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## OROMUMMA AND THE ELUSIVE QUEST FOR RECONCILIATION: AN AFRICAN COMMUNITY-BASED CONFLICT RESOLUTION MECHANISM

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### **Abstract**

*This article explores the concept of Oromumma and the pursuit of reconciliation among the Oromo people in Ethiopia. The Oromo possess a rich cultural heritage that emphasizes collective decision-making, social accountability, and human rights. Their reconciliation process serves as a community-based conflict resolution mechanism, prioritizing restorative justice and healing relationships between individuals and communities. However, this process faces significant challenges, including a lack of formal recognition and support from the Ethiopian government and judiciary. This essay argues that achieving reconciliation requires a long-term, multifaceted approach that addresses the underlying causes of conflict while promoting social and economic justice. By drawing on the principles of Oromumma and restorative justice, alternative conflict resolution mechanisms can be developed that are effective, legitimate, and sustainable. The pursuit of reconciliation for the Oromo people necessitates a deep understanding of their cultural heritage and values, as well as a commitment to addressing the root causes of conflict in a comprehensive manner.*

**Key words:** *Oromumma, Reconciliation, Peace, Oromo*

## INTRODUCTION

Oromumma is a multifaceted initiative that encompasses both national and global dimensions. At the national level, it serves as the primary ideology of the Oromo national movement, enabling the Oromo people to reclaim their cultural heritage, evaluate the impacts of Ethiopian colonialism, express collective grievances, and mobilize various cultural resources. This ideology fosters connections among personal, interpersonal, and national relationships, facilitating the development of Oromo-centric political strategies aimed at galvanizing the nation toward liberation.

On a global scale, Oromumma calls for an inclusive and democratic Oromo national movement that can form alliances with other political and social movements advocating for national self-determination and multinational democracy. The overarching goal is to create a world free from all forms of oppression and exploitation. This aligns with the concept of cultural revival, which emphasizes the importance of reclaiming and revitalizing cultural practices and traditions as a means of promoting identity and resistance against oppression (Asafa, 2014).

The global vision of Oromumma underscores the necessity for the Oromo national movement to be inclusive of all individuals and operate democratically. This inclusive approach allows the Oromo people to forge alliances with political forces and social movements that share principles of national self-determination and multinational democracy, thereby promoting a vision of global humanity free from oppression and exploitation. As Mohammed Hassen articulates, “Oromumma as a social movement is not only concerned with the welfare of the Oromo people but also with the welfare of all humanity” (Hassen, 2002).

Rooted in principles of mutual solidarity, social justice, and popular democracy, global Oromumma recognizes that the struggle for national liberation is interconnected with the global fight for justice and social equality. This perspective aligns with the principles of internationalism, which highlight the significance of solidarity and cooperation among oppressed peoples and nations in their liberation struggles (Asafa, 2010).

Historically and culturally, Oromo clans and clan families have lacked clear geopolitical boundaries, largely due to a long history of migration and settlement across vast territories. This reality has led to the presence of clans sharing the same name in different regions of Oromia, complicating social and political dynamics. For instance, the Jarso clan is dispersed across various regions, including East Hararghe, West Hararghe, Arsi, and Bale. Similarly, the Gida clan is found in Borana, Guji, and Jimma, while the Karayu clan spans West Hararghe, East Hararghe, and Guji. Other clans, such as the Galan and Nole, also exhibit this geographical dispersion (Gallo, 2016).

The absence of clear geopolitical boundaries among Oromo clans has significant implications for Oromo society and politics. A primary challenge has been the difficulty in establishing clear lines of authority and governance, often resulting in political fragmentation and conflicts between clans and regions. Mohammed Hassen notes that “the lack of a centralized political authority has made it difficult to maintain peace and stability in Oromo society” (Hassen, 2002). This fragmentation has led to the development of unique cultural practices and identities among different clans and regions. As Gallo (2016) points out, “the lack of a common language or political structure has contributed to the fragmentation of Oromo society into various sub-groups and regions, each with their own distinct cultural practices and identities.”

The absence of clear geopolitical boundaries among Oromo clans has significant consequences, particularly in the realm of conflict resolution. As Abbink (2000) notes, “the absence of a clear hierarchy and political structure has made it difficult to resolve conflicts between different Oromo clans and regions.” This difficulty underscores the complexity of governance within Oromo society, where traditional structures often clash with modern political realities.

Efforts to establish cohesive political structures have been ongoing for decades, with various organizations proposing different models of governance. One prominent group is the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), founded in 1973. The OLF has advocated for a centralized political authority to represent the interests of all Oromo clans and regions. This organization has played a critical role in articulating the political aspirations of the Oromo people, seeking greater political autonomy (Baxter, 1997).

In contrast, the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), established in 2009 as a coalition of various Oromo political parties, promotes a decentralized political system that recognizes regional autonomy while fostering national unity. The OFC has emerged as a key opposition party in Ethiopia, advocating for a federal system where power is decentralized to regional governments, allowing for a significant degree of local governance (Megersa, 2011).

However, the debate over the most appropriate political structure for Oromo society remains contentious. While some factions call for a centralized authority, others argue that a decentralized system better accommodates the diverse nature of Oromo communities. Hassen (2002) highlights that “the lack of a clear consensus on the appropriate model of political organization has been one of the main challenges facing the Oromo national movement.”

In recent years, there have been positive developments toward establishing a more cohesive political structure. The Oromo protests that began in 2014 marked a pivotal moment in the Oromo national movement, uniting individuals from various regions and backgrounds in a collective struggle for greater political freedom and autonomy. Additionally, the election of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister of Ethiopia in 2018 represented a significant shift in the political landscape, creating new opportunities for dialogue and negotiation between the Oromo community and the Ethiopian government (Mohammed, 2019).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The development of the article unfolded through a structured and methodical approach. It began with extensive research into the history, culture, and traditions of the Oromo people in Ethiopia. This involved delving into a wide array of academic articles, books, and other relevant sources to build a solid foundation of knowledge.

Next, the focus shifted to identifying key concepts and themes related to Oromumma and the pursuit of reconciliation. Important areas such as collective decision-making, social accountability, restorative justice, and human rights emerged as central to understanding the context. With the foundational concepts established, the analysis moved to examining the challenges and limitations of the Oromo reconciliation process. This phase sought to assess its effectiveness in resolving conflicts in a manner that resonates with the cultural values of the Oromo people. The exploration then turned to alternative conflict resolution mechanisms. Here, the emphasis was on identifying solutions that are culturally appropriate for Ethiopia, drawing inspiration from the principles of Oromumma and restorative justice.

To strengthen the arguments and conclusions, the article incorporated evidence and real-world examples, citing sources accurately to lend credibility to the research. Finally, the essay was organized in a clear and logical manner, featuring a strong introduction that set the stage, a well-structured body that explored the core themes, and a conclusive summary that encapsulated the key findings and implications. This systematic approach ensured a comprehensive exploration of Oromumma and reconciliation within the context of Oromo society.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The quest for reconciliation between the Oromo people and the Ethiopian state has been a prolonged and complex process. While recent years have witnessed some positive developments, significant challenges remain.

### **GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO PROTESTS**

The Ethiopian government's response to the Oromo protests from 2015 to 2018 was characterized by excessive use of force, mass arrests, and widespread human rights violations. This heavy-handed approach led to significant condemnation from the international community (Amnesty International, 2016). Although the government has made tentative efforts to address the concerns of the Oromo people, many activists and politicians argue that these measures fall short of what is necessary for genuine reconciliation.

### **DEEP-SEATED DISTRUST**

One of the primary challenges in this reconciliation effort is the profound distrust between the Oromo people and the Ethiopian state. As Mohammed (2019) highlights, the Oromo's historical experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and human rights abuses have fostered a deep-seated skepticism toward the government and its institutions. This distrust has been further intensified by the government's reaction to the protests, which many perceive as indicative of its unwillingness to genuinely engage with the Oromo community's concerns.

### **NEED FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGE**

Another significant challenge is the necessity for a fundamental transformation of the political and social structures within the Ethiopian state. Abbink (2019) asserts that "genuine reconciliation requires a fundamental shift in the political and social structures of the Ethiopian state, which have historically been dominated by narrow elite."

Achieving such a transformation would not only involve political reforms but also necessitate social and economic changes that address the deep-rooted inequalities and injustices faced by the Oromo people.

### **POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS**

Despite these considerable challenges, there have been notable positive developments. The election of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister in 2018 marked a significant shift in Ethiopian politics, opening new avenues for dialogue and negotiation between the Oromo people and the government (Mohammed, 2019). The government has also initiated some steps to address Oromo concerns, including releasing political prisoners and beginning a process of constitutional reform.

### **INSUFFICIENT MEASURES**

However, many Oromo activists and politicians contend that these measures are insufficient for achieving genuine reconciliation. Amnesty International (2019) emphasizes that "the Ethiopian government must take concrete steps to address the root causes of the protests, including the long-standing grievances of the Oromo people." This requires not just political reforms but also comprehensive social and economic reforms aimed at rectifying the inequalities and injustices that have historically marginalized the Oromo community. While there are signs of progress in the reconciliation process, substantial work remains to be done. Addressing the deep-rooted issues of distrust and structural inequalities is essential for fostering genuine reconciliation between the Oromo people and the Ethiopian state.

The examination of reconciliation, particularly through the lens of Donna Pankhurst's work, reveals a nuanced understanding of reconciliation as a process rather than a fixed end goal. Pankhurst emphasizes the critical importance of addressing the underlying causes of conflict within the reconciliation framework. Her perspective is supported by various case studies from different conflict contexts that illustrate the efficacy of a process-focused approach.

### **INFLUENCE OF PANKHURST'S FRAMEWORK**

Pankhurst's emphasis on addressing the structural causes of conflict has been particularly influential in shaping the concept of "structural reconciliation." As noted by Ellis and Bjorkdahl (2012), this concept highlights the necessity of tackling the root causes of conflict in the reconciliation process. Pankhurst's insights have significantly impacted reconciliation practices across diverse conflict scenarios.

For instance, in South Africa, the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was influenced by Pankhurst's principles. The TRC's focus on truth-telling, acknowledgment of past injustices, and reparations for victims aligns closely with the process-oriented approach Pankhurst advocates (Boraine, 2002). This framework facilitated a broader societal dialogue about apartheid's legacy and aimed to heal the divisions between racial groups.

Similarly, in Northern Ireland, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 reflects Pankhurst's emphasis on addressing structural causes of conflict. The agreement included provisions for power-sharing and the promotion of social and economic justice, demonstrating a commitment to healing and transformation through dialogue and negotiation (Daly, 2016). Such frameworks underscore the necessity of a comprehensive approach to reconciliation that goes beyond mere conflict resolution.

### **RECONCILIATION IN BROADER CONTEXTS**

The principles outlined by Pankhurst have also permeated other fields, such as transitional justice, which seeks to redress human rights abuses following conflict or authoritarian rule. Reconciliation is often viewed as a key objective in these contexts, further validating the relevance of Pankhurst's work (Teitel, 2003). Moreover, the application of reconciliation concepts extends to intergroup relations, workplace conflict, and family disputes, showcasing its versatility and importance across various settings (Bar-Tal and Bennink, 2004).

Pankhurst's insights on reconciliation echo the work of other scholars in the field, such as John Paul Lederach (1997), who advocate for a long-term, multifaceted approach to peacebuilding. This approach emphasizes the need to address the root causes of conflict while promoting social and economic justice, reinforcing the idea that reconciliation is integral to sustainable peace. Donna Pankhurst's paper, "Reconciliation: The Emphasis on Process," has significantly shaped both the conceptualization and practice of reconciliation across various conflict contexts. Her focus on the process-oriented approach, which prioritizes addressing underlying causes and fostering healing, has been widely adopted in both theory and practice. Despite the complexities and varied interpretations of

reconciliation, it fundamentally aims to restore relationships damaged by conflict, harm, or injustice, positioning it as a vital component in the pursuit of sustainable peace.

The exploration of reconciliation practices in various contexts highlights the significance of a process-focused approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. In particular, Lederach's seminal work, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, emphasizes the need for a transformative process that addresses the root causes of conflict while promoting long-term structural change. This holistic perspective integrates formal mechanisms, such as truth commissions and reparations programs, with grassroots initiatives aimed at fostering social and economic justice and empowering marginalized groups. This aligns closely with Pankhurst's advocacy for a process-oriented reconciliation approach that tackles underlying issues.

### **PROCESS-FOCUSED RECONCILIATION**

Scholars like Bar-Tal and Bennink (2004) further affirm the notion that reconciliation is not merely a destination but an ongoing process involving dialogue and negotiation. Their work highlights the importance of recognizing past wrongs, fostering empathy, and building trust between conflicting parties. Similarly, Lederach and Appleby (2010) advocate for a collaborative, long-term approach to peacebuilding that engages multiple stakeholders and addresses the fundamental causes of conflict.

### **THE OROMO RECONCILIATION GROUNDS**

A notable example of a community-based reconciliation mechanism is the Oromo reconciliation grounds, known as “Gumii Gaayoo” or “Gumii Gadaa.” These forums embody the Oromo people’s traditional conflict resolution practices and prioritize restorative justice, aiming to heal relationships among individuals and communities. The Oromo reconciliation grounds serve as platforms for negotiation, mediation, and reconciliation, attended by representatives from conflicting parties, elders, religious leaders, and community members.

The effectiveness of these forums is illustrated by cases such as a land dispute resolution in the Oromia region. In this instance, the parties involved participated in the reconciliation grounds, where they engaged in dialogue that led to a mutually acceptable settlement. This process involved the acknowledgment of past grievances and the establishment of preventive mechanisms to avert future conflicts (Megerssa, 2011).

### **RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PRINCIPLES**

The Oromo reconciliation grounds exemplify community-based conflict resolution that emphasizes restorative justice and relationship healing. By fostering dialogue and mediation, this approach contrasts with formal legal processes or punitive measures, aligning with restorative justice theories articulated by scholars like Zehr (1990) and Pankhurst (2009). The initiation of the Oromo reconciliation process involves identifying the conflict and selecting a mediator, typically a respected elder or religious leader. The mediator facilitates dialogue and helps the parties identify the root causes of their disputes, striving for a mutually agreeable solution. This process is rooted in the principle of Gadaa, a traditional democratic system that underscores collective decision-making, social accountability, and human rights.

### **CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS**

While the Oromo reconciliation process has demonstrated effectiveness in resolving conflicts in culturally appropriate ways, it faces significant challenges. One of the primary issues is the lack of recognition and support from the government and judiciary, which undermines the legitimacy and enforceability of decisions made in these forums. Without institutional backing, the outcomes of the reconciliation grounds may not be upheld, leading to a diminished impact in fostering social cohesion and community harmony. The integration of Lederach’s and Pankhurst’s frameworks with traditional practices, such as the Oromo reconciliation grounds, showcases the importance of a process-oriented approach to conflict resolution. While these practices reflect a commitment to restorative justice and community healing, addressing the systemic challenges they face is crucial for enhancing their effectiveness and sustainability in the broader context of peacebuilding.

Despite the challenges encountered by the Oromo reconciliation process, it remains a vital aspect of Oromo culture and has successfully resolved conflicts across various regions in Ethiopia. Its foundational principles of restorative justice, collective decision-making, and social accountability offer valuable

insights for developing alternative conflict resolution mechanisms that resonate with the cultural context of Ethiopia.

### **COMMUNITY-BASED CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

The Oromo reconciliation process exemplifies a community-based approach to conflict resolution that prioritizes restorative justice and the healing of relationships among individuals and communities. This methodology aligns with restorative justice principles advocated by scholars like Zehr (1990) and Pankhurst (2009). The process has effectively addressed various types of conflicts, including land disputes and inter-ethnic tensions, demonstrating its adaptability and effectiveness in multiple contexts.

### **INSIGHTS FOR ALTERNATIVE MECHANISMS**

The principles underlying the Oromo reconciliation process could inform the creation of more culturally appropriate conflict resolution mechanisms throughout Ethiopia. For instance, expanding and formalizing community-based forums akin to the Oromo reconciliation grounds could serve as a viable alternative to formal legal processes. These forums prioritize restorative justice and relationship healing, which may be more accessible and culturally relevant for many members of society.

Integrating the principles of collective decision-making and social accountability, central to the Oromo reconciliation process, into other conflict resolution mechanisms could further enhance their effectiveness. This integration could manifest in the formal justice system and government decision-making processes, promoting a participatory and inclusive approach that reflects the cultural values and traditions of the Ethiopian people.

### **PROMOTING INCLUSIVITY AND PARTICIPATION**

By incorporating these principles, Ethiopia could foster a more inclusive approach to conflict resolution and decision-making. Such a shift would encourage greater participation from diverse community members, ensuring that various perspectives are considered. This participatory framework aligns with the democratic ideals inherent in the Gadaa system, which emphasizes collective decision-making and social responsibility.

### **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the Oromo reconciliation process serves as a powerful example of community-based conflict resolution that prioritizes restorative justice and relationship healing. Despite facing significant challenges, its principles hold significant potential for informing the development of alternative conflict resolution mechanisms across Ethiopia. By embracing these culturally relevant approaches, the country can work towards more effective and inclusive conflict resolution strategies that resonate with the diverse needs of its population.

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