

The Long Conversation - Gabra-Borana Peace

A summary of Findings from Research led by the Pastoralist Shade Initiative
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Though closely linked with ties of language, marriage and territory, the Borana and Gabra pastoralist peoples of Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia engaged in a violent conflict with one another that reached a peak in atrocities at Turbi in 2005. The escalating disputes had grown in an entanglement of legal, political and economic tensions that were local, national and geopolitical. Peace was finally restored in 2009.

In September 2010, a team of elders – two Gabra and three Borana – accompanied by an assistant from Pastoralist Consultants International set out on a five-week journey to research the peace. Meeting men and women, young and old, official and ordinary in Chalbi, North Horr, Dillo, Mio, Moyale, Marsabit and Isiolo Districts, their method mirrored the method of peace – asserting peace and hearing news, generating a detailed understanding of the qualities of peace and clarifying the essentials of how and where it had worked.

The peace was formally initiated by the customary councils of the Borana and Gabra – the *gada* and *yaa* – which sent out messages reminding the people of the ancient laws that relate to peace. Customary law (*aada*) encompasses religious, judicial and cultural aspects of Borana and Gabra life and is widely respected. The messages of peace travelled from the councils to spiritual leaders, judges and clan leaders (*jalaab*), and on to men and women, herders, townsfolk, elders and youth. The messages moved from one person to another in the form of *daimtu* (information exchange). The conversation asked “do we have peace?” reminded, “we should have peace,” and asked, “how can we have peace?” Different parts of society took it up in different ways. Women, for example, exchanged information with one another and their immediate relatives in ways that were often decisive.

In Ethiopia, the Oromia Pastoralist Association, a new formation of elders rooted in traditional councils, began formally brokering peace in 2007, building on years of effort by the councils and individual elders that began as early as 2004. In Kenya, the Pastoralist Shade Initiative began to do the same in 2008, in Chalbi, North Horr and Marsabit. On both sides of the border the traditional councils made their decisions and elders and their assistants helped knit together local agreements, putting out fires and spreading the message of peace and justice. They wove a web that included not only pastoralists, but also townspeople, politicians, administrators and NGOs. Travelling in cars, buses and on foot and speaking on mobile phones as well as face-to-face, and connecting together traditional and state administration and customary and state law, they carried out traditional responsibilities across a wide area.

As the messages spread across the rangelands, a series of important events took place. Two young men out scouting on the Kenya-Ethiopia border, one Gabra, one Boran, met unexpectedly. First one then the other held his gun above his head. “Why are we fighting?” they asked. They began a series of meetings in the no-man’s land between Dukana and Dillo, at first small and secret and then expanding to include more herders and elders. At around the same time the Ethiopian government gave the traditional process energetic backing. Newly elected MPs on the Kenyan side began to favour talk of commonalities in a marked departure from the approaches of their predecessors.

The messages also met a series of obstacles and distortions. There were incidents. There were rumours that the peace was false. Peacemakers were accused of spying and feared for

their lives. The Ethiopian Government claimed that the insurgent group, the Oromo Liberation Front, was finding local support in the area around Moyale.

Over a period of four years, the elders continued taking messages and holding meetings, including in places where people didn't want or believe in peace. Finally, when they were confident that agreements had been largely reached, they called pastoralists, politicians and officials to public peace gatherings. The gatherings were done on pastoralist terms, according to traditional rules. One after another, in a series, each meeting built on the last to confirm and expand the area that was at peace. By June 2009 the fighting between Dillo and Dukana came to an end. By July the peace had extended across Chalbi and North Horr in a meeting at Maikona. By August it embraced Turbi, Rawan, Walda and Sololo, places where politics and insurgency had complicated the situation and weakened leadership.

In 2007, traditional council members of the Gabra, Borana and Guji (another Oromo group) had marked the beginning of the peace process by making a formal agreement for peace, involving respect for customary law in cases of murder, theft and other violence between the groups. Their declaration was made at Halona and prefigured the now more famous 'Maikona Declaration' made in northern Kenya in 2009. Both declarations set out the specific laws that relate to keeping peace, but the Maikona declaration is written as well as oral, and written in English as well as the Oromo language. This written version marked a moment at which the worst of the fighting ceased in Kenya and at which the Government of Kenya agreed to provide formal state backing to the customary procedures. After agreeing to accept *ebb*, a blessing that allows for amnesty in the traumatic histories of the war, the people committed the traditional law to paper. At the Walda gathering, the last in the series, the District Commissioner ordained that copies be pasted on administration office walls across the district. Implementation involves a combination of traditional and state justice systems, in which thefts and injuries are dealt with by both systems of law operating in agreement.

During the research, people spoke about peace and how good it is to have peace. In the heartland of Gabra-Borana an area that has suffered years of pain and isolation is now flourishing, trade is moving, grazing and water is shared, and schools are being built that will be accessible to Muslims and Christians, Gabra and Borana alike. The peace is being managed in a process the elders describe as 'surveillance' in which all members of society play a role. Many are confident that strong elders can maintain the peace, even where conflicting political and economic interests are at play. They concede that where elders are weak peace is and will be tenuous. At the edges of the territory there are still violent raids by neighbouring groups of Dassanech, Ajuran, Turkana, Rendille and Samburu. Further south in Isiolo the conflict is severe - a mix of ethnic factionalism and resource annexation on a significant scale.

The research investigates the possibilities of extending the peace into other areas using the long conversation process. National security bodies in Ethiopia and Kenya and others working on conflict are calling for an extended application of the legal and social process to other areas. While outsiders have tended to project a belief that the peace is made in one-off meetings and declarations, the study respondents refer overwhelmingly to the long conversation, the message taking and surveillance, and its roots in traditional law and links to the state. Critics also observe that the situation in neighbouring areas is different; in Isiolo, for example, it is argued that tradition has lost strength, elders' authority has been weakened, different religions prevail, ethnic groups are more numerous and political-economic dispute is more intense. Despite Isiolo's complexities, the researchers believe that elders should try to take their peace process there. In interviews in different parts of the district, they found that customary institutions are still appreciated.

The elders reiterate that peace is not achieved by holding public meetings and making declarations alone. It is achieved through long, careful work of message-taking, information sharing, surveillance and implementation of law. Modern and traditional at once, the process has been hailed as exemplary.