharan language speaking groups, but also the Agew and the Shinasha inhabitants of the area. Immediately after he took power in 1607, Susenyos made an expedition against the Gumuz, the Shinasha (Gonga) and other populations of Metekkel. The expedition was big and it was led by his principal officers (Perreira 1900, 109). Susenyos also attempted to control the frontier areas, which led to confrontations with the Funj Kingdom. *Ras Se'ele-Krestos*, for instance, penetrated the land of Gumuz and Gonga and proceeded as far as Fazogli in 1615. As Lobo (1789, 114-115) states:

They [Fazogl and Wambarea] are inhabited by nations entirely different from the Abyssins, their hair is like that of the other blacks, short and curled. In the year 1615, *Rassela Kristos*, lieutenant general to Sultan Segued, entered those kingdoms with his army in a hostile manner....

The campaigns against the inhabitants of the western borderlands continued under Susenyos' successors. *Fasiledes* (1632-1667) and his successor, *Yohannes* (1667-82), devastated this region during almost every year of their reign. It was *Iyasu I* (1682-1706), however, who earnestly attempted to incorporate this region. In 1689 and 1697, he attacked the Durra River region up to Berber, which is in eastern Metekkel. He conducted various expeditions to the Durra River region, which is the stronghold of the Gumuz people (Taddesse 1988a, 13). The local population could not defend themselves with their traditional spears and shields. Therefore, they were forced to move into less favourable river valleys (Taddesse 1988, 11-12).

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, pressures over the inhabitants of the region had been doubled from both the Christian rulers and the Sudan. The major purpose of these continuous campaigns was to have greater control over the natural riches of the region. The Christian kings had a powerful local ally, *Chuhay*, who was an Agew chief, to whom they entrusted the affairs of the Metekkel region. He had his power base at *Sigadi* in Agewmedir and continued slave raids into the region (Taddesse 1988b, 16). The people, mainly the Nilotes, were enslaved, displaced or killed.

The inhabitants of Metekkel particularly in the Guba and Wanbara Districts also suffered raids from the Sudan. Guba and Benishangul areas had been tributaries of the Sultanate of the Sennar Kingdom in the Sudan. When, however, the Egyptians took control of the Sudan in 1821, these regions became part of the Turco-Egyptian government that sanctioned slave raids into the region. Consequently, the inhabitants were forced to move either into malaria-infested lowlands or along the tributaries of the Blue Nile to the south. The Mahdists who replaced the Turco-Egyptian government in (1881 - 1898) also raided the western lowlands bordering the Sudan (James 1980, 42 - 44; 1986, 124).

By virtue of their location, therefore, the Gumuz and other inhabitants of Metekkel became victims of the expeditions of two big states: the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia and the Sudan. As *Simoons* (1960, 55) observes, "...the survival of Gumuz culture against the pressures of Islam from the Sudan and against Amharization from Ethiopia seems remarkable..."

The Gumuz particularly around the Durra River attempted to put up a stiff resistance. However, strong and protracted resistance could not be organized until the Oromo settlement in the region. With the Oromo settlement, the Shinasha and the Gumuz were incorporated through the Oromo ancient customs of assimilation and they rallied alongside the Oromo. The latter had gained experience through their prolonged warfare and their *Gada* institutions. Consequently, they led the inhabitants of the region in defence of themselves and their natural wealth. They built trenches and ditches to prevent raids from Gojjam and the Sudan. It could be said that it was largely due to their efforts that the Sudanese raids could be contained along the western borderlands, which would later constitute the international boundary between the two countries (Tsega 1997, 45).

The Oromo continued their ancient process of assimilation after their settlement in Metekkel. Since their early days of contact, the Oromo had developed a number of mechanisms for establishing relationships with non-Oromo communities. When they started to permanently settle among the different communities, they seem to have devised different mechanisms to adapt themselves to the new situation. Some cultural and political adjustments needed to be arranged, the most important of which was incorporation. In Wanbara, the incorporation process or mechanism applied was the *Luba basa* institution. Although the most common name used in the adoption process was the *Moggasa* (Mohammed 1991, 21), a similar institution, *Luba basa*, was the case used in Wanbara. *Luba* means "freed, circumcised" while the suffix *basa* means "to set or to make" so that *Luba basa* may be translated as "to set free" or "to make free" (Bartels 1983, 167-373).

This system of assimilation was used mainly to incorporate the Shinasha. The Gumuz were largely treated through *Michu* and the *Harma Hodha* institution (see below). To a lesser degree, however, the *Luba basa* institution was also applied to them. Some Nilotic groups captured in the process of skirmishes were liberated and allowed to own land and to marry (informants: Dirirsa, Berasa and Jabessa).

The Shinasha of Metekkel were almost completely assimilated into the Oromo culture. Different types of symbolic rituals were used in the adoption process. A piece of skin freshly cut off from the ribs of the animal slaughtered during the adoption ceremony, known as *Medhicha*, was tied on the wrists of the representatives of the adopted clan members as a confirmation of the adoption. This form of adoption process was based on the willingness of the group to be adopted as it resulted in a complete change into the Oromo ethnic identity. At the end of the ceremony, food and drinks were served in the presence of the *Abba Bokku* (father of the sceptre) who confirmed the adoption process (Tsega 1997, 39).

Through the *Medhicha* institution, non-Oromo communities were supposed to assume positions of full equality with the Oromo. In Wanbara, it was largely applied to the Shinasha. Those who were captured in the early campaigns were taken to Wallagga where they were adopted. They were given equal privileges with the Oromo. Most of them stayed in Wallagga while others returned to Wanbara where they in turn adopted their own relatives in Wanbara through the *Medhicha*. For instance, a certain Iggu Duqqai is said to have played a considerable role in the adoption of the Shinasha groups in this way. Duqqai, the father of Iggu, is believed to have been chief of the Shinasha in Wanbara. His son Iggu was adopted in Wallagga. Later returning to

Wanbara, Iggu is believed to have encouraged most of the Shinasha to accept the *Medhicha* adoption process. Since he was from a well-known family, Iggu could influence many Shinasha groups (informants: Bultum, Teferra, Abebe and Assege). Today, the role of Iggu in the *Medhicha* friendship system as well as the *Butta* practices is especially remembered in the living traditions of the local people.

Most of the Shinasha groups, therefore, were completely adopted into Oromo society. Those who refused to be adopted were considered as outcastes and discriminated against. For example, they could not sell their produce at market places, which means that there was social pressures on them to accept the adoption. Because of the continuous Christian military campaigns from Gojjam against them and the encouragement from those already adopted, most of the Shinasha of Wanbara were not averse to assimilation (informants: Ibid).

The majority of the Shinasha were at first adopted in Wallagga for two reasons. Firstly, the adoption had to be undertaken in the area where the majority of the adopting Oromo groups lived. If the Gidda Oromo in Wanbara adopted a Shinasha, the Gidda Oromo of Wallagga needed to recognize the adoption since they were to become relatives of both the Gidda of Wanbara and Wallagga (informants: Bultum, Dirirsa, Dibaba and Teferra). Secondly, in earlier times, the traditional symbol of the Oromo law, the *Alanga* (whip) that was used at the ceremony was only available in Wallagga. The *Alanga* was whipped for each article of old or new legal declarations (Negasso 1984, 78) as the following traditional poem shows (Informant: Dirirsa):

Alangaa quwwaasee Having whipped the *Alanga*,

Seera qasam godhe He promulgated the law.

In the *Luba basa* institution, the *Alanga* was always used to confirm the adoption process. At first, no member of the Oromo clan who had settled in Wanbara could make it and the ceremony had to be held in Wallagga. Later, however, they brought the prepared *Alanga* from Wallagga and the ceremony could be held in Wanbara as well (informants: Abetu Wargu, Dirirsa, and Oljira).

Following the arrival of the *Alanga*, the *Gada* system was firmly established. According to tradition, the principal Oromo clans met to discuss how to strengthen the *Gada* institution not only for the purpose of adoptions but also for the establishment of a *Chaffe*, an assembly. In addition to the *Chaffe* established in Dangab region, the Oromo of western Wanbara set up their own *Chaffe* at a place called Rabo. The new centre was strategically placed surrounded with trees. It became an even stronger centre than Dangab, as in the ancient Oda Nabe and Oda Bisil where *Gada* rules and regulations were issued (informants: Ayeru, Abetu, and Dirirsa).

The adoption of non-Oromo communities or individuals was very important in Wanbara, and the clan to be adopted had the right to have the ceremony either in Wanbara or in Wallagga. The symbolic rituals used for adopting the non-Oromo groups varied from place to place. In Wanbara, the most common mechanism was to put a yoke on the neck of the group to be adopted. The yoke was prepared from a plant called *kello* in Oromo. The group to be adopted

broke the yoke that symbolized that their old ethnic identity was broken and that they were assuming a new one sanctioned by the following solemn oath (Informants: Ibid):

<i>Yoo isin gannee dhallii</i>	If we abandon you, let our descendants
<i>keenya akka qambarii kana hacabu.</i>	be broken (destroyed) like this yoke.

They also pledge: "We go where you go, we hate whom you hate, we love whom you love..." This is a highly respected oath. Many Shinashas of Wanbara have kept their adoption mainly due to the oath taken by their ancestors.

Another symbolic ceremony followed immediately after the adoption. Both the Oromo and the group to be adopted mixed their blood to confirm the adoption process. After this, the adopted group assumed the clan name of the Oromo adopting them. In other words, a Shinasha group adopted by the Gidda Oromo would be called Gidda. Similarly, Shinashas adopted by the Babbo Oromo clan became Babbo, while those adopted by the Manasibu became Manasibu (informants: Bultum, Dibaba, Dirirsa).

Intermarriage was allowed between the Oromo and the adopted communities. They were completely assimilated into the Oromo society so that after a few generations it was hardly possible to differentiate between the Oromo and the adopted communities (Tesema 1980, 26; informants: Dibaba and Dirirsa). Most of the Shinasha of Wanbara were thoroughly assimilated through such marriages. This ancient mechanism of assimilation helped the Oromo to incorporate and absorb a large number of non-Oromo communities, which greatly facilitated the process of Oromo expansion. In fact, the dynamism of the Oromo movement into extensive territories inhabited by different communities, within a relatively short period was largely due to this well-established system of assimilation (Tesema 1980, 26). It has to be noted that the main aims of the adoption process was to avoid conflicts with the inhabitants and to cultivate an environment of cultural tolerance.

Thus, the Shinasha adopted and completely assimilated Oromo value concepts, religion, language and identity. They called themselves after the Oromo clan who conducted the adoption process. They pledged an oath to the Oromo not to abandon them and to break their Shinasha identity using various symbolic rituals. Afterwards they were given equal privileges as the Oromo. With the exception of the Shinasha of Bulan, all the rest were absorbed by the Oromo in the region. In the Bulan area, the Shinasha were incorporated through the *Harma Hodha* ("sucking the breast") institution. This system establishes a kind of parent-child relationships without complete absorption. Therefore, the Shinasha in this area kept their identity though they adopted the Oromo language, value concepts and rituals (informants: Assege, Atomsa, Ayyana and Tibessa).

The majority of the Shinasha and the Gumuz considered the Oromo as their "liberators" from external aggressors and adopted Oromo value concepts, which laid the basis for the *Michu* institution through which they resolved internal conflicts and which helped them to live in an environment of cultural tolerance (informants: Abebe, Ayyana, Dukkan and Dirirsa). The

adoption process, indeed, played an important role in alleviating inter-ethnic conflicts in Metekkel region. As indicated earlier, the expeditions to enslave the people and control the natural resources of Metekkel continued until the first half of the twentieth century. The Gojjam rulers led such kinds of campaigns to the region until its formal annexation in 1898. King Tekle Haymanot in particular turned his attention to Metekkel after his defeat at the battle of Embabo in 1882 by Menelik II over territorial competition to control southwestern Ethiopia. Describing this, a Dutch traveler, Schuver wrote the following in September 1882:

Today, it is three months ... since the Abyssinians pushed forward their borders considerably to the west, by taking possession of everything, which still existed of independent country. For they have not only laid waste and plundered Wumbera and the Berta villages at the Beri hills ... but they have taken possession of these districts in their usual manner, that is, they have spread a thin net of military colonists through out the conquered territory (James 1986, 123).

The Gojjam army thus plundered all the areas beyond the Beles River and established garrison centres. When Schuver travelled in the region, he could observe the exploitation of the people and the local resistance against the aggressors. Gradually, the Christian Amharic speaking societies settled in fertile parts of Metekkel. Schuver added that, " ... each time a strip of land is annexed, a certain number of families are told out of over populated [Gojjam] to settle as colonists in the new territory" (James 1986, 124).

The Oromo settlement in Metekkel consolidated ethnic solidarity against these pressures. Traditionally, the Oromo tend to form leagues or confederations for different aims. These leagues consisted of the Oromo and the adopted communities. In Metekkel, they succeeded in forming ethnic enrichment with all the Shinasha, the Gumuz, the Agew and the Amhara. They had also set up significant relationships with the Oromo south of the Abbay River. The adoption process was conducted on both sides of the river; and the Oromo south of that river actively participated in defending Metekkel against external pressures (informants: Dibaba, Dirirsa, Bultum and Ayeru). This created a solid foundation for the application of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms.

In spite of strong ethnic assimilations, however, there were conflicts over land, prejudices and differences in levels of development among the societies of Metekkel. However, they were traditionally resolved. The people have adopted various mechanisms of incorporation used by the Oromo, and an environment of cultural tolerance has been institutionalised. They adopted, among others, the *Michu*.

3. MICHU AS AN INSTITUTION FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

3.1 The Nature and Causes of Ethnic Conflicts

Inter-ethnic conflicts in the Horn of Africa in general are many sided. They involve nations, regions, ethnic groups, clans and lineages and they are fought between and within states, regions and ethnic communities. Scarcity and mobility made the conflicts inevitable. As Markakis (1994,

219-220) observes: "The major migrations of the past gave rise to endless strife, memories of which continue to nourish contemporary hatreds... Occasionally, such conflict is enmeshed with major confrontations and it escalates out of control."

The process of expansion and incorporation by the ruling class stored a great potential for conflict in the Horn, which brought about unequal relationships. It led to the domination and subjugation of many ethnic groups by few others. Markakis (1994, 222) states, "A system of ... 'ranked' ethnic groups emerged, and an explosive combination of ethnic and class contradictions was the result, creating the potential for massive conflict¹."

In spite of attempts at assimilations and eventually at integrations among the different ethnic groups in Metekkel, there were ethnic frictions and conflicts between the relatively organized highland communities (the Amhara, the Agew, the Oromo and the Shinasha) on the one hand, and the Negroid populations mainly the Gumuz on the other.

Before we move into the discussions, it would be better to define some basic terms: ethnic group, ethnicity, society, conflict, and conflict resolutions. Pawlos (1998, 7) defines an ethnic group as:

... a group of people who form part of a larger population and consider themselves distinctive and share certain real or putative objective characteristics associated with common ancestry, territory, shared historical experience and cultural practice (language, religion, custom of food and dress, music and dance, know - how, method of taking decisions and exercising power and other socio political and economic behaviour); which are susceptible to change and variation.

Ethnic communities tend to have myths of common origin and ancestry including ideologies and value concepts, while ethnicity refers to aspects of gain and loss in ethnic interactions. According to Eriksen (1994, 39), "Ethnicity is an aspect of social relationship between agents who consider themselves as culturally distinctive from members of other groups with whom they have a minimum of regular interaction ... Ethnicity refers both to aspects of gain and loss in interaction and to aspects of meaning in the creation of identity."

Ethnic identity is one form of social identity that the community develops in multi-ethnic societies. It can be defined as " ... the subjectively conscious social formation that emanates from the objective distinct cultural and other clusters of people.... and as identity with a clear 'Us' and 'They' differentiation" (Pawlos 1998, 8). However, an ethnic group is not a separate and impervious unit but part of a larger population that is in constant conditions of change.

A people or society refers to a group of human beings who share a common origin, beliefs and practices, cultural value concepts and who occupy for a long time the same area of habitation (Bonta 1996, 405).

In general, an ethnic community is a named human population with a myth of common ancestry, shared memories and cultural elements, a link with a historic territory or homeland, and a measure of solidarity (Brown 1997, 81). A group to be called an ethnic community, therefore, must have a name for a collective identity, common historical memories, traditions of origin, and

shared cultural values and practices (Brown 1997, 82). These generally accepted definitions of ethnic groups, ethnicity and people will be followed in the study.

Ethnic conflict is a disagreement, quarrel or strife over important social, cultural, economic, political or territorial issues between two or more ethnic communities (Brown 1997, 83). It may be violent or non-violent depending upon its causes. As Bonta (1996, 405) observes:

Ethnic conflict is the incompatible needs, differing demands, contradictory wishes, opposing beliefs, or diverging interests which produce interpersonal antagonism and, at times, hostile encounters. Conflict situations thus range from antagonist behaviour to verbal abuse to physical violence to, ultimately, killing.

Ethnic relations can therefore take different forms in different parts of the world. The relationships can be constructive or destructive. The destructive part of ethnic relations, therefore, can be considered as ethnic conflict. These conflicts can be between ethnic groups or between the state and ethnic communities. They could be managed, reduced or resolved.

Conflicts are natural to human beings, but the process of handling them may either escalate or reduce and ultimately solve them. In the conflict resolution, the primary goal is not just to end the strife but also to solve the problem. In this case, *resolution* means to deal with something successfully, to clear it up, to find an answer (Nathan 1996, 11).

The term *conflict resolution* was first used by Kenneth Boulding in the 1950s to mean the analytic and descriptive study of a conflict and the normative element of its positive management. Recently it has developed to mean a process of traditional power-mediation and a multi-lateral approach capable of mobilizing wide varieties of intervention strategies from peacekeeping to problem solving workshops (Woodhouse 1996, 135 - 36). According to Bonta (1996, 406), resolving a conflict means:

... a settlement or avoidance of disputes between individuals or groups of people through solutions that refrain from violence and that attempt to reunify and re - harmonize the people involved in internal conflicts, or that attempt to preserve amicable relations with external societies.

Conflict resolution has been used for several years in the world to reduce problems within societies, companies, countries, ethnic groups, individuals and so on. It is primarily aimed at peaceful and successful solving of disputes and conflicts that arise from time to time in different parts of the globe. It encourages people to negotiate and to establish peace (Nathan 1996, 11-13).

Conflict management on the other hand is the theory and practice of peaceful resolution of a conflict (Woodhouse 1996, 135). In the study, *Michu* is used as a traditional mechanism for conflict resolution to the disputes, quarrels and conflicts that broke out among the different ethnic groups of the Metekkel region. It refers to the successful handling of ethnic conflicts and to the establishment of an environment of tolerance and mutual coexistence.

The major causes of ethnic conflicts vary from place to place. It is also difficult to clearly illuminate the basic factors that cause strife. This is mainly because a certain factor may be central in one ethnic conflict, but might be irrelevant in another. As Ismagilova (1978, 43) states:

Ethnic problems have always played an important role in social development. They have many facets and various political, economic and ideological aspects including the following: the whole complex of problems associated with both the interrelationships of peoples of different ethnic origins and relations within any one ethnic group; the process of nation - building; ending of the existing imbalance in the development of the different peoples; the language problem; the development of ethnic features inherent in an ethnos; education of a new man in a spirit of respect for members of other ethnic groups; and the fight against tribal separatism.

These are some of the underlying factors for ethnic conflicts to occur, and it is only through the proper tackling of all these factors that social progress and national consolidation can be maintained.

The main causes of conflicts between peoples include the unresolved nature of socio-economic issues, which are further complicated by ethnic antagonisms (Ismagilova 1978, 158). Eviction from land is one such major cause. The problem of displacement entails uprooting people from a familiar environment and thus causes friction (Nsibambi 1989, 228). In a rural society such as the Gumuz of the Metekkel region, it is very difficult to adapt to the new areas with backward agricultural tools. As already indicated the Gumuz and the Shinasha had been subjected to a continuous process of eviction from their localities because of prolonged military campaigns. They were forced to move from one unfavourable lowland area to another. This created instability and insecurity over their land. Therefore, they conflicted with each other and they developed tremendous hatred wars against the invaders, who gradually settled in the rich highland parts of Metekkel. When they moved from one habitat to another, naturally this posed friction to occupy arable land. As Rothchild and Olorunsola (1983, 153-154) observe, "In the agricultural societies of Africa, particularly where the population is dense, the penetration of a money economy give rise to an intense competition for land." These campaigns and evictions escalated rebellions in Metekkel among the various inhabitants of the region (informants: Ayyana, Dukkan, Yadesa, Oljira, Ayeru, Adam and Waqo).

The competition for control of market is another underlying factor for ethnic conflicts. The desire to control items of trade and trade routes was an equally intense factor in Metekkel. The region is rich in natural resources particularly gold, which invited aggressions and invasions. The control of the gold deposit, which was traditionally panned mainly by the Gumuz in the streams of the Abbay River, aroused conflicts within the communities. Since the Axumite period, campaigns had been waged on this region. Agents of the kings obtained particularly gold from this and surrounding regions. The people paid tribute, mainly after the 1890s in gold. Gumuz Islamic entity in Guba and Wanbara, in particular, apparently used to pay tributes in gold until recently. These further aggravated competition for control of gold areas. The highlanders obtained gold by plundering, by forceful acquisition from the Gumuz or by formally buying it from them or local merchants. This escalated the conflicts between the various inhabitants of the region (informants: Abebe, Tefera, Gelata, Dibisa, Adam, and Waqo).

The Gumuz in particular became victims of raids and even killings when they continued to refuse tribute payment. Because of the hatred they developed against the invaders, they stopped gold tribute payment, which invited a more ferocious enslavement. In the first half of the twentieth century, the Say Gumuz clan, for instance, were massacred by the Gojjam State Administration. They were forced to abandon their settlement areas and they crossed the Abbay River into Wallaga, where they presently inhabit (informants: Abebe, Gelata, Tefera and Oljira; see also Irwin 1968, 131 and 137).

Conflicts in Metekkel also occurred over other items of trade and natural resources. Animal skins and civet were another important source of contention between the Gumuz, Shinasha, Oromo, Agew and Amhara communities. There were hunting expeditions in this region mainly in the first half of the twentieth century. In this process of hunting expeditions, enslavement and displacement of the Gumuz continued even after the 1950s. Control of the important animals, the items of trade and the resourceful areas made the region a hunting ground for armed men. The highland hunters could not safely move in the forested areas dominated by the Gumuz. They had to either take forceful actions against them or form friendships and continue to capture animal skins and civet. The local communities usually formed friendships - *Michu* - and conducted hunting expeditions.

Biases and prejudices are the other causes of ethnic conflicts. These are the subordination, discrimination and marginalization of indigenous peoples (Ismagilova 1978, 79). The Nilotic peoples in Ethiopia were marginalized politically, socially and culturally by the relatively organized communities in the highlands. Although they were partially assimilated to the highlanders, they remained despised and overlooked. Apparently, the highlanders called them *Shanqilla*, a pejorative and derogatory name meaning dark skinned lowlanders (Abdussamed 1995, 54) with connotations "... of inferiority and fitness only for slavery" (Simoons 1960, 36; Quirin 1997, 234).

The Gumuz people in Metekkel were socially despised, discriminated and enslaved. They were strongly marginalized in all levels of development. The highland communities had developed prejudices against them that they were inferior in all aspects of life, incapable of rational thinking, backward and always limited to lowland areas with no access to education and modernity. This created a lack of confidence in their existence, as they were not in a position to compete with the highlanders. Ismagilova (1978, 82) states:

The danger of ethnic prejudices is not only that they estrange peoples and promote friction between ethnic groups, but also that they actively encourage the isolation of national minorities and the development of tribalistic frames of mind and an emotionally charged attitude to their own language and peculiarities of culture.

If ethnic prejudices become a norm of social behaviour in a society, they segregate people and divert their attention from real social problems thus help the ruling class to keep the masses in subjection (Ismagilova 1978, 84). Those who were uneducated, backward in all levels of development, resent those who were educated and urban based. The dimension of modernity thus causes friction (Rothchild and Olorunsola 1983, 155) as was evidenced in Metekkel between the Gumuz who were uneducated and limited to rural areas and the relatively organized highland

communities (mainly the Oromo, the Agew and the Amhara). Indeed biases and prejudices were one of the most important underlying factors for ethnic conflicts there (informants: Mekuriaw, Taddesse Genneti, Niquis, Adam and Waqo).

Because of ethnic prejudices, the highlanders and the state enslaved the Gumuz and the other dark skinned non-Nilotic communities. Slaves were in fact one of the main items of trade in the nineteenth century Ethiopia. *Ras* Haylu, the son and successor of Tekle Haimanot (1850s - 1901) had actively participated in the slave trade in the region (Tsega 1997, 69). The Agew governor at Belaya, particularly after the 1890s, continued to capture Gumuz slaves. From 1905 - 1910, Zeleqe Ligu was made governor of the Tumha District including Belaya, which made the slave trade much worse. In the course of the raids, Zeleqe extended his domain to include the Sheikdoms of Dunkur and Abu Ramla. When Metekkel region was given to *Ras* Haylu in 1911, Zeleqe is said to have bought his lucrative office. His position was confirmed over Tumha and Belaya, which brought about a more ferocious pattern of slave raids there up to Wanbara. In 1921, for instance, his forces penetrated as far as Wanbara to capture slaves, apparently with Haylu's blessing. Unable to defend themselves, many of the victims fled to the Sudan (Abdussamed 1995, 62).

Regarding the justifications of the slave trade, Zeleqe pointed out that " ...though there were men [Agew] living in Belaya Mountain, all the low country between the plateau and the Sudan frontier was inhabited by his slaves" (Abdussamed 1995, 59-60). This clearly illuminates how the Agew along with the Amhara had long developed a derogatory attitude to the Gumuz and other minorities in the region. They were hardly considered as human beings.²

The Gumuz and the other slave victims thus developed hatred against the slave dealers: "They developed tremendous hatred to all isolated strangers so much so that when succeeded in killing one, they cut off his right arm, dry it with smoke and beat their drums with it, this gives great honour to the killer" (Abdussamed 1995, 60). For this reason, the Gumuz were very eager to kill the non-Nilotic communities. The people had used different mechanisms to defend themselves including entrenchment, withdrawal and migration. In the first half of the twentieth century they, for instance, fled to the Sudan where they stayed on at Roseires. The Agew rulers even went to the extent of requesting the British authorities in the Sudan for the return of their slaves (Abdussamed 1995, 61). The slave trade that escalated ethnic conflict in Metekkel continued until the Italians took strict measures to practically end it. They forced the slave owners to liberate their slaves so that they would be hired in the Italian military services.

Indeed, the slave trade practically stopped during the Italian occupation (1935 - 41). However, expeditions in the form of hunting and tribute collections continued unabated in Metekkel (Tsega 1997, 70).

Thus, ethnic conflicts arise out of various factors. Ethnic problems appear to be the permanent norms of socio-political struggles in the modern world: "No major region is free from it" (Stavenhagen 1990, 76). As briefly stated above, ethnic conflicts generally involve a class of interests or struggle over the right to land, modernity, prejudices, freedom of existence in every social affair, preservation of social identity, autonomy and so forth. Often economically rich and privileged communities face danger from less privileged but powerful and organized

communities (Stavenhagen 1990, 76). In such kinds of conflict, the privileged regions with uneducated ethnic groups defend what they consider legitimate rights denied them while the powerful groups debate in terms of national interest. In other words, frictions arise when one's right is denied by others (Pawlos 1998, 10). The Gumuz and the Shinasha consider their natural right to use the riches of the region. However, the more organized and powerful communities controlled the region making them slaves. Slaves had no right whatsoever, and the Gumuz were considered this way. This had the greatest impact on the psychological make-up of the people. Pawlos (1998, 10) states:

... the conflict is due to differences in the culture and psychological properties as well as differences that indirectly emanate from the mental or psychological make - up of members of the different ethnic groups Some groups are considered as by nature encapsulated within a cultural code leading to self isolation and rejecting to new pathways of life ... Hence it is assumed that this differences will lead some to a higher rank and the others to a lower rank and hence become a potential ground for conflict.

This maximized inter-ethnic skirmishes in the study area. The Gumuz took several repetitive ambush attacks including plundering and robbing merchants, chasing off peoples moving in the lowland parts occupied by them, killing cattle keepers, refusing tribute payment, blockading roads and killing non-Gumuz people moving in their areas.³ Thus, "A subordinate minority ... may react to years, decades, or centuries of discrimination and oppression and stand up to say `enough'" (Stavenhagen 1990, 77). In the 1950s and 60s, Gumuz attacks on the neighbouring communities and merchants took a more ferocious character. They blockaded the route from Chagni to Bulan and from Bulan to Berber and up to Wanbara. They chased state tribute collectors, hunters, group or individual merchants and burnt non-Gumuz villages. People were forced to divert to another difficult route to Gojjam. Tribute collections not only from them but also from the other communities became practically impossible. Complete turmoil and chaos reigned in the Durra River region. This escalated conflicts between the Amhara, Agew, Oromo and Shinasha on the one hand and the Gumuz on the other (informants: Niquis, Mange, Ayyana, Mekuriaw, Assefa, Gayo, Adam Warkineh and Haile).

In the meantime, the government intervened in 1960 and took severe actions on them. The government armed the Oromo, Shinasha, and Agew inhabitants of the region and together with state troops massacred the Gumuz.

For a complete control and suppression, a garrison centre was established at a place called Dibati, which later on developed into a town after the Debatsi Gumuz clan was annihilated in the region. This triggered ethnic conflicts in the region. The highland communities organized themselves and attacked Gumuz villages as the latter continued to chase and kill merchants, plunder their crops, burn villages and so on.

Although Haile Sellassie's government intervened, the situation was not solved. The Gumuz continued their action to face another disastrous attack about ten years later. The 1960s saw ferocious attacks on the Gumuz near the Durra River region. The Gumuz of this particular area were known for their prolonged resistance against the Christian kingdom. Since the medieval period, this part of Metekkel experienced the stiffest resistance against the expeditions from the

state and neighbouring communities. In 1970, a second and more organized campaign was ordered for complete suppression of this region. The Debatsi Gumuz clan was annihilated. However, this did not quell the rebellion; in fact, it was escalated. The Gumuz continued to kill the "Red" - as the highlanders were called, chase their cattle herders, merchants and individuals. Until the *Michu* institution was applied in this part of Metekkel, the conflicts continued unabated. After the Oromo set up this traditional conflict resolution mechanism, even tribute collection became possible. Indeed, the Gumuz paid tribute only to their *Michu* who transferred it to the state. Gumuz-Oromo relations were particularly strong through the *Michu* institution, which other communities followed as well (informants: Niquis Kume, Niquis Duressa, Adam, Haile, Warkineh and Mekuriaw).

To conclude, therefore, the causes of ethnic conflicts are multi-layered; i.e., land, markets, biases and prejudices, modernity, border areas, culture and psychological properties, deliberate killings for fame and social acceptance and so on. The nature of conflicts ranges from violence to the outbreak of rebellions. Conflict generates migration, displacement, refugee problems, insecurity, eviction, rape, killing, plundering, massacring, and even ethnic cleansing (Brown 1997: 92). Consequently, conflicts constitute one of the greatest challenges facing Africa in particular and the world in general. The multi-layered nature of conflicts calls for multi-layered solutions at international, national, and local levels.

3.2 African Traditional Principles of Conflict Resolution and

Reconciliation

The protracted and complex nature of conflicts in Africa makes the conflict prevention and resolution map of the continent very complex. The principles followed to manage the conflicts also affect the processes of their resolutions (Mwagiru 1999, 1). As long as people live in societies or groups and nations there are conflicts arising from differences of interests, prejudices, needs and ambitions. Therefore, the approaches adopted to prevent and resolve such differences of interests determine the resolutions of the conflicts. In support, Mohiddin (1999) states the process by which such differences might be discussed and resolved might be peaceful, amicable, problematic, disagreeable or violent. Much will depend on the social, economic and political environment in which such differences are discussed and resolved.

What is to be followed is a careful and serious adoption of the necessary conflict resolution and reconciliation mechanisms in an environment where the conflicts occurred. The primary goal is to find a successful solution to the conflicts through peaceful procedures as much as possible. As Mohiddin (1999) clearly indicates, the underlying issues are:

- How, and by what means or processes conflicts can be channelled into creative or productive forces;
- How and within what institutional framework differences can be prevented from being converted into violent conflict;

- How and by what systems and process conflict can be managed, contained and prevented from spreading over to the neighbourhood;
- How and by what means violent conflicts can be resolved;
- How reconciliation that is essential to reclaim and affirm esteem and respect, and promote peace with dignity can be promoted.

The means and processes of peace resolutions are the critical issues in conflict management. There are coercive and non-coercive methods of conflict management. When we carefully look into the contents of the mechanisms, the coercive methods of conflict management are those in which the conflicting parties have little or no autonomy in terms of choosing the forum, and in which the parties must abide by the decision of the forum. These include judicial settlement and arbitration. Non-coercive mechanisms, on the other hand, confer a lot of autonomy on the parties especially in terms of choosing the forum and of defining the context of the outcome. These include methods such as negotiation, mediation and problem solving workshops (Mwagiru 1999, 3).

During the pre-colonial period, there were various traditional principles of handling conflicts in Africa. These traditional mechanisms worked well as they were performed within a particular culture and traditional environment. In the continent, there are complex and rich traditions, cultures, religious practices, tolerance and ways of life. The environment in which these traditional conflict resolution mechanisms worked had been destroyed both by internal and external factors. The colonial impact and the cold war situations were some of the underlying external factors that worked against it (Mohiddin 1999).

The processes adopted until the present period have been to westernise the African principles rather than look into their context and environment. African and western cosmologies are different. African perceptions of conflict management are different from those of the west: "... in western conceptions arbitration aims at reaching justice on the basis of rules (as norms) in Africa arbitration shades into conciliation and negotiation" (Mwagiru 1999, 5).

In the western approaches, which emphasise establishing guilt and executing retribution and punishment, evidence must be direct and specific. They give emphasis to physical and material penalties without giving due regard to the re-incorporation of the offender into the community. As Lanek (1999, 5) observes, "The western systems are remote from the people and require large infrastructure and great expense."

African traditional principles of conflict resolutions are aimed at maintaining and enhancing social and public order rather than at promoting the rule of law. Therefore, the African principles are more of a resolution process to a conflict than settlement as evidenced in the west. Conflict settlement leads only to short-lived results whereas resolution mechanisms have structures that are not based on power and thus they are long lasting. Conflict resolution aims at legitimisation of relationships "... and a peace that is self-sustaining" (Mwagiru 1999, 3). Therefore, African traditional principles of conflict management are non-coercive methods.

Many writers on African traditional principles of conflict resolution have indicated that it is possible, although not easy, to resurrect and refurbish the old traditional mechanisms of resolutions. A return to these principles does not mean, as might be erroneously thought, looking at the outward methodology and backwardness. It is, rather, a return to the use of the internal cosmological context, which will entail positively rethinking the past and creatively reinventing the future based on experiences and possibilities (Mohiddin 1999).

The African traditional mechanisms worked well and could work again if refurbished. Their strongest point is that "... they helped to preserve unity even in the face of diversity" (Mwagiru 1999, 9). The traditional principles pay attention to group unity, to reconciling the conflicted individuals or groups and to their peaceful re-incorporation into the community. As already noted, those who are reconciled totally abandon their old feuds and live amicably in an environment of tolerance. It must be noted that tolerance plays an important role in social reconciliation and conflict preventions. Traditional societies come together with shrubs of grasses or olive wreaths as a sign of peace making and coexistence. Although they were conflicting parties, they show signs and willingness for reconciliation as performed by elders' interventions. This is typically the case in many African societies. In Metekkel, the Gumuz and the other highland communities use various symbols of reconciliation, and they peacefully resolve their differences.

Traditional African principles are less individualistic. They give emphasis to group interest. Moreover, they consider all parties interested in and affected by the conflict. This is the strongest point of the traditional principles. Bozeman states that their "supreme purpose ... [was] not to ... indict an individual but to rectify troubled social relations so that all may continue to live together amicably" (Mwagiru 1999, 10).

Africa consists of multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic societies with various traditional mechanisms of conflict resolutions. The conflicting parties are all willing to accept and abide by their traditional cultures; ignoring these traditions would amount to exclusion from the societal norms. The mechanisms are indigenous ingredients that would be tolerated in any societal interactions. In each ethnic community, the traditional principles are followed, and considered as indigenous initiatives. Elders, as pointed out above, play a central role in these mechanisms, reconciling the conflicting groups according to the norms and forms prevalent in their respective areas.

For comparative analysis and effectiveness of the traditional African conflict resolution mechanisms, we shall try to look briefly into some African cases alongside the *Michu* institution.

In South Sudan, conflicts between the Dinka and the Nuer ethnic groups are resolved through the traditional meetings of the conflicting parties. There will be friendly discussions at suitable places according to the norms and values of the communities. A ceremony is held in which the traditional priests and story telling elders participate. The main aim of the story told by the elders is to highlight the moral teachings of the stories in relation to the conflict and as an introduction to the discussions (Ayub 1999, 7).

As a sign of reconciliation, they make offerings to their divinities. In most cases, a bull is slaughtered at both the beginning and end of the deliberations. Bulls mainly white in colour represent peace in both Dinka and Nuer traditions. At the end, songs, traditional merry making, hugging and invocation of spirits continue. The ceremony is concluded after the elders and clan chiefs shake hands as a sign of peace and future cooperation (Ayub 1999, 8).

In Metekkel, the *Michu* conflict resolution mechanism also has similar rituals. At the end of the ceremonies, a bull or more frequently goats and fowls are slaughtered, followed by traditional merry making. The Gumuz usually prefer a fowl and if the parties involved slaughter a fowl, it is considered a sign of friendship (see below).

In the case of the Nuer and Dinka conflict, the most important decisions reached after resolution include:

- A cessation of hostilities;
- An amnesty for all offences against people and property;
- Freedom of movement and inter-communal commerce;
- Sharing of resources such as border grazing lands and fishing grounds;
- Encouraging displaced communities to return to their homes and rebuild relationships with their neighbours (Ayub 1999, 8-9).

Similarly, the Nuba people in northern Sudan practise different reconciliation systems. For arbitrations, they use the *Ajaweed* council. It is a reconciliation council of elders. The council arbitrates the society at a family level, household level, clan level and ethnic group level. It is, therefore, an important reconciliation process at the grass root level. The council members would bring the conflicting parties together to reach a fair settlement and reconciliation (El Hussein 1999).

What is interesting in the traditional African principles of conflict resolution is that the conflicting parties are given equal rights to present their cases. Religious councils, in some cases, also participate in the mediation process. In the Nuba Mountain in the Sudan, if the *Ajaweed* council fails to resolve the issue, it was passed on to the Muslim Sheikh council. Muslim traditional resolution systems have different stages of development until finally the Amir looks into the case (El Hussein 1999). However, conflicts are usually resolved at the *Ajaweed* council without a need to forward them to the Amir.

For each of the various causes of conflicts, there are various mechanisms of resolution in many African countries. Among the Nuba, for instance, in the case of murder conflicts, there is a *Diyya* mechanism where the relatives of the murderer are required to pay blood money. Once again, local elders arbitrate the conflicting groups and set down the fines, usually payment of a limited number of cows. This will end the conflict (El Hussein 1999).

In Ethiopia, there is a similar practice of conflict resolution through payment of blood money. In almost all of the major ethnic groups, the term used is known as *Guma*, equivalent to the Sudanese *Diyya*. The murderer is required to pay either in cash or in kind to the parents or relatives of the deceased. Failure to pay the blood money could provoke violence. Local elders and clan chiefs arbitrate the conflicting groups. In Metekkel, the practice works well although it is less common when compared to the *Michu* institution. In any case, however, it was/ is used among the Oromo, Amhara, and Tigre with similar name and practice. Although it is difficult to forgive each other in such severe cases, the people accept it and they pay the blood money to come to terms with each other.

Intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts are very common in Africa. Indeed, warfare and ethnic skirmishes take the lives of millions of Africans. In spite of a long record of warfare, however, they are able to develop traditional mechanisms of conflict management. The Turkana ethnic group in Kenya, for instance, have a long history of warfare, but also various systems of resolutions. To prevent the outbreak of intra-tribal conflicts they used / still use the process of education and socialization. Turkana children are socialized not to develop anti-societal behaviours that may affect social relations. Kona (1999, 3) states, "Intra-ethnic emissaries are occasionally sent to the families of those members of society with unbecoming behaviour to let them know so that they can deal with them before they disrupt social equilibrium."

Turkana children right from their infant stage are socialized to shun confrontation and violence that would affect social harmony and to use non-coercive methods of expressing grievances. "This is didactically inculcated together with other strong moral ethos like justice, fairness and mutual interdependence" (Kona 1999, 7). This kind of conflict prevention is, indeed, very important for societal relations.

However, there are many cases where children are taught the art of warfare, which initiates ethnic feuds. Some communities do encourage their children to be warriors and hunters to acquire courage, fame and social acceptance. The best example is the Gumuz people in Metekkel, where the *Michu* mechanism was instituted (Fekadu 1998, 5). Hunters and killers were given special admiration among the women and the society. For example, women kneeled down in front of them, washed their legs, served them food and drinks in special utensils while kneeling down, and sang praise songs for them. Upon their death, memorial figures were erected on their graves. They were highly respected in the society, which encouraged killings and feuds mainly against the non-Gumuz communities. Wives of those who killed were also given special respect. They were given priority, for instance, in fetching water, sitting at festivities and in every social activity. Therefore, women themselves encouraged men to kill. One also had to kill to marry, as they were traditionally required to present men's genital organs. Since, ancient times, therefore, there were warring situations in Metekkel region of Ethiopia (Fekadu 1998, 6; informants: Dukkan, Mange, Ayyana and Hinsermu).

Yet, the Gumuz have traditional systems of resolving conflicts. Elders call a meeting of communities to reconcile the conflicting groups. Other than the most common *Michu* system, the Gumuz utilize traditional elders' councils which are also effective. The elders set out fines to be paid by the offender. Elders' decisions are accepted unquestioned and are seriously practised (Fekadu 1998, 4). Therefore authority is exercised among the Gumuz by the respected elders

and leaders. They have the ability to punish those who violate traditional customs and laws. In the Gumuz society there is also another authority of conflict reconciliation, known as *Gafia*. It is a magico-religious authority - the witch-doctor and the protector of the community's wellbeing. The *Gafia*, which could be male or female, is often consulted and his or her words are strictly adhered to (Desalegn 1988, 19).

The use of emissaries among the Turkana is another best way of managing conflicts. Although socialization and education play a key role in their prevention, once conflicts occur the emissaries perform a quasi-diplomatic role between the ethnic groups. Their role is mainly to prevent the conflicting parties from avenging one another. They calm down the conflicting groups at their initial quarrels in the norms and customs of the people. The use of emissaries is particularly evident with the pastoral groups. "In order to constantly monitor peace, contain disputes and ensure harmonious coexistence, emissaries permanently accompany mobile pastoralist groups in their unending search and boundless migration for better grazing fields for better live stock" (Kona 1999, 9). Another traditional principle of African conflict resolution worth mentioning is the taking of a drink made of bitter herb to identify the offender and as a sign of forgiveness. Among the Acholi people of Uganda, for instance, the drinking of the juice of a bitter herb known as *Mato Oput* is the most common and effective mechanism of conflict reconciliation. It is a mechanism in which the guilty party repents, asks for forgiveness, pays some fines and is reconciled with the victim's family. For instance, in 1986 the Acholi used it to resolve their conflicts with the peoples of the West Nile, who had been marginalizing them during the tribal dictatorship of the 1970s. Any form of conflict among the Acholi needs to undergo through this process involving all the Acholi (Lanek 1999). Although it is a bitter plant, the drinking has no medicinal effect and it is " ... intended to remove the bitterness and evils in offenders' minds thus putting an end to wrongs in the society" (Lanek 1999, 3). In fact, according to Lanek (1999, 3) *Mato Oput* is an exemplary principle which could serve other societies as well. He writes:

It is therefore relevant to present the principle of conflict resolution and reconciliation contained within the process of *Mato Oput* and to advocate its accommodation in the present quest for sustainable peace first in northern Uganda, other parts of Uganda and to other parts of Africa and beyond.

Among the Chagga people of Tanzania, as well, there is a drinking of the juice of thorn-apple known as kimanganu. It is used to identify culprits after a person objects to the verdict. Both the defendant and the plaintiff should drink with a condition that in case of defeat (perhaps affected by the drink) one would surrender to the opponent. The ceremony is closely watched by the chiefs and observed by the relatives from both sides. Before preparing the drink from thorn-apple, the participants take an oath to designate the number of cattle which, in case of defeat, will be rendered to the opponent (Amani 1999, 4)

In the African traditional principles, what is interesting is that in each community the parties involved in a conflict are reconciled to maintain social harmony. Conflicts or a culture of vendetta is avoided between individuals, families or clans and eventually a community. The symbolic rituals and environments in which these traditional principles are performed could vary

from ethnic group to another; but the central idea in it is to end the warring situations and to introduce an environment of tolerance.

Among the Acholi people of Uganda, two main symbolic rituals are performed after taking a drink made of *Oput* tree. If the cause of the conflict is found to be killing, a "Bending of Spear" ritual is performed by the two parties, which symbolizes an end to the conflict. Secondly, elders provide a blessing known as *lamo oboke olwedo* to mark the end of the conflict (Lanek 1999, 4).

In Metekkel region of Ethiopia, also, chief elders from both sides bless the two conflicting groups at the end of the *Michu* ceremony. The symbolic ritual *lafe cabsu* - breaking a bone - is equivalent to the Acholi's "Bending of Spear". It symbolizes ending the conflicts for good. As pointed out many African societies use elders or leaders' council in their conflict resolution process than inviting a third party or forwarding it to court. Traditionally, bringing a case to court before settling the matter in a friendly manner is considered as trying to do harm to the opponent (Amani 1999, 16). In Metekkel, the various ethnic groups also tend to refer their case to the *Michu* mechanism rather than forwarding it to court (Fekadu 1998, 4). For the different elders' councils, the African societies have their own respective names. Kona (1999, 17) clarifies:

Among the Somali, clan elders, *Guurti*, manage conflict, while among the Samburu a similar council of elders is known as *Lpayani*. Among the Bush men of Kalahari desert, elders convene a *Xotla*, to discuss on unresolved dispute between the parties; ... Lewis reveals that the local council of elders (*Jama'ah*) is empowered among the Berber society to make peace and mediate in intra-community disputes...

In this process of traditional principles, though female elders are allowed to participate, male elders dominate and convene the gatherings. Highly respected clan elders and chiefs are responsible for such councils. "In this regard, the spirit of the institutions of elders is still alive and its influence recognized" (Kona 1997, 10).

The councils are held in traditionally recognized meeting sites, usually under trees with shrubs of shades and riversides. "Being an essentially consensual decision-making process, the elders deliberate on the principle of *Primus inter pares*, first among equals, and on the basis of parity of negotiation status" (Kona 1999, 11). This is the basic characteristic of African traditional principles of conflict resolution and reconciliation.

3.3 *Michu* - Traditional Basis for Conflict Resolution

Most of the Ethiopian peoples solve their conflicts at local levels. The Oromo, for instance, have various traditional bases for resolutions of conflicts among themselves and with other communities. More importantly, they developed different mechanisms of adoption for cultural integration and tolerance, which speeded up their expansion process. When they started to permanently settle among different communities during their early days of expansion, the Oromo devised different mechanisms to adapt themselves to the new condition. They made some cultural and socio-political adjustments, the most important of which was incorporation. For this purpose, they used different but related names. In some places, *Moggasa* (adoption) and *Guddifacha* (to foster) were used. *Guddifacha* is in fact one form of *Moggassa* (Mohammed

1991, 21). In other Oromo areas, *Luba basa* was quite common. Most probably, it is a more general term including various adoption institutions (informants: Jabessa, Berasa, Dirirsa and Dibaba).

Other common, but less incorporative, traditional conflict solving institutions adopted by the Oromo are the *Michu* and the *Harma Hodha*. It should be noted that the Oromo devised these institutions to avoid conflicts with the communities among whom they settled. *Harma Hodha* (sucking the breast) is a mechanism that establishes a parent-child relationship. A ceremony is held and the "son" licks or sucks the honey mixed with milk and dabbed on the breast (or in most cases the thumb) of his "father". "This ceremony highlights the nurturing aspect of the relationship; the practical aspect is in fact one of clientship where the son expects some material assistance in return for the political and economic support he will give to his father" (Blackhurst 1996, 240).

Michu (literally friendship) is a reciprocal bond of friendship which is invoked for serious problems of conflict and peace. It is a life and property security institution, which establishes free movement of people. It is used among all the inhabitants of the region as a mechanism of conflict resolution and reconciliation according to their traditional practices (informants: Admasu, Dukkan, Mengasha, Chinqaro, Niquis Kume; see also Tadesse 1988a, 11).

We have seen earlier that the Oromo's continuous movement into Dangab, Berber, Bulan, Dibati and Wanbara *waradas* of Metekkel was connected to ancient customs of hunting and killing expeditions. In this process, the Oromo had to contact the Gumuz who predominantly occupied lowland Metekkel. The Gumuz had also a custom of killing particularly non-Nilotic groups (Fekadu 1998, 5); many Oromo hunters were killed by them. The Oromo groups of hunters needed guides in the jungle and rugged terrain of Metekkel, which the Gumuz could provide. Therefore, the Oromo decided to befriend the Gumuz people through the *Michu* institution (informants: Dukkan, Warkineh, Admasu and Niquis Durressa).

Until the Oromo gradually consolidated their settlement patterns, they needed the cooperation of the Shinasha and the Gumuz - which necessitated the *Michu* institution. Moreover, some economic needs also necessitated the application of the *Michu* institution. The Oromo needed cotton, which was largely produced by the lowlanders. In turn, the lowlanders did not have weavers, and a kind of reciprocal relationship emerged. As a result, *Michu* was instituted since the early years of Oromo settlement in Dangab, Wanbara and Bulan areas of Metekkel (see fig. 1). Traditions indicate that it was first started between the Oromo and the Gumuz. It was and still is known as *Michu Sanqalla*, that is, Gumuz (*Shanqilla*) *Michu*. Later on, it was extended into the other settler communities (informants: Ayyana, Dukkan and Mange).

Fig. 1. Parts of Metekkel and Wallaga

The Gumuz people were considered as slaves at the beginning and were subjected to slave raids. The Oromo, once they consolidated themselves, continued raids to enslave the Gumuz. There were thus conflicts between the Oromo and the Gumuz for many years. The Oromo, as the other highlanders, despised the Gumuz and called them *Sanqalla*, a corrupt form of *Shanqilla*. Prejudices were thus one of the most important causes of conflict. The Gumuz and the Shinasha had been victims of slave raids both from the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia and from the Sudan. They could not defend themselves; and once the Oromo consolidated themselves, the former rallied along the latter in defence of the region. Through the adoption process, the Shinasha had largely been absorbed and the Oromo population had gradually augmented. The Gumuz, too, had been incorporated and they adopted Oromo language, cultural beliefs and practices. As a result, it is difficult to identify a Shinasha from an Oromo, although the Gumuz can be identified because of their skin colour. They all speak the Oromo language; they perform *Gada* rituals and other traditional Oromo customs (informants: Dukkan, Niquis Duressa, Admasu and Dirirsa).

The Shinasha who crossed to Metekkel had already been incorporated south of the Abbay River. Such Shinasha clans as Hindibo were already considered as Oromo because of their complete integration into the Oromo culture and identity. In southern parts of Metekkel, they just continued the Oromo *Gada* system and incorporated other Shinasha groups. This greatly facilitated inter-ethnic relations and laid the foundation for the *Michu* institution. The Shinasha were incorporated both in Wallaga and in Wanbara, which facilitated cultural interactions on both sides of the river. The *Michu* institution had already been common south of the Abbay River, and in Metekkel, the system continued without difficulty. Consequently the Shinasha, the Gumuz, the Agew and later on the Amhara adopted it retaining its original name, *Michu*⁴ (informants: Dukkan, Abebe, Hinsermu, Jana and Dirirsa). The majority of the Metekkel merchants had established *Michu* friendships south of the Abbay River as far as western Wallagga. There were strong commercial relations on both sides of the river since earlier times, which consolidated the *Michu* institutions. This facilitated freedom of movement on both sides of the river ensuring security for peoples and commodities.

Once the *Michu* institution became a common traditional dispute solving practice, cultural integration enhanced. However, conflicts were also common mainly for economic reasons. The highlanders wanted to control the rich resources of the region mainly gold, which was obtained from the Gumuz-dominated river valleys. Unlike the highlanders, the Gumuz were naturally considered to have the ability to pan gold. If the highlanders wanted to get gold, they would buy

or plunder from the Gumuz. This created a constant cause of disagreement in the region. Without having *Michu* (friends), it was difficult to get gold. The highlanders, even if they had the ability, could not go down to the rivers for panning without Gumuz guides. The Gumuz could take severe actions on them in the lowlands. To eradicate such hostile environment, therefore, they set up *Michu*. The Gumuz were also not averse to the friendship because they did not have goldsmiths (informants: Hinsermu, Warkineh, Admasu and Niquis Kume).

A ceremony is held in the institutionalisation of the *Michu*. An animal is slaughtered and the two conflicting groups mix their blood to show complete friendship. In addition, they break a bone depicting that they have broken their old quarrels. Finally, they pledge an oath: "We do not deny each other. If either of us denies let his descendants be broken up to seven generations. We assist each other at all times. Your enemy is my enemy..." (informants: Dukkan, Hinsermu, Mengasha, Admasu and Niquis).

These oaths are "unbreakable" and there has been strong belief that it would immediately affect the one who breaks them. It goes with the traditional saying *Lafeen cabu hin deebi'u*, i.e., a broken bone does not straighten (informants: Dukkan and Hinsermu).

Before the rituals, elders gather and discuss on the issue openly. Ngwane (1996, 51) states "... the discussions were frank, free and fruitful with the guilty asked to pay a token fine as a symbol of confession and a return to the society as well as the general assembly resorting to a friendly and brotherly round of drinks at the end of the exercise."

Clan members of both sexes from both sides gather and peacefully resolve the conflicts. They denounce the conflicts and hold a friendly round of festivities as a symbol of friendliness. The most notable application of the *Michu* ritual is that made between the Dongoro Oromo and the various Gumuz clans in Berber. Here, when the Dongoro Oromo started to permanently settle in the nineteenth century, the Duminda and Duwenu Gumuz clans continued to kill them and burn their new villages. The Oromo also took severe actions against the Gumuz clans; but when the conflict worsened, elders from both sides decided to resolve it through negotiation. They gathered mainly led by the Oromo chief Tufa Foroso at the Qarsa River on the road from Zigih to Berber town in Dibati *warada*. A ceremony was held after the free discussions. They took an oath and resolved their conflicts. It was successful and left no traces of bitterness behind. That river, consequently, was named Qarsa Arara meaning Negotiation (Qarsa) River (informants: Niquis, Tura, Admasu, Ayyana and Hinsermu).

Today the Dongoro and Gumuz clans in Berber have very strong friendship to the extent that if non-Dongoro Oromo says that he is Dongoro, he will be equally welcomed by the Gumuz. Due to the oath their ancestors pledged, the present Gumuz and Dongoro Oromo keep their strong friendship. This is the basic form of the *Michu* institution throughout Metekkel.

The most interesting thing in the traditional conflict resolving institutions is that dissenting issues are freely entertained. The people are also ready for negotiations. If the problem is considered not human, elders call on their ancestors through oracles to bring peace and goodwill to the land (Ngwane 1996, 51-52). In Wanbara the people gather at a place called Tullu Arara (Negotiation Mountain) to mediate conflicting groups, to pray to their Almighty, to bring peace and brotherly

affection among the various communities and generally to bless the land. There are various such places in Metekkel where people resolve their disputes, promulgate laws of conflict prevention and call on their ancestors for peace to the land. The other centre was at Chancho in Galesa, Dibati *warada*. It was partly related to their ancient *Gada* rituals (informants: Oljira, Dibaba and Dirirsa).

Traditional forms of conflict resolution are common in many parts of the world. In Malay Peninsula, for instance, villagers gather for conflict resolution through a proceeding known as *Becharaa* (Bonta 1996, 403). In many African countries, there are also such practices. The word conflict in Bantu language, for instance, is known as *Palaver*, which was gradually extended in the African societies to mean the processes of negotiation and pacification. It is widely used as a traditional conflict resolution institution in various parts of the continent. "All in all, the end purpose of conflict prevention and Resolution in traditional African society was to show that group interest was above the interest of the individual (no matter his status, family, age-grade or clan" (Ngwane 1996, 52). Thus, African societies have experienced conflicts long before the colonial period and attempted to prevent the escalation of tension through symbols and signs prevalent in the continent.

The desire to solve problems amicably is the main thrust of the African character. His hospitality, his accommodating spirit, is the drive that welds threads of peace in the land. Words like National Conferences and Constitutional Conferences are a revisit to the traditional African society where conflicts are solved through free Dialogue and frank discussions (Ngwane 1996 51).

In the traditional peace-building mechanisms⁵ such as the *Michu*, the parties involved do not hold grudges and "... sniff no more from the snuffbox of hate, but puff more tobacco from the pipe of peace" (Ngwane 1996, 52).

Although *Michu* was initially developed as an institution between the highlanders (Oromo, Shinasha, Agew and Amhara) and the lowlanders (Gumuz), it is also used among the communities in the highland areas. It is applicable within the same ethnic group or inter-ethnic communities. In Metekkel, the Agew had *Michu* institutions with the Gumuz, the Oromo, Shinasha and the Amhara. The Oromo had *Michu* with the Shinasha, the Gumuz with the Shinasha, the Agew with the Shinasha and so on in their respective localities. In the beginning, the Amhara coming to the region were guided by the Oromo to form *Michu* systems. Later on, they continued to use it by themselves. Traditions indicate that almost all of the ethnic groups had set up the institution in each corner of Metekkel.

During the spontaneous Emergency Resettlement Program in the region, conflicts occurred between the settlers and the indigenous population, the Gumuz. Due to the land holding system the Gumuz started to attack the new settlers. In addition, when they saw themselves surrounded by non-Gumuz populations they began to take severe actions against them. Such forms of hostile actions, for instance, were settled through reconciliation (Berihun 1999, 77). When the highlanders moved to the lowlands, they needed, as already indicated, protection for themselves and their goods. They also needed food and provisions of shelter. Reciprocally, when the lowlanders moved to the highlands they needed protection, guidance and security. In the

commercial interactions as well, the Gumuz needed guidance in the highland market areas. They placed their goods in their *Michu* houses and received orientations on the nature of the costs of buying and selling. Thus, *Michu* was invoked for each daily interaction. It facilitated ethnic relations, intermarriages, cultural toleration and commercial networks. Gumuz children started to live in their *Michu* houses where they were able to attend education and acquaint themselves with highland social activities. The highlanders also started to keep their cattle in their Gumuz or Shinasha *Michu* houses for grazing lands. Communal use of honey bee trees, water wells and pasture eventually became the norm. Communications improved; people were gradually accustomed to other cultures - which they adopted, and subsequently peace was instituted, through traditional basis of conflict prevention and resolution (informants: Dukkan, Mekuriaw, Adam, Admassu, Mekonnen W/Giyorgis, Habesha Yimer, Adam Beza and Hinsermu).

In each *waradas* of the Metekkel region, *Michu* predominantly exists to this day. It plays an important role in preventing conflicts. It even gradually took the form of incorporation. In Dangab region, for instance, those Gumuz who became *Michu* to the Anu and Jagga Oromo clans call themselves after these Oromo clans. In time, it developed into cultural and social integration similar to *Luba basa* adoption process. These integrated ethnic groups constituted the largest reserve force for the chiefs in their respective areas. They together with Oromo chiefs and governors participated in the military campaigns against organized slave raids coming from the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia and from the Sudan. In Wanbara, this coalition of all ethnic groups led by the Oromo governors had repulsed the Turco-Egyptian and Mahdist attacks. Similarly during the Italian occupation (1936 - 41), they actively resisted the Italians led by *Fitawrari Ejjeta Biftu*, governor of all the territories south of the Shar River (informants: Gelata, Dibaba, Taddese Fufa and Bultum). When the region was added to Gojjam by *Negus Tekle Haymanot* in 1898, the Oromo and the Shinasha were appointed governors in various districts who also governed the Gumuz. The latter had chiefs who collected tribute and handed it over to the highland governors, known as *Qoro*. These governors arranged various *Michu* institutionalisation rituals mainly to have effective control over the natural riches of the region. Later on, mainly after the Revolution, when governors were appointed from the centre, the Gumuz refused to pay tribute to the new administrators. In general, the Gumuz did not trust non-*Michu* highlanders for whatever type of interaction. The governor of Wanbara under the *Derg* (1974 - 1991), Tsehay Sawasew was forced to send the early *Qoros* to collect tribute from them (informant: Tsehay). For any forms of celebrations and social relations, the Gumuz invite their *Michu* friends to the present day. The *Michu* ritual takes place once but the friendship continues from generation to generation. It lasts forever preventing and solving conflicts and insuring a cessation of hostilities, an amnesty for all offences, freedom of movements of peoples, inter-communal commerce, sharing of border grazing lands and so on (informants: Hinsermu, Huis, Mekuriaw, Assefa, Jana, Mange Mekonnen W. Giyorgis, Habesha Yimer, Adam Beza and Dukkan).

The *Michu* conflict resolution system can therefore be applied to the other inter-ethnic conflicts in Ethiopia. Due to the traditional customs and cultural tolerance, the parities in conflict were /are not averse to the peace-building process. Traditional customs and practices are seriously respected and carefully practised. "In this sense, our traditional principles for conflict resolution and reconciliation provide us with an established design and bases for living and resolving the current and future conflicts within ourselves" (Amani 1999, 17).

The modern world should learn from the African traditions of conflict resolutions that the most effective ways of resolving conflicts are through peaceful means such as negotiations, amicable discussions, establishment of reasonable deterrence and compensation to the defendants, as we have seen in the cases of the Acholi, Nuba, Nuer, Turkana and Gumuz. Some of these systems may even be applied outside Africa. Today there is an increasing demand in the western powers to introduce mediation, victim participation and reconciliation into formal legal systems (Lanek 1999, 5).

Sharing food, drinking bitter herb juice, socializing, breaking a bone, bending a spear, pledging an oath and others are all symbols of conflict resolution and peacebuilding process.

In the areas where the traditional principles were applied, there was total reconciliation and resolution. It is, thus, necessary and quite possible to include them into the government framework, as the final aim is to construct a base for peace and cultural tolerance. Some writers argue that there is no room for considering the traditional principles of conflict prevention and resolution in contemporary African legal systems. However, one must take into account not the form, but the content and even the processes of these African principles. A critical look at the content of the principles reflects the centrality of dignity of individuals and the role of the institutions for conflict prevention as agents for the stabilization of socio-political and other relationships. The content of these mechanisms is based on certain views and values that Africans had and still have about their society (Mwagiru 1999, 9). Comparatively speaking, the traditional mechanisms are less individualistic than the western systems. Moreover, they allow all parties in a conflict to participate, and are, therefore, an important part of the social process (Mwagiru 1999, 10). We have seen that such traditional principles successfully resolved conflicts with no traces of bitterness left behind. It is, therefore, possible to blend the traditional mechanisms with the modern ones. There has to be a positive rethinking of the past, and reinvent the future based on the experiences to refurbish the traditional principles (Mohiddin 1999).

African practitioners, policy makers and constitutional writers should give emphasis to the African principles of reconciliation. The traditional mechanisms should be used creatively as a complement to the established legal systems. "This will allow for ample room for an indigenous people of Africa to explore experiences of other African peoples rather than allowing domination to treat it as backward" (Lanek 1999, 8).

For the current problems facing the African continent, the rich traditions of community concern and involvement, belief in justice, tolerance, mutual security, the continued practice of compromise and coexistence have very great relevance that should be earnestly adopted. Africans' most important legacies are the traditions of conciliation, compromise and tolerance (Ayub 1999).

When we sum up, therefore, the present conflict preventive mechanisms prevalent in Africa could be blended with the traditional institutions. Military interventions only escalate conflicts. Traditional leaders including women should be involved. Ethnic conflicts are best resolved in mechanisms that involve village elders who frankly discuss their disputes and thereby resolve them. If *Michu* and similar traditional bases for conflict resolutions are effectively blended with

other modern mechanisms in various parts of Ethiopia and Africa, the prevalent conflicts may be successfully controlled. As Kona (1999, 22) observes:

This will lay the foundations for the development of a culturally sensitive adaptable and mutually co-operative conflict resolution approach. Such cross-cultural fertilizations the challenging agenda for conflict theorists and practitioners, as it holds key both the management and resolution of violent ethnic conflicts and to the future of the fields of peace studies and conflict resolution.

We have seen how *Michu* resolved ethnic conflicts in Metekkel region of Ethiopia; and how the Acholi resolved the conflict with the West Nile people in Uganda. These and the other traditional mechanisms are successful in Africa as they are applied according to the established norms and situations of the peoples. "It is a call [therefore] for African leaders to use their traditional mechanism in rallying the larger village (country) and village elders (political factions) around a palace (conference hall) in order to give Peace a chance in the land" (Ngwane 1996, 52).

4. CONCLUSION

Michu, the traditional basis for conflict resolution, thus played a significant role in alleviating ethnic conflicts and in laying the foundation for cultural tolerance. It brought about mutual enrichment of ethnic communities in Metekkel. It was gradually transformed from conflict solving to cultural assimilation and ethnic integration.

It is the positive conclusion of the present paper therefore to encourage the use of traditional peace building mechanisms combined with the modern democratic forms of conflict prevention elsewhere. What is more significant is that durable solutions to conflicts in Ethiopia, Africa and the world will have to come not only from the top in the form of interventions from governmental and international organizations and agencies but also from the grass-roots. The civil society must be prepared to join hands with the government concerned to address conflicts more successfully. The government authorities as well need to follow good governance, justice and equitable national resource allocations and they should be determined to uphold human rights. The result will be successful resolution of conflicts.

NOTES

1. Ethiopia and the Sudan, indeed, have the longest record of ethnic conflict in the Horn. It has never been a peaceful region (see Markakis 1994).
2. As explained in the chronicle of Susenyos (1607-32) *Shanqulla* had the connotation of "black" to refer to those somewhat less than human beings, rather than the "red", which was the common colour of the Ethiopian people. The colour prejudices were used mainly to justify slave trade (see Quirin 1997, 234).
3. In the open market areas, usually skirmishes arose between the Gumuz and other settlers. According to their tradition, if a non-Gumuz touches a Gumuz woman, they consider it as an insult and immediately attack that individual (informants: Niquis Kume, Waqo, Admasu and eyewitness account).
4. In fact, in the Agew and Amhara dominated areas of Metekkel such as Mandura and Guba, it is also called *Wadaje*, which exactly means *Michu* (informants: Mekonnen W/Giyorgis, Habesha Yimer and Adam Beza).
5. Peacebuilding encourages contacts between members of conflicting groups. (For details see Ryan 1992, 119 - 120.)

REFERENCES

- Abdussamed Ahmed. 1995 The Gumuz of Western Gojjam: The frontier in history, 1900 - 1935. *Africa* 50, no. 5: 53 - 67.
- Amani, A. 1999. African principles of conflict resolution and reconciliation: A case study of Chagga ethnic group in Tanzania. Paper presented at the All-Africa Conference on African Principles of Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, 8 - 12 Nov. 1999. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- Ayub, Y. N. 1999. Principles of conflict resolution and reconciliation by the Nuer and Dinka people in the South Sudan on the inter-ethnic conflict. Paper presented at the All-Africa Conference on African Principles of Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, 8 - 12 Nov. 1999. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- Bakwesegha, C. J. 1997. Conflict resolution in Africa - A new role for the Organization of African Unity? In *Out of conflict: From war to peace in Africa*, edited by G. M. Sorbo and P. Vale, 77-94. Uppsala.
- Bartels, L. 1983. *Oromo religion: Myths and rites of the Western Oromo of Ethiopia*. Berlin.

Beckingham, C. F., and G. W. B. Huntingford. Eds. 1954. *Some records of Ethiopia, 1593-1646*. London.

Beke, C. T. 1845. On the languages and dialects of Abyssinia and the countries of the South. In *Proceedings of the Philological Society*. London.

Berihun Mebratie. 1996. Spontaneous settlement and inter-ethnic relations in Metekkel: Northwest Ethiopia. MA Thesis, Department of Sociology and Social Administration, School of Graduate Studies, Addis Ababa University.

_____. 1999. Spontaneous settlement and inter-ethnic relations in Metekkel: Northwest Ethiopia. Department of Social Anthropology, Trondhiem.

Blackhurst, H. 1996. Adopting an ambiguous position: Oromo relationships with strangers. In *Being and becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological enquiries*, edited by P. T. W. Baxter et al. Uppsala.

Bonta, B. D. 1996. Conflict resolution among peaceful societies: The culture of peacefulness. *Journal of Peace Research* 33, no. 4: 403-420.

Brown, M. E. 1997. Causes and implications of ethnic conflict. In *The ethnicity reader: Nationalism, multi-culturalism and migration*, edited by M. Guibernaw and J. Rex, 80-100. Cambridge.

Desalegn Rahmato. 1988. Resettlement and the indigenous population of Metekkel. In *The proceedings of the workshop on famine experience and resettlement in Ethiopia*. Institute of Development Research, Addis Ababa University.

Ehret, C. 1995. Nilo Saharans and the Saharo-Sudanese Neolithic. In *The Archaeology of Africa: Food, metals and towns*, edited by T. Shaw et al., 104-116. London.

El Hussein, D. M. 1999. Traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution in Nuba Mountain (Case Study). Paper presented at the All-Africa Conference on African Principles of Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, 8 - 12 November 1999, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Erikson, T. H. 1997. Ethnicity, race and nation. In *The ethnicity reader: Nationalism, multi-culturalism and migration*, edited by M. Guibernaw and J. Rex, 33-42. Cambridge.

Fekadu Wamber. 1998. Ye Gumuz behereseb achir ye bahil zagaba (A brief cultural report of the Gumuz people). Unpublished.

Irwin, L. 1968. Some notes on the Say Say culture. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*. pp. 131-139.

Ismagilova, R. N. 1978. *Ethnic problems of tropical Africa. Can they be solved?* Moscow.

James, W. 1980. From Aboriginal to frontier society in Western Ethiopia. In *Imperial Ethiopia: The Southern periphery from the 1880s to 1974*, 42-44. Working papers on society and history. Cambridge.

_____. 1986. Life lines: Exchange marriage among the Gumuz. In *Southern marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, edited by D. Dorham and W. James, 119-147. Cambridge.

Kona, E. S. 1999 Customary conflict management mechanisms among the Turkana of Kenya: Implications for conflict resolution discourse and practice. Paper presented at the All-Africa Conference on African Principles of Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, 8 - 12 November 1999, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Lanek, R. 1999. Integrating indigenous approaches with national and international mechanisms for conflict resolution and reconciliation. Paper presented at the All-Africa Conference on African Principles of Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, 8 - 12 November 1999, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Lange, W. 1982. *History of the Southern Gonga* (S.W. Ethiopia). Weisbaden.

Lobo, J. 1789. *A voyage to Abyssinia*. London.

Marcus, H. 1994. *A history of Ethiopia*. Berkeley.

Markakis, J. 1994. Ethnic conflict and the state in the Horn of Africa. In *Ethnicity and conflict in the Horn of Africa*, edited by K. Fukui and J. Markakis, 217-237. London.

Mohammed Hassen. 1991. *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A history, 1570-1886*. Cambridge.

Mohiddin Ahmed. 1999. Resolution and reconciliation, rethinking and reinventing the traditions. Draft summary and outline. Paper presented at the All-Africa Conference on African Principles of Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, 8 - 12 November 1999, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Mwagiru, M. 1999. Conceptualising traditional conflict management mechanisms. Paper presented at the All-Africa Conference on African Principles of Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation, 8 - 12 November 1999, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Nathan, A. 1996. *Everything you need to know about conflict resolutions*. New York.

Negaso Gidada. 1984. A history of the Sayyoo Oromo of Southern Wallaga, Ethiopia. Ph.D. dissertation. Frankfurt.

Ngwane, G. 1996. *Settling disputes in Africa. Traditional basis for conflict resolution*. Yaunde.

Nsibambi, P. 1989. The land question and conflict. In *Conflict resolution in Uganda*, edited by K. Rupesinge, 223-248. Oslo.

Pawlos Chanie. 1998. The unfolding of politicised ethnicity in Ethiopia and the aftermath of its empowerment. Research report submitted for Tenth OSSREA Research Competition. Addis Ababa.

Pereira, S. 1900. *Cronaca de Susenyos rei d' Ethiopia*. Lisboa.

Quirin, J. 1997. Society and the state: Reflections from the North-West, 1300-1900 In *Ethiopia in broader perspective: Papers of the Thirteenth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. I, edited by K. Fukui et al., 221-241. Kyoto.

Rothchild, D., and U. A. Olorunsola. Eds. 1983. *State versus ethnic claims: African policy dilemmas*. Colorado.

Ryan, S. 1992. The United Nations and the resolution of ethnic conflict. In *Early warning and conflict resolution*, edited by K. Rupesinghe and M. Kuroda. London.

Simoons, F. J. 1960. *Northwest Ethiopia: People and economy*. Madison.

Stavenhagen, R. 1990. *The ethnic question: Conflicts, development and human rights*. Tokyo.

Tadesse Tamrat. 1988a. Nilo-Saharan interactions with neighbouring highlands: The case of Gumuz of Gojjam and Wallega. In *The Proceedings of the workshop on Famine Experience and Resettlement in Ethiopia*, 7-21. AAU, Institute of Development Research, Addis Ababa University.

_____. 1988b. Processes of ethnic interaction and integration in Ethiopian history: The case of the Agew. *Journal of African History* XXIX: 5-18.

Taye Retta. 1963. Gojjam Governorate General. *Geographical Society*, 22-30. London.

Tesemma Ta'a. 1980. The Oromo of Wallaga: A historical survey to 1910. MA Thesis, Department of History, School of Graduate Studies, Addis Ababa University.

Tsega Endalew. 1997. The Oromo of Wanbara: A historical survey to 1941. MA Thesis, Department of History, School of Graduate Studies, Addis Ababa University.

Woodhouse, T. 1996. Commentary: Negotiating a new millennium? Prospects for African conflict resolution. *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 68: 129-137.

ANNEX: LIST OF INFORMANTS

No.	Name	Age	Place and date of interview
1.	Abebe Gudata	58	Debre Zeyt & Sonkora, Jan. 1997
2.	Abetu Warga	90	March 1999
3.	Adam Beza	45	Kilaj, Jan. 2000
4.	Adam Endalew	75	Chagni, June 1999
5.	Admasu Gessesse	67	Bulan, March 1999
6.	Assege Rado	87	Debre Zeyt, Jan. 1997
7.	Assefa Abeje	65	Chagni, May 1999
8.	Ayeru Gonde	42	Debre Zeyt, Feb. 1997
9.	Atomsa Dibaba (<i>Grazmach</i>)	99	Debre Zeyt, Feb. 1997
10.	Ayana Waqjira	47	Galesa, March 1999
11.	Berasa Kasasa	66	Sonkora, Jan. 1997
12.	Bultum Obse	95	Debre Zeyt, Feb.1997
13.	Chinqaro Seno	58	Bulan, May 1999
14.	Deressa Amante	55	Debre Zeyt, Jan. 1997
15.	Dibaba Wanjo	98	Hebacha, Jan. 1997
16.	Dibisa Waqtole	67	Chagni, March 1999
17.	Dirirsa Dangala	95	Babbo, Jan. 1997
18.	Dukkan Aga	120	Galesa, March & Aug. 1999
19.	Gayo Dide	38	Debre Zeyt, Jan. 1997
20.	Gelate Ejjeta	55	Pawi, Oct. 1996
21.	Habesha Yimer	104	Zigam, Jan. 2000
22.	Haile Yilma	77	Dibati, June 1999
23.	Hinsermu Fayisa	60	Galesa, March 1999
24.	Huis Huido	65	Dibati, May 1999
25.	Jabessa Ejeta	85	Addis Ababa, Dec. 1996

No.	Name	Age	Place and date of interview
26.	Jana Abdi	92	Galesa, March 1999
27.	Mange Wirtu	45	Chagni & Galesa, March 1999
28.	Mekonnen W. Giyorgis (<i>Grazmach</i>)	85	Zigam, Jan. 2000
29.	Mekuriaw Bizuneh (<i>Grazmach</i>)	80	Chagni, May 1999
30.	Mengasha Beke	54	Bulan, May 1999

31.	Morca Gammada		Dangab, March 1999
32.	Niqus Duressa	69	Galesa, March 1999
33.	Niqus Kume	70	Dibati, May/June 1999
34.	Oljira Dibaba	67	Debre Zeyt, Jan. 1997
35.	Taddesse Fufa	38	Bahir Dar, Feb. & June 1999
36.	Taddesse Genneti	70	Galesa, May 1999
37.	Tefera Tuji	63	Sonkora, Jan. 1997
38.	Tefera Tuji	63	Sonkora, Jan. 1997
39.	Tibesa Dinagde	80	Berber, Jan. 1997
40.	Tsehay Sawasew	41	Debre Marqos, Feb. 1997
41.	Tura Gagga	96	Tuski in Berber, Jan. 1997
42.	Waqo Kosso	58	Galesa, May 1999
43.	Warkineh Donzino	80	Dibati, May 1999
44.	Yadesa Jara	43	Debre Zeyt, Jan. 1997

Contd.