



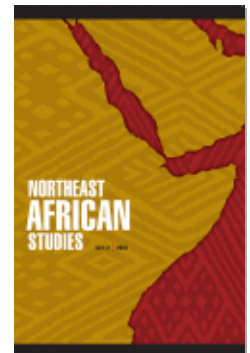
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Asebe Regassa Debelo, Tadesse Jaleta Jirata

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“Peace Is Not a Free Gift”: Indigenous Conceptions of Peace among the Guji-Oromo in Southern Ethiopia

ASEBE REGASSA DEBELO, *Dilla University, Ethiopia*

TADESSE JALETA JIRATA, *Addis Ababa University*

ABSTRACT

Indigenous African knowledge of building and maintaining peace is not well known and has not been much used in the dominant modern mechanisms of conflict resolution. With the aim of addressing this limitation, this article analyzes the broader conceptualization of peace and peace building among the Guji-Oromo in southern Ethiopia. The Guji-Oromo are keenly aware that their existence as a society depends on the maintenance of peace (nagaa) among them as a community and between them and God as well as between them and their natural and human environments. They believe that peace is not a free gift, because maintaining it requires continuous and earnest negotiation, social actions, and cooperation among many stakeholders who possess political, cultural, and spiritual powers. The article further argues that the Guji-Oromo conceptualize peace beyond the conventional understandings that position it as the absence of conflict or warfare. Rather, for the Guji, peace is broadly understood as a continuous flow of relationships between the people and their human and nonhuman environments. The article shows that Guji's conceptions of peace are not static; rather, they are subject to internal and external influences that shape how different members of the society conceptualize it and the way it is maintained.

Introduction

The postcolonial period in Ethiopia (since 1941) is similar to that of most African countries, in that it is characterized by two major sociocultural dynamics that intersect. On the one hand, the indigenous cultures and knowledge of the ethnic groups received decreasing attention from state actors, peace-building institutions, and academia in peace studies because of the increasing modernist discourses that are part of the globalization process.¹ On the other hand, Ethiopia has continued to experience another history of violence, interethnic conflicts, civil wars (interstate and intergroup wars), and sociopolitical unrest that destabilized the state and societies for a couple of decades since 1960s.² Although indigenous knowledge and practices have great value and play significant roles in the everyday life of ethnic groups, the way they use their cultural knowledge and indigenous practices for peace building have not been given proper academic consideration. Likewise, even though scholars in peace and conflict studies vary in their arguments about the roots of the ethnic conflicts unfolding in the country, the increasing attention to global values and knowledge at the expense of local ways of life seem to conceal the indigenous means of peace building. The external “expert” solutions proposed by the international agents of peace building for resolving conflicts rarely do so because they are “cookie-cutter” solutions, which have already failed elsewhere. This problem could also be attributed to the mismatch between the international dominant culture of conflict resolution and the local and culturally embedded practices of peace building.³

Following the international dominant culture of conflict resolution, the successive regimes in Ethiopia often resorted to resolving conflicts through the “conventional” top-down approach primarily through military intervention and the suppression of dissent. As a result, Ethiopia has become an epicenter of ethnic and political conflicts for the past half a century.⁴

In the last few years, there has been emerging interest in indigenous approaches in resolving political and ethnic conflicts and building sustainable peace.⁵ More important, the legitimacy of state and international institutions in effecting the objectives of conflict resolution has been contested.⁶ In particular, the failure of the state-centric approach, which focuses on the

top-down practice of handling conflict through military or administrative intervention, has resulted in an emerging interest in the culturally embedded approach of peace building, which focuses on the use of indigenous institutions and knowledge of societies as mechanisms for building sustainable peace. However, there is only limited research-based knowledge on how ethnic groups and indigenous societies in Africa conceptualize peace and mechanisms of peace building in order to maintain intra- and intergroup coexistences. With the aim of filling this gap in knowledge, this article analyzes how the Guji-Oromo apply their indigenous knowledge and institutions to resolve conflicts and build peace within their society, and between their societies and the societies sharing borders with them as well as between them and supernatural power (God). The article also goes beyond the internationally dominant conceptualization of peace that sees peace as the absence of conflict among human beings. Rather, based on the tradition of the Guji-Oromo, the article argues that peace is a result of continuous negotiation, cooperation, and harmony among individuals, groups, and neighbors in particular, and among humans, nonhumans, and supernatural power (God) in general. The article deals with the Guji-Oromo's conceptions of peace and the dynamics of their knowledge and practices of resolving conflicts at local levels.

The article contributes to the debates on the cultural and political plausibility of indigenous approaches to peace building. It addresses the issue on two different levels. First, it discusses Guji's conception of peace and cultural repertoires in their approaches to peace building. Second, it presents practices of peace building and conflict resolution based on two particular cases. These cases are about the tradition of peace building applied to conflicts between Guji and Gedeo ethnic groups in 1998 as well as Guji and Burji ethnic groups in 2010. These two cases illuminate different contexts of conflict resolution. In order to comprehend changes and continuities in the Guji's conception of peace, the article locates the discussion within the macro-level political trajectories in Ethiopia and shows how this condition affected the local practices of conflict resolution and peace building.

The Research Context and Methodology

The Guji-Oromo inhabit the southern part of Ethiopia, predominantly in the present-day Guji zones of the Oromia regional state, with significant number of their population living in different zones and districts in Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region.⁷ They are one of the eight Oromo ethnic branches and speak Afan Oromo (Oromo language), one of the most widely spoken languages in Ethiopia. The Guji share borders with Borana in the south, Burji and Amaro in the southwest, Gamo Gofa in the west, Arsi in the east, and Gedeo and Sidama in the north.⁸ The Guji is a confederation of three culturally interrelated clans (*hagana*); namely, *Huraga*, *Maatti*, and *Hokku*.⁹ These clans are culturally interconnected and perform the *gada* rituals together.¹⁰ According to this view, *Huraga* is the senior clan, *Maatti* is second, and *Hokku* is the junior clan of the Guji-Oromo. In geographic terms, the three clans occupy different areas with free interclan movements and residences. Even though the clans have their own *Abba gada* (leader), they are interdependent and have their delegates in the Guji *gada* council (*Yaa`a*), which is led by the *Abba gada* of the *Huraga*.¹¹

Of the eight Oromo ethnic branches, the Guji are known as the cradle of Oromo ancestral traditions because they still practice the original Oromo cultural values and norms. In other words, although Oromo indigenous practices have lost their values among the other Oromo ethnic branches due to differing historical dynamics within the Oromo and their relationships with the other ethnic groups as well as the external economic, cultural, and political pressures, the Guji and Borana Oromo have maintained the *gada* and *qallu* traditional institutions along with embedded customary practices, beliefs, and values.¹² Among the fundamental external forces with enduring impacts on Oromo worldviews and self-views was their encounter with the Ethiopian state, which was characterized by history of conflict, domination, and marginalization perpetrated upon them since the late nineteenth century.¹³ Oromo elders recall the conquest by the Ethiopian state as a phenomenon that disrupted the peace (*nagaa*) of the Oromo land.¹⁴ It was the period when Oromo institutions of peace such as the *gada* system and *qallu* institution were destroyed and replaced by state administrative structures such as the state court and state-backed Orthodox Church.¹⁵ As

a result of the state imposition of the land-tenure system in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Guji-Oromo, who used to lead pastoral livelihoods, were introduced to crop cultivation. Today, they are engaged in diverse livelihood practices that include pastoralism, agropastoralism, and crop farming.¹⁶ Cattle herding has continued to signify social, economic, and cultural values, particularly in rural contexts.¹⁷ Livestock reflect Guji's social pride, self-esteem, worldviews, ecological wisdom, and intersocietal relations. Moreover, livestock possession, which signifies a person's wealth and social status, shapes Gujis' relationship with their neighbors. Despite the continuous cultural subjugations by the central Ethiopian governments until 1991, the Guji-Oromo to a large extent maintained their ways of life, religious practices, and indigenous knowledge systems of governance and resource management as a result of their resistance to the hegemonic state system.¹⁸ Scott explains such social and historical trend within a society as indigenous communities' resorting to their own knowledge systems of governance, resource management, religious practices, and intersocietal relationships as part of their resistance against an institution and practice they consider illegitimate.¹⁹

Following the political reordering in Ethiopia under ethnic federalism post-1991, a new national constitution was formulated and proclaimed in 1995. According to this constitution, "Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to speak, to write and to develop its own language; to express, to develop and to promote its culture; and to preserve its history."²⁰ This constitutional right has strengthened the Guji-Oromo's political space to exercise and maintain their indigenous knowledge and ways of life. As a result of political rearrangement, on the one hand ethnic groups' indigenous ways of life have received recognition; on the other hand, the conflicts and competitions among ethnic groups have become recurrent.²¹ After a decade of failed experiments of top-down state intervention to solve such conflicts, the government has resorted to empowering ethnic groups to resolve their conflicts through their indigenous ways of life. Such official recognition of indigenous institutions of conflict resolution and peace building seems to have formally introduced what scholars call "retraditionalization."²² According to this view, retraditionalization is a revitalization of traditional practices, rituals, and customs as forms of governance, cultural expression,

and identity reconstruction whereby different ethnic groups trace some customary practices in their everyday lives. The recognition of the *gondoro*²³ tradition among the Guji-Oromo that was banned up to 1991 both by the imperial and military regimes as a backward practice, for example, is one aspect of retraditionalization process.²⁴ It is within these broader historical and social contexts that this article discusses Guji-Oromo's understanding of peace and their peace-building practices.

This article is based on empirical data drawn from ethnographic fieldwork that we conducted in different periods between 2009 and 2017 in the areas where the Guji-Oromos reside. In order to fully grasp the complex notions of peace and peace building that are embedded in Guji culture and expressed through their social and cultural practices, ethnography was used as a methodological approach. We employed ethnographic approach because of its recognition of context-specific accounts of the subjects and suitability for "interpretation of the meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions, practices and views and how these are implicated in local, and perhaps also wider, contexts."²⁵ This article positions knowledge within the broader notion of social constructivism in which the meanings, interpretations, and practices related to peace are socially constructed as embodiments of norms, values, beliefs, and customs of the life of the society.

Under this methodological framework, specific research methods, including in-depth interviews with key informants, participant observations, and focused group discussions, were used for data collection. The in-depth interviews were intended to generate data on how members of the Guji (men, women, adult, children, and people of different religions) understand and express peace and how peace is understood among the Guji in the past and present as well as practices and role divisions in the process of peace building. The participant observation focused on observing and documenting peace-related traditions through participation in village reconciliation practices, various rituals, ceremonies, and elderly persons' administrative meetings. The focus group discussion targeted the way people of different ages, sex, and religion understand peace and traditions of peace building. Thus, persons of different gender, age, and social background participated in the activities of data collection mainly in the in-depth interview and focus group discussions. In particular, twenty culture bearers that include Guji

men and women, *gada* officials, members of *qallu* institution, and other key informants were purposively selected and participated in the interview and group discussion. The participant observations were done in Ballii *Kenna* (*gada* power transfer ceremony), *Lagubaasa* (ceremony for rite of passage) *Maqabaasa* (ceremony for the naming of children), *Eebba Kenna* (ceremony of giving blessings), and *Fala* (ceremony for prayer to the supernatural power, i.e., God). Conflict resolution rituals were also observed to complement oral information. The peace-building rituals we observed were practiced for various purposes ranging from prayers for rain, fertility, and abundance to the resolution of intra- and intergroup conflicts. In the article, we kept the original names of the informants confidential by giving them made-up names or referring to the informant as "anonymous informant" or "Guji elderly person" to help ensure their privacy and security.

The Qallu and the Gada as Institutions of Peace among the Guji-Oromo

The *gada* and the *qallu* are the two political and cultural institutions of the Guji-Oromo society. Hinnant (1977) described the Guji *gada* system as a complex scheme of ranking, authority, and decision making consisting of a generational structure that rotates every eight years.²⁶ It is characterized by the following functions: first, it categorizes all members of the Guji into thirteen generational grades that succeed each other every eight years assuming progressive roles (from simple to complex roles whereby the younger generation perform simple tasks) and social responsibilities. The generational grades are known as *Suluda*, *Daballe*, *Qarree*, *Dhajisa*, *Kuusa*, *Doorii*, *Gadaa*, *Batu*, *Yuba*, *Yuba Gadaa*, *Jarsaa*, and *Jarsaa Qululu*. In the system, social hierarchy is a central organizing principle through which the generational grades are grouped into two categories as seniors (*gurgudda*) and juniors (*xixiqqa*). Members of the lower five grades (*Suluda*, *Dabballe*, *Qarre*, *Dhajisa*, and *Kusa*) are categorized as the generation of juniors and the upper eight grades (*Raba*, *Dori*, *Gada*, *Batu*, *Yuba*, *Yuba Gadaa*, *Jarsaa*, and *Jarsaa Qululu*) are conceptualized as the generation of seniors.²⁷ Membership in the *gada* system is based on generational-set in such a way that a child



FIGURE 1. Picture of Abba Gadaa and his council (Source: Authors, April 2016).

remains exactly five stages (ideally forty years) below his/her father. This is based on the norm of keeping five generations between a father and his child. This means that all persons who are five grades below their fathers occupy the same grade regardless of their ages. Third, the length of time that a person stays in a generational grade is eight years. Fourth, only males are direct participants in the *gada* system; women's direct participation in this institution is extremely limited. As a result, girls are affiliated to the generational grades through their fathers whereas married women are associated to the system through their husbands. The *gada* leadership serves as institution of peace building through its system of keeping social and moral orders functioning properly. As mentioned earlier, the *gada* institution formulates rules and regulations that govern the interaction between the Guji-Oromo and nature, among members of the society, and between the society and neighboring societies. By overseeing the functioning of these rules and regulations, and by channeling them down to the grassroots level, the *gada* maintains peaceful interactions between humans and nonhumans, between adults and children, between men and women, and between the Guji-Oromo and their neighbors.

Among the Guji-Oromo, the *qallu* is perceived to be a messenger of *Waaqa* (God). Jiloo Man'oo, the current Guji Abba Gada, explains this cultural reality

of the society as follows: "Qallu is at the top of the society. *Qallu* is between our society and our supernatural power—the *Waqa* (God). *Qallu* is holy and an agent of peace between *waqa* and *nama* (human kind), between human kind and nature and among human kind. *Abba Gada* is given blessing by the *Qallu*. *Gondoro* ritual is headed by the *qallu*. Therefore, *Qallu* is the spiritual leader of the Guji" (Me'ee Bokko, May 2016).

Through their oral tradition, the Guji-Oromo articulate that the *qallu* was sent from the *Waqa*; thus, it is considered to be holy and superhuman. The Guji strongly believe that the *qallu* came down from *waqa* to mediate between human beings and God; thus, they pay him homage. Therefore, the *qallu* serves as solicitor of peace from God and facilitator of a peaceful relationship between God and human beings. He gives blessing and prayers moving across the entire Guji villages. In order to maintain peace, the *qallu* prays to God; the God of creation, peace and life; the God who created and guides everything; the God who created rivers, therefore, the God of rivers; the God who created trees, therefore, the God of trees; the God who is manifested in the form of *ayyaana* (kind spirit). It is the God who comes down to human beings in the form of *ayyaana* (kind spirit) and gives them peace and an orderly life. Therefore, a Guji father says "Ayyaana Abbaakoo nagaa buusi" (God of my father give us peace) whenever he leaves his home to his farmland. He prays to the God who helped and guided his forefathers. In the case of the Guji, the *gada* system administers the social, political, and cultural organizations and practices whereas the *qallu* institution governs the overall moral, ethical, and spiritual aspects of the society. The *qallu* connects human beings to the supernatural power (God) and maintains the peace between human beings and God. Likewise, the *gada* promotes and reinforces the peaceful relationships among human beings by enforcing *seeraa* (laws), *safuu* (moral standards), and *aadaa* (cultural practices) that it formulates every eight years. The *gada* officials deliberate on different levels on any of the laws and regulations during the eight years and make necessary amendments. That means, minor issues like family cases, disputes between neighbors and issues of inheritance can be addressed at village level or at the level of *balbala*. Complex issues such as homicide are addressed at the level of general *gada* council. The changes are often responses to internal or external pressures—to support or

resist changes arising from within/outside the society with regard to peace building and other societal issues. Both institutions regulate and sustain peace and order as part of the social and cultural lives of Guji society. However, it does not mean that the peace-building roles of the *gada* and *qallu* institutions are uniformly accepted and agreed upon by all sections of the Guji society. For example, according to our discussions during the fieldwork, whereas the youth and educated sections of the society incline toward state institutions for resolving conflicts, Christians often focus on spiritual commitment as source of peace. Internal challenges to Guji's conception of peace emanates from the intergenerational gap attributed to religious differences within the society.

Guji-Oromo's Conceptions of Peace

There is evidence that shows that despite subjugation under previous Ethiopian regimes, the Guji-Oromo have preserved their traditions and kept them somewhat intact. The Guji-Oromo are viewed as warriors by people in other societies because they are often in conflict with neighboring ethnic groups. For instance, they have history of conflict with Gedeo, Burji, Borana, and Sidama ethnic groups. See, for example, the following statement from an informant from one of the neighboring ethnic groups: "the Guji people are often engaged in war with their neighbors mainly due to the prestige attached to killing from groups they traditionally consider as enemies. In the past, they also used to fight with their neighbors to raid cattle but now that culture seems declining" (anonymous informant, May 2017). But the Guji perceive themselves as a peaceful society known for their tradition of resolving conflict through *gada* and *qallu* institutions. An elderly Guji person articulates this way of life as follows: "Guji is a society of *gada* and *qallu*. *Gada* and *qallu* systems shape our peace with God and our neighbors. Children behave as per the values and moral principles embedded in these institutions. Elders have the obligation to teach children about what is good and bad. Intraclan, interclan, and interethnic conflicts are resolved through *Abba gada* and *Abba qallu* interventions. *Gada* and *qallu* elders have the power to

sanction people who transgress Guji laws, the laws of their ancestors and the covenants between them and *Waqa* [God]" (Guji elder, April 2017).

In the present time, the majority of the Guji people, mainly elderly men and women, strongly accept that the *gada* system ensures order through enforcement of *seera* (customary law) and *aadaa* (customary values), the *qallu* institution maintains the spiritual connection between the society and *Waqa*. These two institutions guide and shape Guji's interpersonal relationships, their interaction with their surroundings (humans and nonhumans), and their spiritual connection to *Waqa* (God). In human-environmental relations, for example, parents socialize their children in line with norms and values formulated by the *gada* institution. At the societal level, at every *Gumi* (*gada* assembly), which is convened every eight years, the *ya'aa* (general assembly of the *gada* officials) promulgates laws that govern the behavior and practices of the Guji-Oromo, including interpersonal and intergroup relationships, relationships between genders and age groups, and the relationship between nature and humans. At the local community and extended family levels, elderly persons translate the rules and regulations set out by the *ya'aa* into values and ways of life that govern the everyday lives of individuals and groups. However, men and women among the Guji articulate that they fall in conflict with their neighboring ethnic groups for twofold purposes. The first is to stop individuals and groups who cause disagreements and disrupt their peaceful relationships with their neighbors. The second is to stop aggressors who challenge the internal (within society) peace and stability. This is evident from a summary of focus group discussion with Guji men and women that reads as follows:

We [the Guji] do not go for war with our neighbors without reasons. We want to live with our neighbors and with our members peacefully. However, there are groups and individuals who disturb our peaceful coexistence. We fight such groups and individuals to defend our peace with our people and our neighbors. We pay a lot for peace. Peace is not a free gift. Our men and women are courageous to defend the peace of our land. Not only our men but also our women play fundamental role

in resolving any problem that disorders our peace and taking initiative to maintain our peace. (FGD, April 2017).

As can be seen in the quotation, Guji-Oromo articulate that “peace is not a free gift” (in Oromo, *nageenni kenna bilisaa miti*). Its acquisition and maintenance demands war against intruders as well as the sober and relentless efforts of cultural and religious elders who persistently undertake rituals to maintain harmony among humans, nature, and the supernatural power (God). To be more comprehensive, these are often combined with other types of social actions including continuous dialogue, mediation, and discussion with elders from neighboring communities. Moreover, peace as a fundamental part of human existence is inscribed into the imaginations of every Guji-Oromo across age, gender, and religious boundaries through oral traditions, worldviews, and creation myths. Thus, all the relationships the Guji-Oromo have with their neighboring ethnic groups are regulated to be based on peace, mutual cooperation, common values, and laws, and, more important, values of respect and reciprocity. A retired *abba gada* of the Guji-Oromo asserts this reality as follows: “Every eight years, *ballii* (leadership power) is transferred from one *gada* generation to another. As the main part of the power transfer, the Gumi makes and declares *seera* (customary laws) by which the incoming *gada* leads the society. The central element of the *seera* is peaceful coexistence with our neighbors and God. No Guji man, woman, or child disobeys this law. A guilty person is punished, advised or cared in accordance with our laws. We appease conflicts and resolve disorders based on the laws. That is how we lead our society.”

According to Guji worldviews, not only relationships and harmony with the neighboring ethnic groups but also the fertility and productivity of livestock, the coexistence of the Guji with the natural phenomenon in their surroundings, and the tripartite harmony among the people, nonhumans, and the supernatural power (God) are significantly influenced by the presence or absence of peace. For the Guji, peace and supernatural power (*Waaqa*) are strongly interconnected and in this interconnection, cattle and nature (for example, trees, sacred places, and rivers) play significant roles as fundamental elements of rituals and sacrifices. Baxter explains that Guji, “more than the other Oromo branches, are keenly aware that

the maintenance of their culture depends on the maintenance of peace (*nagaa*) within the community and between the community and the *Waaqa* (supernatural power or God)."²⁸

In spite of the perspectives embedded in the dominant cultural repertoires enforced by the *gada* and *qallu* institutions, there are contrasting views from the followers of Christianity because they accept the idea that peace is inherent in faith in God, who symbolizes love among all humankind. For the Christians whose members are predominantly young people and women, peace is maintained through the prayers and righteous acts of every individual. A woman who was a follower of protestant Christianity asserted, "Peace is not something people can make through sacrifice or any kind of ritual. Rather, God is the only authority over peace who can turn violence into peace, and peaceful conditions into turmoil based on individuals' and groups' level of spiritual commitment" (anonymous informant, April 2017). In contrast, those men and women who follow the dominant values and practices embedded in the *gada* system and *qallu* institution believe that the duty of maintaining peace rests on the shoulder of elders and requires them to provide continuous rituals, blessings, prayers, and sacrifices to *Waaqa* on behalf of all people, cattle, and the environment at large.

Members of the Guji-Oromo who follow the dominant tradition of *gada* and *qallu* and those from Christianity have one point in agreement and another point in disagreement in relation to their conceptualization of peace. People in both categories agree that failure to maintain harmony with *Waaqa* (God) may result in conflict and affliction principally expressed in the form of withholding the rain on which all animals, plants, and humans depend. Individuals from both sects believe that disobedience to the will of God results in divine punishment, such as acute unexplained illness, accidental death, infertility, infant mortality, attack by wild animals, and lack of productivity of animals and crops. They disagree on the way peace is maintained. Christians understand that peace is the result of God's presence in a person's life because God is the source of peace. It is the result of life and action under the commandments of God. Guji men and women who follow Christianity do not agree with the perspective of our informants who subscribe to indigenous beliefs and practices, and thus conceptualize peace as something acquired by keeping oneself righteous. It is something holy

that people cannot make but receive from God through His mercy. They also argue that neither the *gada* nor the *Qallu* institutions reinforce peace. Rather, prayer to God and doing righteous things are believed to reinforce harmonious relations among all humans.

However, those following the dominant Guji traditional ways of life assert that peace emanates from and is maintained through obedience to and conformity with the *seera* (traditional laws) of the Guji people under the guidance of the *gada* system and the *qallu* institution. They articulate that obedience to and conformity with the *seera* keep the earth, cattle, and women moist, fertile, and productive. Such a condition represents peace and order among the Guji society. A Guji elderly person, namely, Galgalo Jilo, expressed the dynamics in Guji's relations with their surroundings and its implications as follows:

In the past, when our people obeyed ancestral *seera* (law) and *safuu* (moral standards), everything was fine. We did not experience problems like drought. Guji did not know hunger. Everything was plenty in Guji-land. Rain used to come in its proper time and cattle were fertile; milk was abundant; children and calves chanted in every village. In those days, elders respected their forefathers' customs, children respected *safuu*. Rituals were practiced according to specific customs prescribed in Guji tradition. But now everything is changed upside down. As you observed along your way to our village [showing us the field], small rivers dried up, pasture degraded and now even big trees are dying. The rain did not come for two years. This is not natural. It is neither a normal occurrence. It is what *Waqaa* invokes to punish our people. I do not know how the future will be but if it continues this way, things might be terrible. We are so worried. Something worse might come. (interview with Galgalo Jilo, April 2011)

With these statements, the informant articulates two points. The first is that for the Guji, peace (*nagaa*) has a deep emotional and psychological representation of the well-being of the entire Guji land including the people, animals, livestock, plants, water wells, spirits, neighbors, and other living and nonliving beings. Guji land is considered peaceful when rain comes and goes



FIGURE 2. Guji ritual ceremony for peace and harmony (Source: Authors, March 2010).

following its natural order; when livestock are fertile and productive; when *gada* officials transfer power within the prescribed terms; when wells generate water; when fields grow ample grass for cattle; and when the people live in harmony with their neighbors. This conceptualization is quite different from the conventional understanding of peace found in peace and security studies, which associates peace with absence of conflict.²⁹

In the traditional Guji worldview, everything revolves around symbolic and material representations of livestock. Cattle herding and possession of a large herd of cattle are associated with cultural pride, economic values (wealth), a sense of Guji identity, and social privilege in marriage arrangements and intersocietal relationships. Livestock are also expressions of the peaceful and harmonious coexistence of the Guji with its neighbors because the Guji understand that absence of peace would impede the fertility of the livestock. In Guji culture, beyond the economic values, cattle are used for rituals, transition rites, gift, bride price, and compensation during reconciliations, and as symbols of social prestige. Therefore, the Guji sees livestock both as elements of maintaining peace through sacrifices and also as expressions of its presence as a sign of blessings from *Waqqa*. As Van de Loo observes, "Numerous forms of animal sacrifices constitute the means of establishing and strengthening the complex vital interconnectedness

between *Waqqa*-deity and the Guji men and women, between the living and the dead, between marriage partners, or between a household and its livestock.”³⁰ Thus, livestock herding is also intimately related to the Guji’s notion of peace.

The second point made by our informant is that disobedience to the traditional Guji *seera* and *safuu* results in non-peace situations embodying collective and individual punishments from God. The Guji believe that absence of rainfall, death of cattle, infertility of women, and unproductivity of land are different forms of divine punishment. People who adhere to such a perspective believe that *Waqqa* invokes misfortunes such as drought, famine, flooding, disease, and war in response to people’s failure to maintain their ancestral traditions and values. They accept that if a person encroaches upon sacred spaces for farming or cuts trees from such areas, which is against the Guji traditional law, he/she would face one or more of the above forms of divine punishment. Several men and women believe that *waqqa* is above everything (the sky God), and observes every good and bad action of humankind. They communicate with Him through *fala* (rituals) and *ebbisa* (blessings), which are led by elderly persons in the *gada* generation.

Likewise, there are individual, family, clan, and society-level experiential correlates for actions that are regarded as “nonpeace” in the eyes of God and Guji observers. This makes it possible for people to observe and test, in a way, God’s judgment of certain kinds of non-peace-reinforcing social actions based on occurring social realities such as the fortunes of people, calamities at family, clan, or community levels on the basis of the breaching of certain Guji ideals. Nevertheless, our informants are of the opinion that although divine interventions or punishments are still experienced, people’s perception and interpretations of the punishments and their actions have changed over the years with the introduction of new institutions and objects such as guns, biomedicines, government courts, Christianity, and modern education. For example, killing wild animals with spears would connect the object with the prey and is believed to transmit the infliction directly to the killer, unlike killing with a gun, which disconnects the killer from the animal he kills, and by implication diminishes the possibility of inflictions being invoked.

Peace as Subject in Folksongs, Rituals, and Human Relationships

Folksongs and the associated rituals play profound roles in the social and cultural practices of the Guji. The society uses different forms of popular songs to express its values, problems, desires, and dislikes.³¹ Peace is articulated in the values and concepts that the society expresses through its rituals and oral traditions. In this section, we demonstrate how the Guji articulate and express peace through their folksongs and rituals.

All rituals are aimed at maintaining peace between God and human beings as well as among human beings. The common symbolic practices such as *Korma qalaa* (bull-killing), *ariirata* (branding), *dhibaafata* (sacrifice), and *eebbifata* (blessing) are believed to be processes of peace formation and maintenance. The prayer for peace encompasses a plea for rainfall, health, harmony, order, and fertility. Elders come together at *Arda Jila* (sacred ritual site), kill a sacrificial animal, sprinkle the blood of the sacrificial animal to the four directions (north, south, east, and west), spit out milk and honey beer and pray to *Waaqa* (God), and bless their people (the Guji people) and their environments for peace. These processes are accompanied by recitation of verses from oral traditions (prayer and blessing verses). When they perform these ritual practices, the elderly of the Guji chant the following expressions:

God, as you gave us peace yesterday, give us peace tomorrow
 God, as you gave us peace in the night, give us peace in the day
 Make our home and environment peaceful
 We were perceived as dogs and donkeys in the past
 You helped us escape that wrong perception
 Help our children grow
 Look at us again and give us peace
 Give us respect
 This tree [*odaa*] makes us remember your name
 We were exploited by *qawwee* [Amhara feudal lords].
 We have won them today

Thank you God, we have forgotten the past
 God made us politically visible.
 God made us peaceful, strong and happy.

The elderly persons chant these verses on the occasions of giving blessings. Through such verses, the Guji men and women express that they are thankful to their *Waaqa* (God) for He gives them peace and liberates them from humiliations by their feudal lords. They believe that the source of peace is *Waaqa* who hears their voices through the verses and rituals, and sends them peace. One of our key informants, Wataa Shedoo, strengthened this idea by asserting, “we [the Guji people] believe in *Waaqa* who is a God of creation, peace and life. The God who created everything.” Guji elders often give blessings to members of their society at different occasions. Blessings can be performed in rituals, meetings, and similar occasions. For a blessing, in addition to the verses, the elders need to have honey beer or milk in their hands. They spit the honey beer or milk on people, which symbolizes endowing peace and fertility. They chant the following verse when they spit honey beer or milk:

Be abundant like sand
 Have large number of cattle and children
 Be powerful and hard worker
 Be respectful to elders and Guji culture
 Be peaceful and healthy
 Catch with peace and all good things.
 Have peaceful times as you have this milk
 As you make peace for others, receive peace from them.
 Be like a white bull
 Be fertile and rich
 Lead our village
 Inherit our cattle
 Hold our land

Such verses are recited not only in the contexts of blessings for one’s own peace but also in occasions of enacting laws as processes of maintaining peace. The following is another example:

One who is alone should not climb tree; it is a law
A newly married man should not pass a night out of his home; it is a law
A father should not sleep with his daughter; it is a law.
A son will never sleep with his mother; it is a law
Makkalle Ayyuu is respectful; it is a law
Jalkeen is respectful; it is a law
Qallu is respectful; it is a law
Girls should be given care; it is a law
Qallu will never pass a night outside his home; it is a law
One will not milk a cow from a left side; it is a law
A man shouldn't see another's wife; it is a law.

Through these verses, elders reinforce peace and order in their society and between the society and the supernatural power (God). They use the verses to strengthen the social and cultural means of peace formation. By performing these forms of peace building through rituals and oral tradition, they correct misbehaviors, build social cohesion, and ensure the existence and continuity of peace in the society. On the other hand, failure to abide by these laws results in God's punishment on the community (collective punishment) or an individual (individual punishment). The Guji believe that God corrects collective flaws or individual misbehaviors by punishing incestuous partners.

Thus, the rituals and embedded expressions represent the way the Guji understand and maintain peace across time and place. On the other hand, the Guji believe that bravery is necessary to maintain peace. An informant articulated this perception as follows: "It is a brave man who has peace and the cowardly man who does not have peace." This belief is predominantly expressed through folksongs in which the words "bravery" and "cowardice" occur over and over. Of the forms of songs characterized by such content, *Gerarsaa* (a boasting song about a single warrior's bravery) is the common and popular one. Below is an example.

Fight for peace (5×)
A smooth hand, I have got you
An attractive hand, I have got you

An attractive neck, I have got you
A beautiful air, I have got you
A head of beauty, I have got you
The coward doesn't get you, but the brave

Fight for peace (5×)
When a man goes to war
His mother gets sad
When he comes back from war
She gets delighted.

Fight for peace (5×)
A big tree is a shadow
One can rest under it
My hair is a shadow
One can hide in it

Fight for peace (5×)
Death is inevitable
One shouldn't be afraid of it
One should fight and die for peace.

Let us consider some words and expressions in the above song and examine how the discourse in the text represent peace. The phrase “fight for peace” often comes at each break of the song and expresses the existence of the traditional sense of bravery as a means of maintaining peace among the people. Through this song, the Guji ascertain that to fight and defeat an enemy is a means of securing and owning peace. They use such songs for praising and glorifying a brave man for his ability to protect his community from enemies and ridiculing and defaming a cowardly man for his failure to safeguard the people. They show that a brave man can have everything good in the society. A smooth and attractive hand, a beautiful neck, an attractive air, and a beautiful woman symbolize good things, which include peace and order. Through the song the people assert that it is only a brave man who may own peace, which provides the person all aspects of beauty

in life. In the performance of such songs, the Guji articulate that bravery is highly valued for it ensures peace. In contrast, cowardice is devalued and condemned because such a person cannot contribute in maintaining peace and order. This controversial notion of peacemaking among the Guji leads us to another point related to the dilemma of maintaining peace in the context of changing internal and external circumstances to which we will return later.

Apart from situating peace as a central subject in their interpersonal and intersocietal interactions, the Guji practice specific peace-building rituals as mechanisms for settling disputes and maintaining peace. Based on the nature of perceived threats to peace, the Guji undertake different rituals to avoid conflict, settle disputes, and ensure peace among themselves as a community and between themselves and others (other groups, spirits, nonhuman beings and *Waaq* [God]). Because of its significance in settling conflicts and maintaining peace in interethnic conflicts, the *gondoro* tradition deserves a brief elaboration here.

"Gondoro," which is a common term both in Afan Oromo and other Cushitic speaking neighbors of the Guji, implies declaring an evil event and action will not happen again. It has been commonly practiced by the Guji and their neighbors in settling intergroup and intragroup conflicts with slightly differing procedures in the rituals. The general guiding principle is that a person/group who is engaged in an action that transgresses the customary laws of the society (usually homicide) would face a curse as punishment from God that could be manifested in the form of illness, death, drought, flood, or the infertility of people and livestock. The "curse" is conveyed between people by shared blood-linkages or kinship, which extends individual punishment to collective consequences. The tradition has complex ritual procedures and a strong symbolic representation of purification of the "curse" and reconciliation of conflicting individuals/groups. The performance of the *gondoro* practice is led by the *qallu* or his delegates and involves hosting and excommunication of the guilty person as well as cleansing and purification of the guilty person and the reunion of the two parties. Members of the victim's and perpetrator's kin groups would join together through a complex procedures of rituals. The ritual takes place according to the following procedure: in the case of a homicide committed by one or some individuals on one or more member(s) of the other group, the

transgressor seeks refuge at *galma-qallu* (the sacred/compound of the *qallu*). The transgressor remains excommunicated from society until members of the *qallu* institution arrange for a reconciliation with the family and clan of the deceased. There would be a series of prohibitions on his/her day-to-day activities, including a restriction from contact with people and deprivation of rights to appear tidy, including right to get his/her hair and nails cut, until the day of the *gondoro* ritual.

Before the day for *gondoro* is decided, the *qallu* sends a delegation to the clan leaders, *abba gada*, and other *gada* officials belonging to the deceased. Both *abba gadas* and local elders arrange a specific date and place for the ritual where families and relatives of the perpetrator and the victim appear, accompanied by their respective *gada* leaders and local elders.

Both parties provide sacrificial animal that is an integral part of the ritual, along with the honey beer and milk that the *qallu* and the elderly people use for performance of the ritual. Before starting the process of slaughtering the sacrificial animal, the perpetrator appears in front of the public with his/her hair shaved and his body and clothes washed by a “caste” group called *watta* (potters). After this, guided by blessing and “cursing” procedures, the *qallu* and the *gada* leaders sprinkle the blood of the animal and the *boka* (honey beer) on the heads of both parties. Sprinkling the two parties with blood and *boka* symbolizes the purification of the guilty, his/her family, and members of his/her kin group from the sin. Another symbolic process is the act of jointly breaking a bone of the sacrificial animal. The two parties hold each end of the bone and the two *abba gadaas* break the bone with the blunt edge of a knife. Bone breaking symbolizes removing (breaking) the hostility between the conflicting groups. The next step is making the two parties eat and drink together, which represents reconciliation and the restoration of friendship. Finally, the *qallu* concludes the ceremony by declaring the peace to be durable and at the same time cursing any attempt of retaliation/avenge. Through the ritual process, the guilty person and his/her clans would be reconciled with the relatives and clan of the offended. This tradition works both in resolution of interpersonal and intergroup conflicts.³² However, the efficacy of peace depends on the level of shared culture and descent between the slayer and the slain.

In this context, a brief explanation of two different cases would provide an insight into intergroup ramifications and how traditional practices converge with or diverge from the kinds of peace-making practices offered by the Ethiopian state. The first case: during a conflict between the Guji and Gedeo in 1998, the *gondoro* ritual was practiced in the presence of cultural elders and spiritual leaders from both groups. Because the two groups have many shared values that ensure the recognition and legitimacy of the *gondoro* tradition, the two groups were able to resolve their conflict, build sustainable peace, and have maintained social harmony since then.³³ The second case goes back to the late 2009 and early 2010 when the Guji-Oromo and Burji ethnic groups entered into violent conflicts that resulted in destruction of property and loss of life. As a mechanism of conflict resolution, the regional states (Oromia and southern nations, nationalities, and peoples) in collaboration with the Ministry of Federal Affairs organized a quasi-traditional conflict resolution in the form of *gondoro*. Unlike the Guji-Gedeo relations that were built on the myth of common descent—despite emerging polarizations and divergence—the Guji-Burji relation had a history of antagonism.³⁴ In the latter case, the conflict persisted even after the *gondoro* practice in April 2010. This hints upon the fact that the efficacy of the *gondoro* tradition depends on the shared values and descent among parties in conflict.

When asked about the effectiveness of the “modern” court system and the traditional mechanism of conflict resolution in making long-lasting peace, our informants unanimously responded that the court system punishes a transgressor by putting him/her in prison for some years; but after the person is released the conflict might erupt again as relatives of the deceased could seek vengeance. However, the *gondoro* tradition not only reconciles people but also sanctions further aggression by warning both parties not to violate the rules that would invoke punishment from *Waaqaa*.

Emerging Changes Causing Dilemmas in Maintaining Peace

Despite culturally embedded notions of peace among the Guji and their knowledge of resolving disputes, conflict remained recurrent within the

Guji as well as between them and their neighbors. Although the Guji people articulate the conflict as a means to maintain sustainable peace within the society and with their neighbors, they have been stereotypically represented among their neighbors as warriors and a warlike community.³⁵ Therefore, the ambivalence in Guji's notions of peace and their commitment to defend their peace along with their territory, identity, culture, pride, self-esteem, and autonomy, which involves conflict with their neighbors, prompts us to probe further into these competing discourses. As we discussed earlier, the Guji have deep-rooted respect and commitment to peace building within themselves as a community and between them and their surroundings (humans and nonhumans). The baseline issue in this discussion is that the Guji have confronted the external and internal dynamics that have threatened their culturally embedded conceptualization and practices of peace.

First, continuous state intervention into their ways of life, including the impositions and restrictions on the *gada* system and *qallu* institution, was among the major threats to their conceptions of peace and its practices. The denigration of these institutions entails the suppression of the culture that sustained the fundamental notions of maintaining peace. In other words, it is analogous to killing the speakers of a certain language, which equivocally leads to the death of the language itself. Despite the opening of political and cultural space for the practice of indigenous institutions such as *gada* system and *qallu* institution in the post-1991 period following the political reordering into ethnic federalism, the system still does not grant a clear mandate for traditional institutions to function properly in areas of peace building. Giving the mandate of resolving homicide cases to traditional institutions would strengthen the power and legitimacy of these institutions, and inevitably make them competitive with the state institutions. Second, the different rival groups who the Guji locally considered as natural enemies to their peace have encircled them. As is common among agropastoralist communities elsewhere in east Africa, cattle raids, wars of pride, conflict over grazing land and water grounds, and externally induced forms of conflict have been common among the Guji. That is why the Guji associate bravery and war with peace. Therefore, Guji's ecological habitation and economic practice as agropastoralists necessitated warfare and conflict, which prompts the people to compromise their broader commitment to peace. Third, culturally

binding norms, values, and rituals of peace-building practices have gradually been undervalued among the young generation. Young people, who have been exposed to Christianity and urban ways of life, hold different values and interpretations of peace. In this regard, some trends of revenge against offenders, which were alien to the Guji culture, have been observed in the last two or three decades. Unlike in the traditional context where slayers and victims would reconcile through long-lasting forgiveness, people tend to kill members of the perpetrator's family or clan even after the case is settled by state court.

The Guji have experienced much more internal heterogeneity in recent years. Although parents and members of extended families try to socialize their children into the common values, ethics, and norms of the Guji society, there is a growing trend of intergenerational dichotomies in terms of worldviews and cultural practices.³⁶ Guji children interact with children from other ethnic groups at school, in workplaces, and in marketplaces. That is to say, though elders still exercise the indigenous practices of peace that constitute rituals, belief, and other culturally intertwined forms of knowledge, youth have less awareness of it. For example, elders focus on conducting rituals to resolve conflicts whereas youth often rely on state courts as the ultimate mechanism for resolving disputes. In spite of such challenges, the Guji, across different social categories (age, gender, religion, and place of residence), still actively share the fundamental notion that peace is the central aspect of human existence. In a nutshell, the Guji's notion of peace is a subject swinging between two competing perspectives—the emerging modernist understandings that subscribe to ideas of ensuring order through a statutory legal system, on the one hand, and the widely accepted culturally binding practices of building sustainable peace through indigenous practices, on the other. This dichotomy, which takes the dimension of generation and religion, may lead to a split of formerly "unified" cultural categories. That means, whilst the followers of Christian religion and youth are adhering to the less efficient state-oriented notions of peace, followers of traditional beliefs and mostly elders still stick to the indigenous practices of peace building.

Conclusion

The discussions in this article focus on Guji's notions of peace and peace building not only as a technical practice of conflict resolution but also as a fundamental epistemological notion that situates peace within their world-views and their relationship with God (*Waqqa*). Peace (*Nagaa*) among the Guji is predominantly a subject of rituals, personal relationships, interethnic relations, and relations among neighbors. Peace is also expressed as a harmony among human beings, nonhuman beings and the supernatural power (God). The Guji understand and believe that peace (*nagaa*) is not a free gift because its sustainability depends on a relentless human commitment to preserve it through rituals, prayers, sacrifices, thanksgivings, and blessings, often conducted by culturally legitimate elders. Unlike the conventional state-oriented understanding of peace, which associates it with the absence or avoidance of conflict, the Guji holistically comprehend peace as an expression of order and the normal flow of things in their natural way, which is in line with how *Waqqa* created them. This includes the fertility of humans and livestock, rain and an abundance of pasture and water, the coexistence of humans and nonhumans, and harmonious communication between people and *Waqqa* through intermediary powers like *ayyaana* (kind spirits) and *qallu*. Likewise, harmonious coexistence between the Guji and their neighbors and coherence within the community in terms of sociopolitical, economic, social, and religious functioning are elements of the concept of peace.

Nevertheless, the Guji conceptions of peace and peace-building practices have faced locally generated and externally imposed challenges since the late nineteenth century, in particular following the conquest and incorporation of Guji land into the Ethiopian empire. State-imposed restrictions and the denigration of Guji culture in general had significant repercussions on the Guji's indigenous practices of peace, although the people have preserved their knowledge and skills. Although the post-1991 political reordering along the lines of ethnic federalism has opened a cultural space for the exercise of rituals and different indigenous institutions, the absence of a clear boundary between the mandates of the state court and customary institutions such as the *gada* and *qallu* makes the practice of conflict resolution more contested among different actors—the state institutions and traditional institutions of

the Guji Oromo. As a result, issues related to the sustainability of peace, and the legitimacy and autonomy of both institutions are fundamental factors affecting people's choice of institutions. Therefore, to make use of Guji's splendid knowledge and inherent commitment to peace, all stakeholders (government, local elites, universities, and nongovernmental organizations) should work towards the empowerment and revitalization of indigenous institutions such as the *gada* and the *qallu*.

NOTES

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Asebe Regassa Debelo is associate professor of development studies at Dilla University. He has won a couple of research projects at an individual level and with colleagues. Dr. Debelo's research interests include the political economy of large-scale development projects, conflict and peace-building, forced migration, IDP, indigenous peoples' right and human-environment relations. He served as director of the Research and Dissemination Office of Dilla University and project leader of two international projects in collaboration with University of Tromso, Norway. Dr. Debelo has extensively published research articles, book chapters, and brief notes on the above themes of his research interest.

Tadesse Jaleta Jirata is an associate professor of childhood studies at Addis Ababa University. He has extensively researched on children's literature, child rights, folk-songs, songs and education, and indigenous mechanisms of conflict resolution. His research's geographical focus is mainly on southern Ethiopia among the Guji and Borana Oromo. He served as academic and research vice president of Dilla University before he moved to Addis Ababa University.
