

# Arsi Oromo Descent and Indigenous Moral system in Ethiopia: With particular emphasis on Guma System in Shashemene City of Oromia regional State

Benti Mekonen Abdisa<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1\*</sup> Lecturer, Department of Civics and Ethical Studies, College of Social Science and Humanities, Dambi Dollo University, Dambi Dollo, Oromia regional State, Ethiopia.

<sup>1\*</sup>Corresponding Author: Benti Mekonen Abdisa<sup>1</sup>

## GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



### Highlight

- Indigenous moral systems are a crucial point of reference in conflict resolution and peace building arenas.
- Inter-clan relationship or kinship and Social cohesion among Arsi are very strong.
- *Gumaa* is one of the Oromo indigenous moral institutions of conflict resolution, justice administration and peace-building.

**Abstract:-** The essential drive of this article is to deal with indigenous moral system of conflict resolution among the Arsi Oromo with particular emphasis on Guma moral system in Shashemene City of Oromia regional State. To realize its intended objectives the study employed qualitative research approach. Relevant data for this article were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Tools such as key informant interview, focus group discussion, and non-participant observation were utilized for collecting primary data depending on the objectives of the study. The data obtained from both primary and secondary sources were organized thematically and analyzed qualitatively. The findings of this study reveal the existence of different indigenous moral system among the study community

including Guma system. Guma as indigenous moral institutions of conflict resolution are functional in conflicts which involve homicides. Lastly, the findings of this study verified that a conflict arises from different sources in Arsi Oromo community of Shashemene city are a collective concern of the community. Therefore, the mechanisms to regulate the breakdown of shared norms and values and ensure social cohesion and collective sentiments as a basis of social order and harmony is through social structures of moral system. This holds true to Arsi Oromo where the social norms, values and institutions are important in regulating the social tensions, stresses and strain emerged in the community as a result of conflicts by creating consensus among its members at large based on the findings of the study.

**Keywords:-** *Guma, Indigenous Moral System, Conflict Resolution, Arsi Oromo.*

## I. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

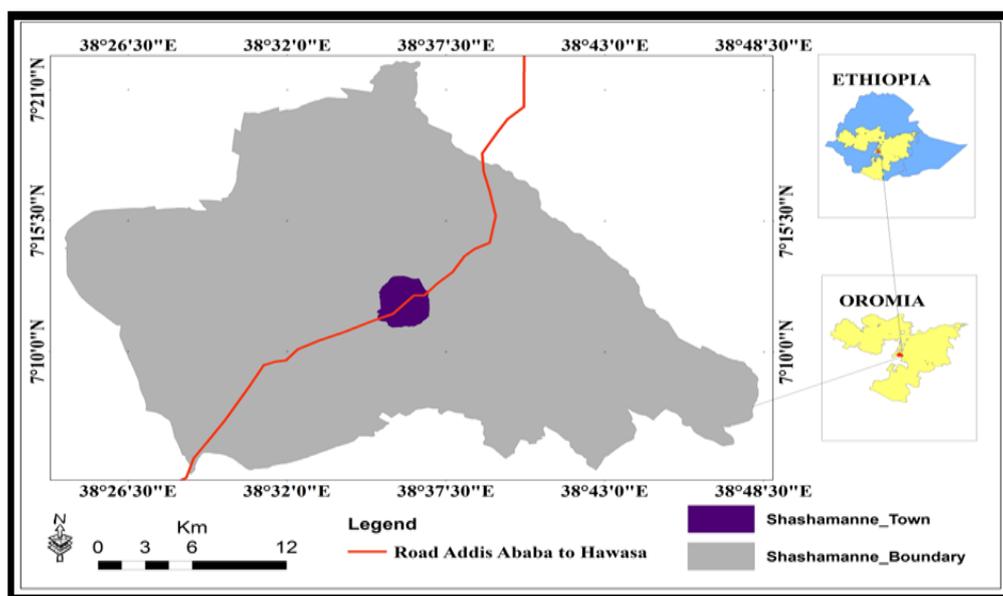
Oromo are the single largest ethnonation in the eastern part of Africa (Mohammed, 1996) that lived for millennia keeping their culture, values and norms which apparently follow the egalitarian political systems-*Gadaa* (Asmerom, 1973). They occupy a land that extends from northeastern Ethiopia to east central Kenya and from the Sudan in the west and Somalia in the east (Lewis, 1984: 590). The Oromo speak a common language. This language is categorized as eastern Cushitic (Huntingford, 1955:19). There is no agreement among scholars about the population of the Oromo, but a consensus seems to reveal that within the present day Ethiopia alone, the Oromo account either the majority or a good half of the total population (Lewis, 1984: 571). The Oromo, according to Gemetchu (1993) are divided into five major groups: the *Tulamaa and the Maccaa, the Sabboo and the Goonaa, the Raayyaa and the Azeboo, the Sikkoo and the Mandoo and the Ituu and the Humbannaa*.

### Geographical Setting, Population and Settlement Pattern

The city of Shashemene is located in Oromia Administrative Regional State at about 250 Km due south of Addis Ababa. Geographically the Town is located at 7° North latitude and 38° East longitudes. It lies within the Great Rift Valley system and is close to the holiday resorts at *Awassa, Langanno and Shala, Abiyata* park (Solomon, 2008). Its altitude ranges from 1,672 to 2772 m above sea. Mount Abaro is the highest point. There are four rivers namely, *Gogeti, Melka Oda, Issa and Dhadhaba* (Gunnilla, 1985). Shashemene is one of the fastest growing urban centers in Oromia National Regional State and has large 11 *kebeles* and also among the first grade cities in Oromia National State. The city has five get ways to get in and out of it. The gets serve as junctions which link the city with different parts of the country. It is also a town of passage that has been transverse by commercial road

junction which serves as spot and point of departure to south part of the country. Shashemene is the center of trade, transport, Communication and administration center of west Arsi and the capital city of west Arsi zone. The city administration of Shashemene in its present form came in to being in 1911 and was the seat of Fitawurari Habte Gebriel (Birhanu, 2008). It was select as a seat, due to its importance as major trade and transportations routes that passed via Shashemene. The urban land of Shashemene stretches over 1,858 hectares of Land. Climatically Shashemene district falls in to three climatic zones known as Dega, Woinadega, and Kolla. The temperature level ranges from 12-28° centigrade and yearly rainfall varies from 1,500-2000mm. It also experiences moderate temperature and rainfall (*Ibid*). Shashemene is the residence of different ethnic groups. Predominantly Oromo, Amhara, Wolayita, Gurage, Kanbata, Sidama, Tigre, Jamaican, Arabs are the major compositions that constitutes more than 85% of the population (Shashemene Administration report, 2020.)

The population of the city is rapidly increasing from time to time at an average growth rate of 5.4% per annual. Because of favorable living condition there is high immigration. According to Shashemene city Administration report of 2013 the current population of the city is over 236, 5437. According to the 2007 National census reported a total population for this city was about 246,774 (this number doesn't include the recently included *kebeles*), from the rural areas of a new master plan. According to 2005 central statics agency report the city has an estimated total population of 339,981 with estimated area of 759.53 square kilometer and has an estimated population density of 447.6 populations per square kilometers. It is the most densely populated city in south west of east Shewa zone (Birhanu, 2008). The dwellers of Shashemene are the followers of different religion namely Islam, protestant, Orthodox Christianity, catholic, the seven day advents, waqefeta and Rastefarians.



**Map1:** Geographical Location of the Study Area, Shashemene city, Oromia, Ethiopia  
(Source: Shashemene Culture and Tourism bureau office, February, 17/2020).

According to Asmerom (1973:9), Borana Oromo still practices almost all of the Oromo culture, social institution, political arrangement, traditional laws, and belief systems. The Oromo's belong to the Cushitic language family from Afro-Asiatic super family of language which extends over the horn of Africa and the single largest ethnic group (Koree, 2000: 15). The Oromo share common cultural heritage and speak the same language (*Afaan Oromo*) or Oromo language which is written in Latin script, with slightly different dialect. They are followers of the religions of Islam, Christianity and *Waaqeffannaa*; the indigenous Oromo religion.

Among the Oromo in general and the Arsi in particular, there were and still are indigenous moral institutions and practices of conflict settlement. The Oromo people settle various disputes through indigenous institutions that they have developed through long years of experience. As Mamo (2006) notes, the Oromo people solve most of the problems of human relations through their own institutions moral system and mechanisms outside of state structure. In Oromo community there are several indigenous moral institutions for dispute resolution. They are such *Gadaa* system as an umbrella concept, *jaarsummaa*, *Qaalluu* system or decision of spiritual leaders', *gumaa system*, *siiqqee institution*, *Waaqeffannaa*, *Irreechaa*, *Moggaasaa*, *Guddifachaa*, *Marabbaa*, *Medhichaa*, *kakuu*, *Buttaa* etc. This article was made to look at the role and the place of *guma* moral system in particular among Arsi Oromo of Shashemene city. More specifically, this study was attempted to:-

- To examine Arsi Oromo descent and paternal kinship structure and
- Explore the procedures through which *guma* take place in the process of conflict resolution in the study area;

## II. METHODOLOGY

The researcher used the qualitative descriptive method to analyze and investigate the marriage practices and indigenous institution in conflict resolution mechanisms among Oromo communities in West Arsi Zone, Shashemene city. So, as to make the more reliable, secure the validity and reliability of the study and increase the depth of my study, qualitative data types and analysis were employed, due to the following reasons. First, due to the nature of the research, which focuses on the community's beliefs, opinions, attitudes and relationships. Second, being an explanatory and descriptive research, qualitative approach is selected as pertinent in order to have critical and deeper understanding of the social phenomenon that is often carried out in a natural context. Moreover, qualitative research is preferred to collect data about human life realities, experiences, behavior, emotion and feeling, organizational function, social movement, cultural phenomena and their interaction with nature (Bernard, 1994). For this particular study, the sampling design that were used in this study is non-probability convenience sampling techniques (purposive sampling), because this technique allows respondents to be selected based on their knowledge and

convenient accessibility. The researcher used two sources of data, the primary and secondary sources. The primary sources of data were obtained from field through interview, and field observation from Arsi Oromo community living in the Shashemene city of the Oromia National Regional State.

Any researcher has the responsibility of analyzing data to meet his/her objectives as well as to make the findings ready for scholarly consumption. Therefore, in this study, all the data were collected through the qualitative techniques of data collection methods and thus were analyzed qualitatively. The primary data gathered through various methods and the secondary data were organized thematically and analyzed through triangulation in order to increase the validity and reliability of the findings of the study. Findings gathered through different qualitative techniques of data collection were mixed in the analysis and interpretation section.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Descent and Paternal Kinship Structure of Arsi Oromo

Kinship system is another form of social organization. According to Asmerom (1973) and Knutson (1967), the Oromo describe their genealogy beginning from the largest kinship system, *gosa*, which is subdivided into moiety, sub-moiety and *qomoo* (clan) (Assefa 2012: 139). These subdivisions have lower-order branches of kinship known as *mana* (lineage), *balbala* (minor lineages), and *warra* (minimal lineage or extended family).

Ethnographic research among the Arsi Oromo also reveals the kinship structure from the family to clan as *mana/warra* (family/extended family), *araddaa* (minor lineage), *balbala* (lineage), and *gosa* (clan) (Hirut 2000: 62-65; Mamo 2006:81-82). The Arsi Oromo is believed to be descendant of Barentu, one of the two major moieties of Oromo (Asmerom, 1973). They have elaborate moiety systems and kinship structure organized along paternal genealogy. Arsi is subdivided into two major moieties called *Sikko* and *Mando*. They consist of a number of lineages and they trace descent from common ancestor without any difficulty. Each clan member easily specifies his own lineage that belongs to that particular clan. Some even specify lineages in other than their own clan. This is because the rule of marriage strictly requires this knowledge.

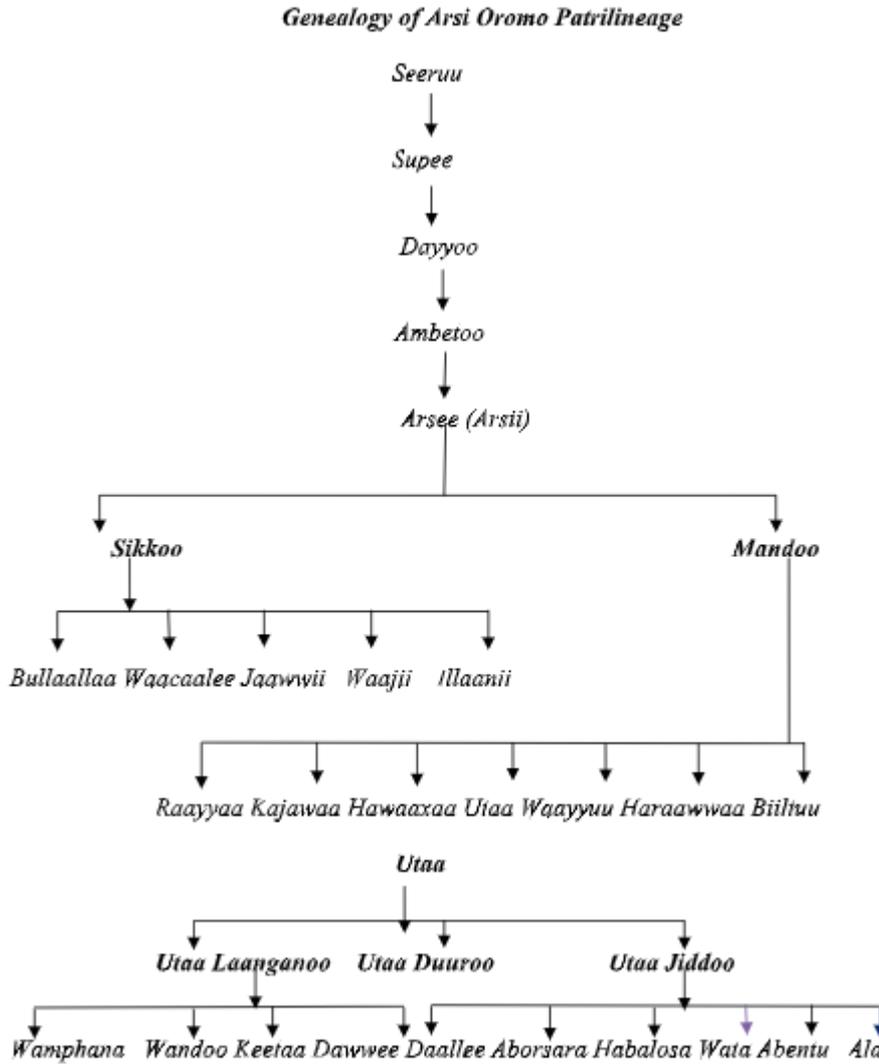
Inter clan relationship and cohesion among Arsi is very strong. '*Arsooma*' being an Arsi is a welcoming feature and a cohesive force as well. "*Arsoomni qorsooma warroomni san mara caala jedhan mitiiree*" which indicate *Arsihood* is a sign of respect, love and brotherhood among any Arsi clan everywhere. At a larger structure, the Arsi clans living in research site have not been separated from one another.

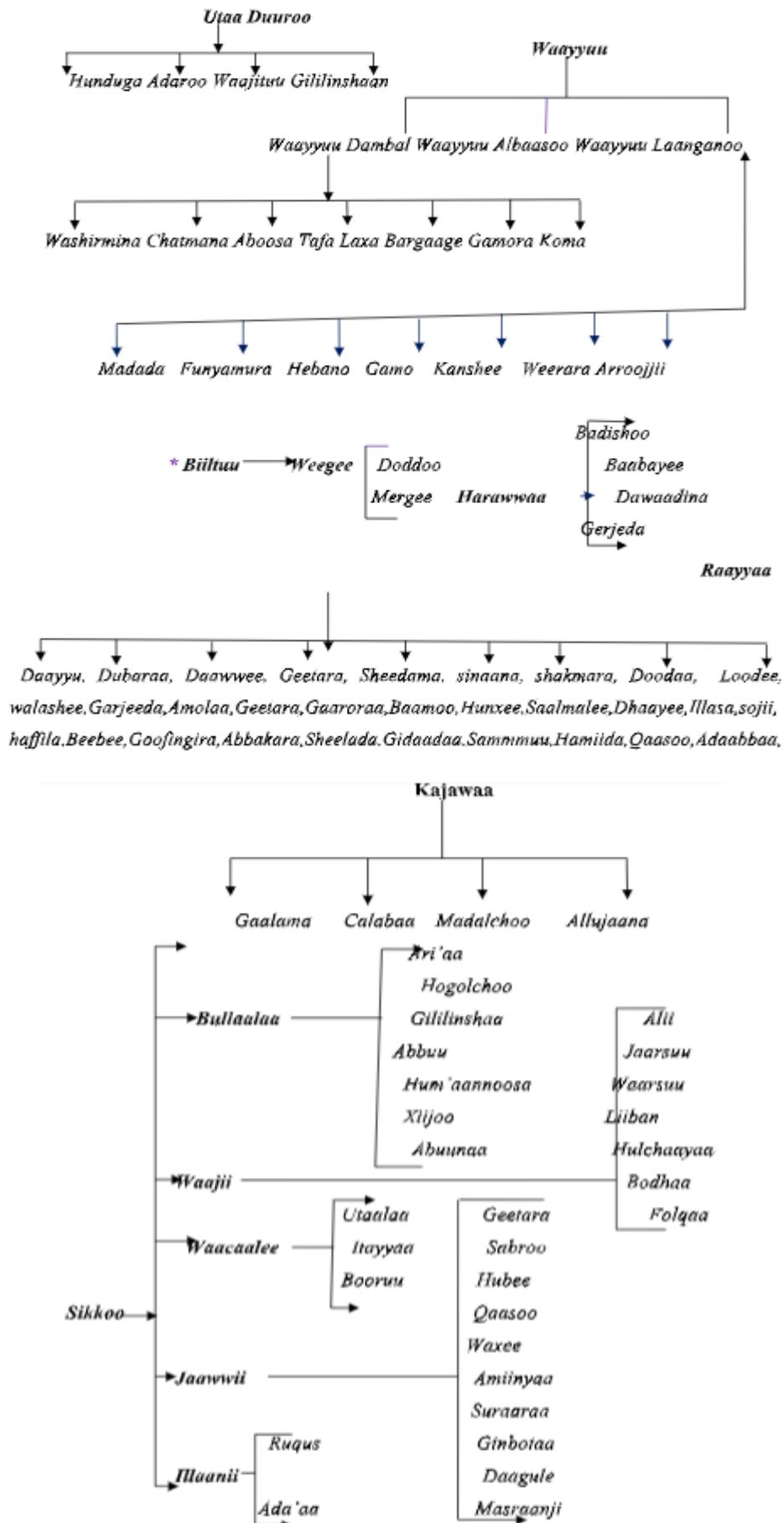
Shashemene Arsi Oromo Kinship Structure is analogues to Oromo tradition. It has five stages extending from the level of particular individual to that of the people or nation (Gemetchu cited in Hirut 2000:52, Informants). The Shashemene Arsi Oromo community is patrilineal,

patrilineal and patriarchal. So, they organize themselves on the basis of blood relationship. Their Kinship social structure organized in ascending order includes, *warra* 'family', *balbala* 'lineage', *gosa* 'clan', *Arsooma* 'Arsihood'. The *Sikko*'s again is further divided into five sub-moieties called *Shanan Sikko* such as, *Bullala*, *Wacaale*, *Jaawi*, *Waaji* and *Ilaanni*. Similarly the *Mando* is divided into seven sub-moieties called *Torban Mando* such as *Raayyaa*, *Kajawaa*, *Hawaxaa* (*Hawaxxuu*), *Utaa*, *Waayyuu*,

*Harawaa* and *Biiltuu/Harroojjii* (Hussien, 2005:26). Paternal kinship structure is very important for Arsi's, because in public gatherings, an individual is often referred to by the name of his clan or lineage rather than by his personal name. A conflict between two individuals from different lineages or clans is also considered as a conflict that occurs between lineages or clans rather than mere interpersonal conflict. Usually, members of the same clan on paternal genealogy live together in a village.

Diagram 1: Arsi-Oromo Patrilineage in particular.





Source: Abbas Haji (1982), Asmerom Legese (1973), and from my informants.

According to the Arsi oral tradition, a man called Arse had begotten two sons; *Sikko* and *Mando*. And they in turn had 12 sons, of which *Mandoo* had 7 Sons; called *torban-Mandoo*. *Sikko* had Five Sons called *Shanan- Sikko*. These twelve sons are “fathers of all Arsi living in Arsi and Bale.

### **Gumaa system and its procedures**

*Gumaa* is one of the Oromo indigenous moral institutions of conflict resolution, justice administration and peace-building that was able to persist and functions to date. These prevailing indigenous institutions of conflict resolution, justice administration and peace-building have mostly been analyzed from anthropological, sociological and psychological points of view (Tamene, 2008). According to my informants the compensation for *gumaa* has many advantages.

These are to build peace, to restore family that apart due to wrong done, encourage living together and the challenge in compensation discourages killing practices. According to explanation in works of Tamene (2013:44), the conflict does not destroy only human life it also disturb and destroy the properties, human mental as well as psychology of the living area including. Procedures of the *gumaa* system in resolving the conflict occurred in Arsi Oromo have the following steps.

**Heexoo koobaa:** Coming to the roles of women in *gumaa* system, women can participate on the finalization in additions to preparing foods and drink for the participants and attendants of the reconciliation. This *heexoo koobaa* procedure of *gumaa* system implemented by the sister of the killed person. *Abbaa Gadaa* gives a command her to spray and distribute the *heexoo* over the area. Also *Abbaa Gadaa* gives command to other sister from opponent side to hold honey (*damma*) full of *Buqqee* (similar to cup). Then the sister of the dead/ killed/ person going in front of the other sister by holding and spraying (*facaasuu*) by her mouth the *Heexoo* while the other sister holding the honey(*damma*) and spraying (*facaasuu*) at the back of the killed person’s sister. Also *Abbaa Gadaa* is going on the side of the way they are going on.

**Dullacha keeraa:** For the Arsii Oromo, sacrificing an old cow is believed to clear all wrong actions and pacifies the society. The *gumaa* system processed by slaughtering the older ox/cow (*dullacha keeraa*). The whole families from both sides collected on back of *dullacha keeraa* and give their hands back to back instead of face to face hand giving. Then the *Abbaa Gadaa* ties the legs of families from both sides by the intestine of *dullaachaa keeraa*. This is to advise them as they are blood relatives that they never do such killing to each other. They promise to stop such conflict between them and that never to be back again. Thus, they take *waadaa* (promise) from *Abbaa Gadaa* to stop such conflict again. According to the work of Jemal (2012:50); the *Dullacha Keeraa* is slaughtered for the purpose of reintegration and reciprocated living of people that ruined due to some wrong actions. My informants told me that, on the reconciliation time and funeral period:

1. They slaughter the ox at funeral place (*Korma Awwaalchaa* or funeral Ox and the killer buy funeral cloth (*uffata Awwaalchaa*); it is from this where *Gumaa* compensation started among Arsi Oromo as the informants from Shashemene town.
2. They gave five cattle for reconciliation (literally called “*Loon Qabbanaa*”)
3. Heifers’ (*Goromsa*) given to the sister of killed person
4. The killer sent the elder to get the permission to come mourning and the mourning families retreated from their eye, while they come and crying.
5. *Fiicaa* is the final stage. When the killer and his clan together prepare *Daadhii* (*teji* from honey), slaughter Ox and call all the families of the killed person during the night and eat together through *fiicaa* rituals.

According to the work of Jemal (2012:47), that the scale and amount of compensation paid as *gumaa* is not the same and it depends on the purpose as well as the condition occurred during the killing. As one of my informant, clan elder Bati Bukulu has pointed out the *gumaa* of a person that occurred because of accident is not the same to other *gumaa*. He has also said that the formerly during our grandparents, the *gumaa* paid for the male is not the same the *gumaa* paid for the female. The *gumaa* paid for the man is hundreds of cattle while the *gumaa* paid for the woman are fifty cattle. During case investigation *Qoraa mutii* say, “*Amantu dhibbaan kottu, waakkattu jilbaan kottu jedhee lallaba*”, literally translated as, if you belief in what you committed, come on with hundred cattle, if you denied it, come on with the one who swear with you. However, currently there is no classification, if it is intentionally carried out, for both male and female the killer compensated one hundred cattle with the funeral cattle. After the *gumaa* system is treated and the families from both sides are compromised they are start living like blood relatives. They reinforce their relationship more than ever and for example, marriage relationship among them is strictly forbidden. As argument found in Tamene (2013:53) *gumaa* system is a mechanism on the way to not only punishing the people by means of finances, imposed payments and social sanctions, but also reestablishing the social relations and synchronizations from side to side mutual understanding, compensation, figurative punishment and resources of cleansing and purification.

If one of the conflicted individuals denies the case, the elders’ council asks him/her by saying “*Dhugoo moo Dhugaan siif ilaalla*”, literally means if you agree, bring the witness and if you denied the case, prepare yourself for swearing an oath. The witnesses, before giving their testimony they go under oath in the name of *Waaqaa* (the supernatural power whom they call “*gurraacha garaa garbaa kan maqaa dhibbaa*”- literarily translated the black wise and wide with a hundred names. This implies the unseen divine with a hundred names who can see everything and is immensely powerful. The elders advise the witnesses to give their words smoothly. They also warn them in case they speak pretexts by saying: “*Waaqa Jala teettee, Lafa gubbaa teettee dhugaa hindabsin*”; which means, do not distort the facts by sitting under God, and sitting on the

earth/soil. This implies that God is the supernatural power who can kill and heal anyone/anything. God can see whatever anyone does, and the earth/soil is also the last destination of all creatures, where anyone’s soul lonely lives inside the grave.

Therefore, it is just a request and an advice for the witness to consider all facts in mind. It is also a means of encouraging them to speak only what they have seen, by intimidating them how ‘Waaqa’ punish them in case they distort the facts. *Jaarsa biyyaa* also warns the witnesses by indicating some points of what will happen to them when they distort the facts. Especially, the spiritual leaders, warn the witnesses to be very careful, and not to speak pretexts by saying: “*Yoo dhugaa dabsite, dabaa dhalchita, dabaan finnatti galta, kanaafuu waan beettu dhugaa dubbadhu*” Roughly translated, “If you distort the reality, you will give birth to an unblest child, thus, speak the fact and the reality you only know and save your families from being unblest.” Finally, after hearing the witnesses, the *Jaarsa biyyaa* meticulously evaluate every single event and come to

the decision. When they make decisions, first, they call for a person whom they think has made a mistake. Of course, they did not tell him on the spot.

They try to calm down his/her temper. They may tell him the decisions through proverbs how they decided. Apparently, the person may get some clues from the proverbs on how the decision has finished. In fact, before they tell him/her that he/she has done something wrong, they have persuaded him/her on every matter concerned the problems. Then, if necessary they request him/her to ask for an apology or to pay compensation.

After they finish persuading on the matters with a person whom they may think is a wrong doer, they move to the next person whom they consider the gloomier or disconsolate. Similarly, they do not tell what they have decided on the spot. They warm the environment by putting various jokes. They give him/her some advises on the matter. Finally, they tell the decision they have made by saying, “We saw every single case; it was not his intention to hurt. Thus, just forgive him and become a family again”.



**Diagram 2:** Elders Sitting Position during *guma moral* reconciliation/compensation (Source: from informants during field work, Febreaury15, 2020)

**IV. CONCLUSION**

Generally it can be concluded that, conflict is common phenomenon among all humans around the world. In dealing with these conflicts, indigenous moral systems are a crucial point of reference in conflict resolution and peace building arenas. Among the Oromo in general and the Arsi Oromo in particular, there were and still are various moral systems of conflict settlement. The article also came up with the contributions of indigenous moral system specifically *guma* practices in restoring long lasting reconciliation between parties at *guma* (blood fued). The study indicates that following the occurrence of homicide, frustrations and

tensions are more likely to be created among the parties because of the act of homicide. Due to frustration and tension, instability possibly occurs within the families of both parties. However, the performance of *guma* restores the stability and order within the families and brings them together for reconciliation. Likewise, the goal of indigenous moral system among Arsi Oromo reveals how the community maintains the social order and stability through the utilization of the existing social structures (norms, customs, and values, institutions) to extend the life span of the sense of collective sentiments and social cohesion among its members in order to settle hostilities under 21century conditions.

## V. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish good governance and open minded leadership at all levels of administration. Because it is the role of policy makers and the government who have the power to do with the needs and wants as well as the preference of their society.
- Create awareness among young generation by socializing them under *Gadaa* leadership and for their common social relationship.
- Rebuilding social harmony through training and through a collective concern which gradually change social behavior for social concerns.
- There should be regular and continuous meeting and discussions among the indigenous elders to improve, re-socialize their relationship and to preserve their indigenous institution which needs to be preserved.
- Learn, analyze and document the best attributes of indigenous moral system and distribute the same to a larger part of peace activists and the general public.
- It is better, if the expert of culture and tourism bureau office should create strong relation with famous elders and accepting their comments as a binding rule.

### About the Author/Details

Mr. Benti Mekonen Abdisa is a lecturer at Dambi Dollo University College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of Civics and Ethical Studies. He achieved his BA degree in History from Addis Ababa University in 2010 and his MA degree in Peace and Conflict Studies from Hawassa University in 2018. His area of research interests are indigenous knowledge, democracy, good governance, human rights, conflict, peace and security. Benti Mekonen Abdisa<sup>1\*</sup>

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