

Affini Culture and Its Role in Conflict Resolution and Peace Building in Sidama Regional State, Ethiopia

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Abstract: The Sidama *Affini* culture is vital for conflict resolution and peacebuilding in the Sidama Region, particularly in Wonsho, Hula, and Daara Woredas, emphasizing transparency, communication, and community involvement through elders' councils. Ethiopia's ethnic diversity has led to persistent conflicts, exacerbated by political and administrative structures, resulting in violence and social instability. Despite indigenous conflict-resolution systems like the Sidama *Affini* culture, their effectiveness remains understudied in modern peace building contexts. This research examines *Affini*'s role in conflict resolution and social cohesion, addressing critical gaps in traditional peace building approaches. The Sidama *Affini* culture has historically addressed inter-clan disputes, land conflicts, and communal tensions through restorative justice and dialogue, preventing prolonged violence. By examining its past successes, this study highlights how indigenous systems like *Affini* can complement modern peace building in Ethiopia's fractious ethnic landscape. Understanding its mechanisms offers actionable insights for policymakers to integrate traditional conflict-resolution practices into contemporary frameworks. This study examines the Sidama *Affini* culture role using qualitative methods. Data obtained through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and field observations. Moreover, the collected data analyzed thematically to identify types, structures, perceptions and major roles. Findings reveal that Sidama's indigenous institutions, led by elders (*chimessas*) selected via the 'Luwa' process, employ customary laws and spiritual sanctions to mediate disputes and maintain social harmony. The hierarchical 'songos' councils, alongside religious leaders, foster reconciliation and collective responsibility. However, modernization, generational shifts, and weak legal enforcement threaten its sustainability. Despite challenges, traditional mechanisms remain effective, especially in rural areas. The study recommends integrating indigenous systems with formal governance to enhance peacebuilding, urging government recognition and further research to preserve these practices for long-term social cohesion.

Keywords: Affini Culture, Conflict Resolution, Peace Building, Sidama Region, Ethiopia

I. Introduction

Traditional approaches to conflict resolution refer to indigenous, community-based methods of resolving disputes that are deeply rooted in cultural practices, customs, and communal values Ogato (2008a). These methods have been passed down through generations and play a vital role in maintaining social order, harmony, and cohesion within communities. Unlike formal legal systems, traditional conflict resolution is often informal and emphasizes reconciliation, mediation, and consensus-building rather than punishment (Amolo et al., 2022). Central to these approaches is the belief that restoring relationships between conflicting parties is crucial for the well-being of the community. Elders, spiritual leaders, or other respected figures within the community typically act as mediators, facilitating dialogue and helping the parties involved reach a mutually agreeable solution as stated by (Mboh, 2021).

In many African cultures, particularly in East Africa, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms emphasize collective societal responsibility and restorative justice, prioritizing healing and relationship restoration over retribution (Amolo et al., 2022; Okoi & Nalule, 2024). These processes often incorporate symbolic acts, rituals, and communal ceremonies to reinforce social bonds and restore peace, adapting flexibly to diverse disputes from familial tensions to inter-community conflicts (Folger et al., 2021). Conflict, an inevitable aspect of human interaction, must be managed or transformed to prevent societal disruption, with indigenous methods relying on mediation and third-party arbitration Francis, (2006). Ethiopia, home to diverse ethnic groups, exemplifies this through traditional systems like the Sidama's *Affini* culture, where elders' councils resolve disputes and maintain

harmony, often filling governance gaps (Markos (2014) & Abebe (2016). Unlike formal legal processes, Sidama’s indigenous mechanisms rooted in egalitarian values foster social cohesion, underscoring the potential for integrating traditional and modern frameworks to enhance peacebuilding (Pankhurst & Assefa, 2016).

Affini is a unique cultural value of the Sidama, referring to the transparency of practices among groups and individuals. It involves informing others about an issue before reacting to it. This practice is crucial for restricting violence, as it restrains individuals from reacting to provocative issues before allowing others to know or intervene (Markos, 2014).

Furthermore, Ethiopia, home to over eighty ethnic groups with distinct languages, cultures, and governance systems, has long experienced both cooperation and conflict among its diverse communities. Contemporary administrative structures and competition over power and resources have intensified ethnic tensions, leading to violence, societal breakdown, and displacement (Markos, 2014). Despite the prevalence of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms like the Sidama *Affini* culture, which emphasizes restorative justice and social cohesion there remains limited empirical research on their efficacy in modern Ethiopian society, particularly amid evolving socio-political challenges (Pankhurst & Assefa, 2016). Existing studies often overlook the practical application of traditional methods in current conflicts, leaving a critical gap in understanding their adaptability and comparative effectiveness (Hamer, 1987; Mulu, 2023; Ogato, 2008b). This study assesses the role of Sidama *Affini* culture in peacebuilding, examining its conflict resolution mechanisms, challenges (such as declining youth engagement), and implications for fostering social cohesion in Ethiopia’s ethnically fragmented landscape.

II. Data Collection and Methods

The Sidama Region, a densely populated agricultural hub in Ethiopia, faces growing tensions due to resource competition, ethnic diversity, and administrative complexities. The *Affini* tradition has historically resolved conflicts over land, resources, and clan disputes, preserving social cohesion in this coffee-rich, ethnically distinct area. By analyzing *Affini*’s adaptive conflict-resolution mechanisms, this study offers critical insights for addressing modern challenges in Sidama and similar multi-ethnic regions.



Figure 1: Sidama regional administrative map, 2024
Source: Sidama regional administration, 2024.

This qualitative study examines the traditional conflict resolution mechanisms of the Sidama *Affini* culture in Ethiopia's Sidama Region, focusing on its role in peacebuilding and social cohesion. The research was conducted across three selected woredas (Wonsho, Hula, and Daara) from May to December 2024.

Data was collected from the key informant interviews with elders, youth, and women, focus group discussions, and field observations. The study analyzes the region's indigenous governance systems, particularly the roles of traditional leaders like the *Mootee* and elder councils in mediating disputes through restorative justice approaches. Using thematic and content analysis methods, the research explores how these age-old practices function within contemporary society, their effectiveness in resolving conflicts, and their potential integration with modern legal systems. The investigation also considers challenges to these traditional systems, including generational shifts and modernization pressures, while maintaining strict ethical standards throughout the research process. By documenting these indigenous peace building practices, the study aims to contribute to broader understanding of alternative conflict resolution methods in ethnically diverse societies.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Demographic Profile

Out of the 15 In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) with different key informant's study participants, study findings reveal Sidama's indigenous conflict resolution systems remain strongly elder-dominated 66.7% of participants over 60 years and male-oriented 86.7%, with leadership primarily based on traditional knowledge rather than formal education 46.7% having only primary education. While these structures demonstrate cultural continuity through their agrarian foundation 66.7% farmers) and Protestant influences (86.7%), their effectiveness faces modern challenges due to limited youth 26.7% under 30) and female 13.3% participation. The presence of some college-educated leaders 20% suggests gradual institutional adaptation, but greater inclusion of younger generations and women appears necessary to maintain relevance amid societal changes. These results highlight both the enduring value of traditional systems in maintaining social cohesion and the need for careful structural evolution to address contemporary conflict resolution demands while preserving cultural identity. The findings suggest that hybrid governance models combining traditional wisdom with progressive inclusivity could enhance the institutions' long-term sustainability.

Structures of the Indigenous Institutions

The Sidama people, renowned for their rich cultural heritage, have a unique approach to governance and conflict resolution that differs significantly from systems like the Oromo *Gada*. Unlike the *Gada* system, which unites multiple functions of leadership and decision-making under one overarching institution, Sidama's indigenous institutions are distinct and categorized based on their specific roles within society. These include the generational age-grade system (*Luwa*), religious and belief-based institutions (*Budu Amano*), and administrative bodies like the Elders' Council (*Budu Gashooti Songo/Budu Songo*). Each of these institutions serves a vital purpose in maintaining social order, resolving conflicts, and guiding the community, reflecting the Sidama's deep-rooted values of collective responsibility, tradition, and social cohesion. This diverse structure ensures that governance is closely tied to the needs of the community and the preservation of its cultural identity. These are generational age grade system (*Luwa*), religious rite institutions or traditional belief (*Budu amano*) and administrative institutions or Elders council (*Budu gashooti songo/ Budu songo*) as stated by (Markos, 2014).

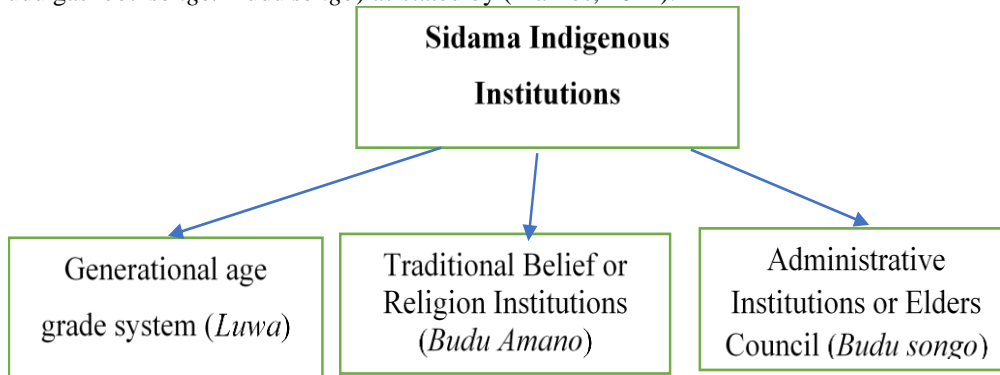


Figure Error! No text of specified style in document..2: Structure of Sidama Indigenous Institutions adapted from Markos, 2014

The *Luwa* system represents a complex generational class structure in Sidama society with debated origins - some attributing it to the Oromo *Gada* system while others tracing it to childhood games that evolved into organized groups. This age-grade system serves multiple social functions, transforming youth into adulthood through initiation rituals that include communal activities like hunting and defense training, though modern adaptations have shortened traditional three-month camping periods due to financial constraints. The hierarchical structure features clearly defined leadership roles (*Gadanna*, *Jalaawa*, *Sadasso*) and follows a strict 35-year *cyclical progression* where sons cannot become elders until their fathers complete the cycle. While maintaining traditional elements like physical training and communal bonding, the system has adapted to modern norms by abandoning practices like cattle raiding. *Luwa's* multifaceted role encompasses social, ritual, cultural, administrative and military dimensions, preserving inter-generational knowledge transfer through its structured phases while demonstrating adaptability to contemporary societal changes. The system's enduring significance lies in its ability to maintain cultural continuity while gradually evolving to remain relevant in modern Sidama society.

The role and position of *Gadaana* and in the wider community in general and the age group in particular as follows:

... “a ritual leader, known as *Gadaana*, is elected for his qualities as a peacemaker, which are symbolized by his physical perfection, strong character, oratorical skills, wisdom, and circumcision. As a figure of peace, the *Gadaana* is prohibited from engaging in war or cattle raiding, roles traditionally associated with conflict. Although the practice of such activities has become rare in contemporary times, the *Gadaana's* role in maintaining peace remains vital within the community.”

The one who pass through the whole processes and promote the ritual ceremony including circumcision is extoled as one who has achieved the highest status in a community and given high respect and responsibility in the community and achieve the title known as *Chimessa*. The one who become *Chimessa* through the processes of *Luwa* can maintain the position of membership in indigenous institutions and nominated by indigenous institution to resolve conflicts. Moreover, *Gadanna* himself remains one of the two most highly respected peacemakers: he is not only called upon to settle disputes within his *Luwa*, but he can be requested to negotiate settlements, in cases where elders' councils fail to manage, anywhere in Sidama. This is not, however, by (Markos, 2014) stated as regular undertakings of *Gadanna* as a ritual leader of *Luwa*; rather he gives ad hoc solution whenever there is an issue that is brought to its attention.

Roles of Indigenous Institutions in Conflict Resolution

Indigenous institutions in Sidama, particularly the *Affini* culture, play a crucial role in maintaining peace and social harmony through traditional conflict resolution and collective governance. These institutions, including the generational age-grade system, elder councils, and religious bodies, are deeply rooted in Sidama's cultural values and emphasize restorative justice, reconciliation, and community cohesion. Studies by scholars such as highlight their effectiveness in resolving disputes ranging from familial to societal conflicts through mediation and customary laws that prioritize restoring relationships over punitive measures (Kurimoto & Simonse, 1998). Indigenous leaders affirm that these systems foster unity by addressing conflicts within a familiar cultural framework, contrasting with the perceived impersonality of formal legal systems. However, despite their historical success, these institutions

The mechanisms of Sidama's indigenous institutions are interdependent, with the *luwa* (age-grade) system serving as the foundation for political, religious, and social structures. As noted by Markos (2014) and Abebe (2016), the *luwa* system's initiation rites determine eligibility for leadership roles in conflict resolution and governance, ensuring that only those who undergo these traditions earn societal respect and authority. Key informant interviews (KIIs) reveal that these institutions collaboratively design and apply conflict resolution strategies to address disputes among individuals and groups, reinforcing their interconnectedness. While these traditional systems are praised for their accessibility and fairness as echoed in Haggmann's (2006) research their survival is increasingly jeopardized by external pressures, underscoring the need to preserve their integrative role in Sidama society.

The Sidama indigenous religious institution plays a central role in managing the spiritual life of the community, overseeing rituals, traditional festivities, and advising traditional political leaders on governance matters. Religious leaders such as *Gaana*, *Woma*, *Qaaricha*, *Gaadalla*, and *Qaddo* preside over religious affairs while reinforcing core values like *hallaale* (ancestral veneration) and devotion to *Magano* (the Creator). Scholars like Doffana (2014) and Markos (2014) emphasize that this institution ensures adherence to cultural norms, acting as a bridge between the community and the divine, with elders believed to receive wisdom from *Magano* for conflict resolution. The interplay between religion and politics is deeply intertwined, as religious rituals legitimize leadership, foster obedience, and enhance the credibility of elders' decisions—often invoking divine authority and sacred principles like *hallaale*. Conflict resolution frequently occurs in sacred spaces, blending spiritual and political dimensions, with ancestral and divine mediation seen as key to restoring harmony. This symbiotic relationship

makes it difficult to separate religious and political institutions in informal dispute resolution, as both work collectively to uphold societal welfare, a view supported by Kealotswe and (Dale Carnegie & Simon and Schuster, 2009), who highlight the spiritual restoration of relationships in traditional justice systems.

Indigenous institutions in Sidama have long been central to the peaceful coexistence of the community, fostering social harmony through conflict resolution and maintaining collective order. These institutions are deeply intertwined with the traditional values and practices of the Sidama people, providing mechanisms for managing disputes, preserving peace, and strengthening social cohesion. The Sidama governance system, commonly referred to as *Affini* culture, is characterized by various structures, such as the generational age-grade system, elder councils, and religious institutions. These structures are instrumental in maintaining societal order, with their roles extending beyond conflict resolution to include the preservation of traditions and cultural practices. According to a 54-year-old indigenous leader, “*the Sidama governance system has always provided a reliable means of conflict resolution that keeps us together as a community, ensuring that issues are solved within our traditional context.*” This observation is supported by studies on African indigenous governance systems, including those by Kurimoto and Simonse (1998), which highlight how such systems have historically maintained peace and harmony within local communities, emphasizing collective responsibility and restorative justice practices.

Conflict resolution is one of the most important functions of Sidama's indigenous institutions. The *Affini* culture, through the mediation of elders and local leaders, ensures that disputes whether familial, societal, or personal are resolved in a manner that restores harmony without resorting to punitive measures. These institutions operate under customary laws that emphasize reconciliation, forgiveness, and community solidarity. For example, in cases of land disputes or minor criminal offenses, the focus is on restoring relationships rather than punishing individuals. A 62-year-old indigenous leader remarked, “*When there is conflict in the community, we sit with elders, and the primary goal is always reconciliation; it’s not about punishing anyone, but about making sure we can all live together again peacefully.*” This approach contrasts with the formal legal system, which can often be perceived as distant or impersonal by local populations. As such, indigenous conflict resolution is highly regarded within the Sidama community for its relatability, immediacy, and fairness. These views are consistent with research by Hagmann (2006), which emphasizes that indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms in Africa are not only deeply rooted in tradition but also valued for their accessibility and fairness (Babalola & Onapajo, 2018; Okoi & Nalule, 2024; Salawu *et al.*, 2023). However, as this study reveals, these traditional institutions are increasingly under threat due to socio-political and economic transformations, as well as the forces of globalization, which challenge their relevance and effectiveness.

Peace Impact on Social Harmony

In Sidama, indigenous institutions play a vital role in conflict resolution, blending spiritual and political authority to maintain social harmony. Sacred sites like Wonsho serve as venues for resolving disputes particularly those involving mysticism, theft, or boundary issues; where ritual leaders invoke ancestral spirits and oaths to uncover the truth, with decisions considered binding and backed by the fear of divine retribution. Meanwhile, the *Songo* system comprising hierarchical councils of elders (*Ollu Songo, Ayidu Songo, Garote Songo, and Mootete Songo*) handles conflicts through a structured process, beginning at the local level and escalating to the Mootete *Songo* for complex cases like murder. Deliberations occur in open spaces (*Budu Batala*) or elders’ offices, guided by the principle of *halaale* (truth), with elders cross-examining parties to reach consensus. Remedies range from compensation (*harafo* or *guma* for severe offenses like homicide) to social sanctions (*seera* and *loogo* for taboo violations), often concluding with rituals (e.g., shared meals or lamb slaughtering) to restore unity. These systems, deeply rooted in Sidama’s cultural and spiritual values, emphasize reconciliation over punishment, with elders and religious leaders wielding moral authority to enforce compliance. However, their efficacy faces challenges from modernization, despite their enduring relevance in fostering communal trust and restorative justice (Abebe, 2001; Abebe, 2016; Doffana, 2014; Flores, 2020).

IV. Challenges of indigenous Sidama *Affini* culture

Political Influence and Challenges

The indigenous *Affini* culture of Sidama, including the *Luwa* age-grade system and Elders’ Council, has long been central to local governance and conflict resolution, but its political influence is increasingly challenged by state centralization and globalization. Formal state structures, as noted by Assefa (2005), often marginalize traditional institutions, undermining the authority of elders and replacing indigenous dispute resolution with standardized judicial systems. The professionalization of governance, as highlighted by Mellese *et al.* (2008); (Ogato, 2008b), further erodes traditional political roles, prioritizing uniformity over localized practices and diminishing the autonomy of Sidama’s indigenous leaders. This tension between state-imposed policies and

customary systems weakens the ability of traditional institutions to maintain social order, resolve conflicts, and exercise meaningful governance, threatening their continued relevance in an evolving political landscape.

Exercise Indigenous Wisdom

Sidama's indigenous institutions have long exercised deep-rooted wisdom, which is central to their role in maintaining societal balance and conflict resolution. This wisdom, often passed down through generations, is embedded in the values, customs, and practices that guide the community. The indigenous institutions, including the elder councils and religious leaders, exercise this wisdom in resolving conflicts and making decisions that maintain harmony within the community. One of the key elements of this wisdom is the emphasis on restorative justice rather than punitive measures.

As explained by a 61-year-old indigenous leader, "*Our wisdom teaches us that forgiveness and reconciliation are more powerful than punishment, and this is how we restore peace.*" In Sidama, conflict resolution is not about retribution but about understanding, mutual respect, and restoring relationships. Elders and religious leaders utilize a combination of moral teachings, spiritual insight, and practical knowledge to address disputes, ensuring that resolutions are aligned with the community's long-term wellbeing.

Furthermore, the exercise of indigenous wisdom in Sidama is reflected in the adaptability and resilience of the society in the face of external pressures. Despite the challenges posed by modernization, globalization, and social change, Sidama indigenous institutions continue to exercise their wisdom in ways that help the community navigate these changes while preserving their cultural heritage. This wisdom has allowed the Sidama people to maintain social cohesion, even as they adapt to the evolving political and economic landscape. A 58-year-old leader noted, "*We may not have formal systems like courts, but our wisdom helps us make decisions that feel right for our people, and that is why we continue to be effective.*" The wisdom of Sidama's indigenous institutions lies not just in their ability to resolve conflicts but in their capacity to maintain a deep sense of identity and unity in a changing world.

Modern Government versus Indigenous Institutions in Conflict Resolution

There are several instances that prove traditional institutions are expected to deal with specific matters in contemporary Sidama society. One is the geographic location of the areas within Sidama. In most remote and rural areas, the people prefer traditional indigenous institutions to government structures to deal with cases of conflicts or pressing problems that adversely affect them in places that are in proximity to the localities of their domicile. This is due to the problem of affordability of access to local government institutions since a complaint is expected to go at least 15 km on foot from his or her vicinity to get government since '*firdishongo*', the structure of government which is found at kebele level, has no ability to resolve conflict resorted in the culture (ibid).

In instances when socio-cultural matters, values and beliefs are involved people prefer to communicate traditional indigenous institutions to government structure in the way of resolving outstanding issues. For example, matters related to dowry payment or marriage within a clan fall under this category. Litigants who have no written evidence or witnesses on a given case would also prefer to go to the elders' council for investigation and decision making on the basis of *halaale* or appeal to *kaaliqa* (creator) to render justice whenever the need arises. Key Informants also expressed that in the modern justice system, decisions are mainly based on the evidences obtained from three witnesses whereas in the *songo* system the investigation process is not so long and it involves rituals on the basis of the *halaale*. In the elders' councils of traditional indigenous institution, gives more focus on identifying the issue of contention between individuals and groups. According to the elders, justice dispensed by the elders' council is fair and just than that of the modern justice system.

Traditional leadership systems tend to have a better understanding of the local context than the formal structures of government. In dealing with conflict management, traditional leadership addresses the root causes of conflicts while government structures are inclined to administering penalties against violators without identifying the root causes of the conflict that could serve as inputs in making decision. Besides, the formal courts lack effective mechanism that could be instrumental in compensating the victims. The possibility of injustices and lack of fairness in the mode of operation of formal government is more likely to occur than is the case with traditional conflict management schemes. Moreover, the processes and procedures characterizing operations of formal judicial systems are more complex, costly, and inaccessible favoring those with modern education and urban lifestyles than rural residents Abebe, (2016). In this connection, Hamer (1987) cited in Markos (2014) highlighted the role, status and advantages of traditional institution during the military regime, which is also partly a reflection of existing state of affairs in contemporary Sidama society:

....."*Elders' councils play a crucial role in shaping local policy and resolving disputes in ways that government bodies often cannot. This is due, in part, to the limited resources available to the government to effectively govern rural areas, as well as the fact that elders' councils offer a more affordable and efficient alternative to formal*

government courts. The elders, with their deep knowledge of local customs and traditions, are able to address conflicts more swiftly and in a manner that is often more accessible to the community. Moreover, while the central government's reliance on bribery and corruption may provide temporary solutions to the challenges posed by a lack of resources and the difficulty of managing local affairs, it has eroded the credibility of formal institutions. In contrast, the customary institutions led by elders retain their authority and respect within the community, as they are perceived as more legitimate and impartial. The efficiency, cultural relevance, and perceived integrity of the elders' councils make them a preferred option for resolving disputes, thus positioning them as a powerful social control mechanism in rural areas where government intervention is limited."

With regards to law enforcement, the transgressor is confined to his/her house isolated from the society until the case is exhaustively reviewed and settled though traditional leadership has no prison. There are clear differences between the two whereby traditional systems focus on the culture and way of life of the people and rely on customary norms and practices and established values whereas government structures rely on implementing the law that is already enacted.

Integration between Modern Government and Indigenous

A number of scholars acclaimed that the success of conflict resolution is the combination of effort of different concerned bodies. As one saying goes "*one hand cannot wash a face*", the existence of gap is inevitable if only one institution strives to resolve a conflict in the complete sense. Yemanebrihan (2016) argued that one of the institutions cannot be successful without the other because the formal mechanism has its own legal means (police force, militia) to maintain order in the area whereas the indigenous one has the experience and traditional authority to harmonize the relation of the people and strengthen social cohesion. This implies that the indigenous institutions of conflict resolution and the formal court system collaboration are inevitable.

There are certain areas that these institutions work together as far as the peace maintaining and conflict resolution are concerned. Those collaborative works are made for the mutual benefits of the institutions on one hand and to keep the societies peace and stability on the other. Both institutions' collaborative work for mutual benefit is viewed when they see issues regarding a family dispute such as post mercy reconciliation of conflict, divorce, property inheritance and property division. According to discussant, in formal court system resolutions of those conflicts are virtually left to the indigenous conflict resolution mechanism in Sidama society since resolution by indigenous institutions would give sustainable solution among the parties.

In the other instances, the elders may request the support of police to ensure temporary peace and security if the presentation of disputants lead them violence while they are presenting their cases to the initial hearing of *songos*. Sometimes, as to the discussant, severe violence might be occurred as a result of quarrel and insults in the process of resolving the disagreement that existed between the two parties.

To avoid this act, *songo* can request the help of local militias or other security forces that might be sent from the police office to watch the situation until the two conflicting parties become calm. Therefore, this is one of the signs of the existence of the relationship between the indigenous institution and government system. Generally, the collaborative work of both indigenous institution and government system has paramount importance to ensure peace and security in the community.

Economic Influence and the Impact of Modernization

The economic function of Sidama's indigenous institutions, historically crucial in managing communal resources and resolving land-related disputes, has been significantly eroded by modern economic systems and capitalist practices. These traditional mechanisms, once central to equitable resource distribution and collective conflict resolution, are increasingly sidelined by privatization, market-driven economies, and state-led economic frameworks (Adebayo *et al.*, 2014; Fisher, 2000). The shift from communal ownership to individual wealth accumulation has weakened social cohesion, reducing reliance on indigenous dispute resolution in favor of formal legal processes. Additionally, younger generations, immersed in modern education and globalized economic pursuits, increasingly perceive traditional systems as obsolete, further marginalizing these institutions (Kurimoto & Simonse, 1998). This generational disengagement, coupled with the individualistic nature of capitalism, has diminished the economic relevance of indigenous governance, undermining its ability to maintain resource equity and social harmony in Sidama society.

Social Attitudes and Generational Shifts

The social influence of Sidama's indigenous institutions is undergoing significant transformation as modern forces reshape community attitudes toward tradition, justice, and collective identity. Historically, these institutions; particularly the Elders' Council and generational systems, reinforced social cohesion through shared values, restorative justice, and communal trust. However, Jeong (2005) observes that younger generations increasingly view these practices as incompatible with modernity, prioritizing formal education, technology, and globalized career

aspirations over traditional governance. This generational divide is exacerbated by competing value systems, as the proliferation of Christian denominations undermines indigenous spiritual frameworks like *Budu Amano*, while state legal systems displace customary conflict resolution. The resulting fragmentations of belief systems and the youth's preference for individual rights over collective norms have diminished the authority of traditional institutions, eroding their capacity to maintain social harmony. Consequently, the very fabric of Sidama society; once woven together by indigenous systems now faces strains from these intersecting pressures of globalization, religious diversification, and state-centric governance.

Globalization and Modernization Challenges

Globalization and modernization have profoundly disrupted Sidama's indigenous institutions, straining their ability to preserve cultural identity while navigating contemporary governance demands. The pervasive influence of Western ideologies emphasizing individualism, formal democracy, and neoliberal economics has eroded collective values central to Sidama's traditional systems, such as the *Luwa* age-grade structure and community-based justice (Kurimoto & Simonse, 1998). Compounding this, Ethiopia's legal framework offers only partial recognition of indigenous practices, acknowledging them in family disputes but excluding serious crimes, thereby marginalizing their authority in broader conflict resolution. The state's preference for formal judicial mechanisms, coupled with globalization's cultural homogenization, has accelerated youth disengagement from traditional systems, as modern education and technology promote alternative worldviews. Without institutional adaptation or policy support, Sidama's indigenous governance risks further irrelevance, caught between the inertia of tradition and the relentless pressures of global modernity.

V. Conclusions

Scholars universally agree that avoiding conflict is unnatural and counterproductive to development, necessitating wise intervention before it escalates destructively. While countries worldwide have developed varied conflict resolution mechanisms, Africa's approaches are uniquely rooted in local customs, making indigenous institutions indispensable for effective dispute resolution. In Ethiopia's diverse sociocultural landscape, indigenous systems thrive, with Sidama society exemplifying this through interconnected institutions like the *luwa* age-grade system, elders' councils (*Songo*), and traditional religious leaders, all collaboratively sustaining social harmony. These institutions, deeply embedded in cultural values like *hallale* (truth), remain vital for stability and cohesion despite societal changes, as observed in Wonsho, Hula, and Daara districts, where their wisdom fosters trust, inclusivity, and enduring peace. Sidama's elders employ persuasive proverbs (*Maamasha*) and restorative processes that not only resolve disputes but also rebuild post-conflict relationships capabilities often surpassing formal legal systems. However, challenges like modernization, youth disengagement, and lack of enforcement tools threaten these systems. Yet, emerging collaborations with government structures offer promise, combining indigenous root-cause resolution with state resources to address gaps in both traditional and formal justice. This synergy enhances peacebuilding, underscoring the need to preserve and integrate indigenous institutions to harness their cost-effective, culturally attuned conflict resolution potential while mitigating their limitations through structured partnerships.

Suggestions and challenges

To strengthen the role of Sidama's indigenous institutions in conflict resolution, policymakers should formally recognize and integrate these systems into the national legal framework, particularly for criminal and civil disputes beyond family matters. This requires legislative reforms to define jurisdictional boundaries; ensuring indigenous mechanisms operate alongside rather than in competition with formal courts. However, challenges persist, including generational disengagement as youth prioritize modern education and careers over traditional practices, as well as the erosion of communal values due to globalization and religious diversification. Additionally, indigenous institutions lack enforcement mechanisms (e.g., prisons or fines), relying instead on moral authority and social sanctions, which may be ineffective in severe cases. To address these gaps, capacity-building initiatives could train elders in contemporary mediation techniques while preserving cultural principles like *hallale*. Meanwhile, the government should document and institutionalize best practices from indigenous systems, such as restorative justice and community dialogue, to complement state-led peace building. Yet, balancing tradition with modernity remains contentious, as excessive formalization risks diluting the flexibility and cultural specificity that make these institutions effective. A collaborative approach combining state resources with indigenous legitimacy could mitigate these tensions, but only if implemented with sensitivity to local autonomy and evolving societal dynamics.

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and formal analysis were performed by all. The original draft of the manuscript was written by all authors and commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Declarations

Ethical approval and informed consent to voluntarily participate

Ethical approval and consent to voluntarily participate and Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Review Committee (IRERC) of Hawassa University. The Director of Research and Community Services also provided the permission. Moreover, supporting letter was taken from the Sidama Regional State and given to Sidama district for the field work survey. Verbal informed consent from each participant was obtained during data collection. The farmers' were given the right to refuse to take part in the study as well as to withdraw at any time during the study. All participants, farmers' and experts were assured of confidentiality.

The entire fully informed competent person expressed their voluntary agreement to participate in the research process. They understood that their participation is voluntary and they are free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. Moreover, they are confirmed that they will be given a copy of this consent form. They voluntarily agreed to take part in the study.

Consent for publication

The authors obtained permission from all participants in the Sidama Regional State and Hawassa University to publish the work.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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