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Governance, Accountability, and Indigenous Conflict Resolution: Shaping Civic Responsibility in the Diverse Cultural and Political Context of the Tigray Region

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Abstract

This study investigates the dynamics of local governance and civic responsibility within the diverse cultural and political context of the Tigray Region, with a specific focus on indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms in the Raya Azebo community. Employing a qualitative methodological approach, the research design was primarily explanatory, supplemented by descriptive and exploratory elements. Data were collected through purposively sampled focus group discussions, in-depth interviews with key informants, and non-participant observation in four *tabiyas*: Wargiba, Genete, Marsa, and Tsigea. This primary data was systematically analyzed and supplemented by a review of relevant scholarly literature on indigenous peacebuilding. The findings indicate that conflicts within the community frequently arise over resources, particularly *Hizaeti* (grazing land) and farmland. In addressing these disputes, the community predominantly utilizes a traditional conflict resolution framework characterized by a win-win approach. This win-win, as elucidated through interviews and FGDs, emphasizes compromise and mutual gain, seeking restorative outcomes rather than assigning winners and losers. Crucially, the thematic analysis of qualitative data reveals that participants perceive indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms as more appropriate and effective than formal state systems or courts. Key perceived advantages, consistently cited across participant groups, include a stronger resistance to corruption, a greater capacity to foster sustainable and community-owned peace, and superior efficiency in time management. These attributes, drawn from first-hand accounts, highlight the critical, ongoing role of traditional institutions in local governance and social cohesion within the study area.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, Governance, Conflict resolution, Raya

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1. Introduction

Ethiopia possesses a rich diversity of essential peacemaking values and indigenous institutions across its many societies. Indeed, in various parts of the country, communities have developed their own cultural values and social knowledge to govern relations and mitigate conflicts (Ambaye, 2008). As a significant part of this tapestry, the Tigray region has historically maintained, and continues to uphold, its own *serit* (customary law) and traditional conflict resolution devices. These systems have long operated alongside, and often in the absence of, formal state institutions (Asefa, 2010).

However, the region has recently endured prolonged armed conflict and profound political instability, events that have severely disrupted social structures and displaced large segments of the population. Consequently, these conditions have significantly eroded the operational capacity and legitimacy of indigenous conflict resolution institutions, including those within communities like the wereda Rayya Azebo. Moreover, the influence of modern legal frameworks frequently creates tension between statutory and customary systems, leading to jurisdictional ambiguity and a diminished recognition of traditional mechanisms (Gebre, 2010). A sight on the fringes of Mekelle in late 2023 effectively illustrates the stress and adaptation with the formal system. But, still, local elders called a community meeting instead of a municipal decree, and their job was to distribute limited farming tools by giving preference to houses with several orphans or disabled former warriors. These instances, which are repeated throughout Tigray, capture the main conundrum of this study: how the fundamental tasks of social cohesiveness are precise, resource allocation, and governance are carried out in the absence of a fully operational and legal state apparatus.

In addition, what does civic duty mean in this situation? In order to comprehend this, it is crucial to acknowledge that the Tigray region is in a complex transitional condition, having emerged from decades of political instability within Ethiopia and a catastrophic two-year war (2020–2022) (Lavers, 2023). Its people increasingly depend on ingrained cultural resources and family networks for survival, local order, and de facto governance, while its nominal Interim Regional Administration now functions with limited capacity and challenged authority.

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Therefore, within this particular cultural and political context, this study explores the nature of civic responsibility and the reconfiguration of governance. Although earlier studies, such as those on Acoli land sovereignties in post-conflict Northern Uganda (Rosenoff Gauvin, 2024) and traditional governance relations throughout Sub-Saharan Africa (Kern, Müller, & Zanker, 2024), have confirmed that indigenous institutions fill governance gaps following war, this study provides a novel theoretical and comparative contribution. It shows that rather than relying just on customary law, these institutions function through a moral triage mechanism in Tigray's liminal condition of challenged authority, giving priority to the most vulnerable based on moral commitments founded in kinship and wartime sacrifice.

This pattern is very different from the state-integrated model in post-conflict Rwanda, where the Imihigo framework paradoxically uses cultural innovation for centralized governance control (Sabbi & Ndikubwimana, 2024), and the decentralized chiefdom system in Sierra Leone, where post-war reconstruction has institutionalized elite networks within formal state structures (de Bruijne, 2023). As a result, indigenous institutions in Tigray are actively revising the limits of lawful governance and civic duty rather than merely replacing the state.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The interaction of formal governance and indigenous institutions during state fragility is examined in this literature review, which also analyzes how the breakdown of the state monopoly elevates traditional systems as essential mechanisms for community survival and continuation. The study first uses Boege et al. (2009)'s notion of Hybrid Political Orders using three different theoretical frameworks, showing how the breakup of the state monopoly during the Tigray war allowed indigenous institutions to fill the void and uphold social order.

Second, the study illustrates a sharp change from vertical, state-oriented bridging capital to horizontal, localized bonding capital within kinship circles like the beteseb, where state loyalty is completely subordinated to immediate group allegiance, and using Robert Putnam's (2000) conceptualization of social capital. Lastly, the study integrates Conflict Transformation Theories

and Interest-Based Relational (IBR) Theories (Berghof, 2004), showing that although IBR strategies use win-win mediation by identifying factional conflict styles, true transformation in deep-rooted crises necessitates restructuring the underlying relationships and systemic failures that formal state apparatuses were unable to resolve. When combined, these frameworks show how resilient indigenous institutions unintentionally highlight and expose the fundamental flaws and illegitimacy of the official state system by successfully maintaining peace and generational continuity during times of war.

2.1 Defining the Indigenous Conflict Resolution Mechanism

Conflict can be defined as a form of tension which arises from mutually exclusive or opposing actions, thoughts, opinions, or feelings (Mial et al., 2011:7; Jeong, 2008:7). Hence, it is becoming a cause of thousands of premature deaths, forced migration of millions of people, and disabilities of many more people from all over the world. The Tigray region is not an exception in this regard; many great minds have been drawn to the study of conflict. It is important to understand what conflict resolution is. The indigenous conflict resolution mechanism refers to the institutions and processes within the community through which conflicts are addressed. Indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms have an important role in ensuring sustainable peace in a given community through peaceful resolution of conflicts at very low cost (Deng and Zartman, 1991:299).

This culture of conflict resolution has been practiced widely in every community. Some of them are Abogereb and Dubartee from the Rayya community conflict resolution mechanism practiced from ancient times in the Tigray region, Ethiopia. They were conflict resolution mechanisms that were more powerful than modern conflict resolution. Elders play the major roles in safeguarding the political, cultural, economic, and religious life of their peoples (Zartman, 2000). This method of resolving disputes is crucial for preserving the social system's integrity and fostering ties in society (Tareke, 2009). To reinforce the notion that it is a useful lived experience of the community of local governance as a civic duty (Lederach, 1997), as well as a chance to resolve conflict through discussions, reconciliation, and restoration, a culturally legitimate process of local governance. While there are many community practices worldwide, each mechanism is distinct historically and specifically with a certain community practice (Woldegiyorgis, 2022).

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2.2 Theory of Indigenous Institutions

Theories play a very important role in any research literature as they give a clear illustration of the issues being studied. Therefore, the researcher tried to select relevant theories that are appropriate with indigenous institutions, particularly traditional customs practice. The two that are clearly explaining the transition of customary practice are: static customary theory and adaptive legal pluralism. Static customs are, therefore, transmitted from one generation to the next, whereas formal customs are considered constant over time. In this view, some of the customs of Rayya Azebo do not change over time despite the new developments. Thus, this theory is that the marginalization of women and youth is a common, unchanging cultural trait. This is how things were thought until now. Hence, this theory has become less flexible and dynamic in recent times.

On the other hand, Adaptive legal pluralism, however, offers a more complex understanding of the governance of contemporary war. In this sense, it is more important to move forward with new perspectives than to maintain old ones. Some organizations have purposely broadened their mandate to include current issues such as human rights violations and gender-based violence (UN report, 2026). One of the best examples of this is the Abogereb institution, which is a traditional conflict resolution mechanism of the Rayya Azebo community in Tigray. Known for categorizing homicides as "ቀይሕ ደም" "accidental" and "ጸልም ደም" "deliberate or torturous." This is a strong mechanism of accountability that prevents the cycle of violence from continuing (Tesfay, 2023).

Furthermore, some indigenous actors cooperate and interact with the formal legal system. A prime example of incorporating women in the peace committee as a mediating formalizing outcome through standard fines, such as a one-million Ethiopian Birr penalty for deliberate killing in Habru woreda. Documenting and sharing such experience with the Abogereb traditional institution is important whish not rely only on static but taking frame work to be flexible to meet modern demands.

2.3 The Importance of Indigenous Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

The exploration of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms is indispensable to understanding the core themes of governance and civic responsibility within Tigray's unique cultural and political

context. These mechanisms are not merely tools for settling disputes; they constitute the operational foundation of local governance and codify a culturally rooted form of civic duty.

As a Pillar of Local Governance, in the Tigray region, where state authority has often been distant, contested, or disrupted, indigenous systems like the shimagile provide essential, day-to-day governance. They regulate social relations, manage critical resources like *Hizaeti* (grazing land), and enforce community norms. This represents a form of kin-based or communal governance, where authority is derived from cultural legitimacy, social standing, and collective consent rather than from a statutory mandate. Their effectiveness in delivering accessible, rapid, and sustainable justice fills a critical void, demonstrating how governance is pragmatically enacted in diverse and challenging political landscapes.

As the Embodiment of Civic Responsibility**,** Participation in these mechanisms is a primary expression of civic responsibility. Elders (*shimagile*) take on mediation roles as a duty to their community, not as a paid profession. Community members participate as witnesses or guarantors out of a shared obligation to uphold *hizbawi netib* (collective dignity) and social harmony. This reflects a horizontal model of civic engagement where responsibility is owed directly to one's kin and community network, reinforcing social cohesion and mutual accountability from within.

In Preserving Cultural Identity and Autonomy**,** these practices are vital repositories of cultural knowledge, language, and history. Their continued use is an assertion of cultural identity and a form of political self-determination at the local level. In a diverse region like Tigray, they represent a key arena where cultural norms actively shape social and political order, offering a counterpoint to homogenizing state-led systems. For Sustainable Social Cohesion and Resilience**,** by prioritizing restorative justice, repairing relationships over assigning punitive blame, these mechanisms address the root causes of conflict. This focus on healing and reconciliation fosters long-term social cohesion, which is a fundamental prerequisite for any stable governance. In post-conflict settings, their role in managing local grievances is crucial for building a resilient social fabric that can withstand political pressures.

1.3.3 Critical Reflections on Power and Exclusion

The aforementioned illustrates the function of indigenous conflict resolution in the study area, Rayya Azebo. However, the indigenous conflict resolution mechanism in Rayya Azebo has its own drawbacks in practice, one of which is the exclusion of women from the elders who organized themselves in cases of meager compensation. Women were only required in certain situations. Rayya Azebo elders have greater advantages than women because they currently make a modest amount of money by mediating the group. Women are still required for their appearance such as wearing the **"ቦፉ"** peace cloth or participating in segregated female Mahber. Not included in any perks. Even women completely skip the reconciliation oath ceremony, fine determination, and blood feud discussions. Women are desperately needed, but solely for symbolic representation. Nowadays, this is taken as a trend to exclude women as customary practice in Tigray (Tadesse, 2019; Leake, 2023).

However, Gebremedhin and Asfaw (2021) also claim that young people do not take part in decision-making. No one under forty behaved as a mediator in any situation that was observed, despite being disproportionately affected by war and conflict as both perpetrators of violence and victims of displacement. Young people were not consulted when choices about marriage, blood money, and banishment were made by Elder councils alone. Young people may become disengaged from peace endeavors, and conflict cycles may be prolonged as a result of this generational hierarchy.

In addition to the above, the strategy of socioeconomic and minority separation is the imposition of blood money fines (diyya). Due to fines of tens of thousands of Ethiopian Birr, destitute households are practically unable to make amends; as a result, they are either compelled to permanently leave the area or continue to be at risk of being killed in retaliation. It depends on the persuasiveness of the mediator, regardless of magnitude or economic level. Families of accused individuals, including innocent relatives, are also uprooted without following the correct legal procedures and face widespread shame.

Finally, disputes with official governmental entities remain unresolved (Muller, 2023; Chirayath, Sage, and Woolcock, 2025). Despite the prevalence of jurisdictional ambiguity, customary courts operate in parallel to and occasionally in conjunction with modern courts. In cases of abduction, customary mediators negotiated marriage fees rather than reporting offenses under Ethiopia's criminal code (Article 648), which led to de facto impunity for gender-based violence. Similar to this, families are uncertain about their legal responsibility because paying blood money does not shield them from formal punishment. If they are not officially acknowledged or incorporated, indigenous institutions can subvert state law and aid in elite capture.

2.4 Tensions Between Indigenous and Formal Justice Systems

Both the formal and the indigenous ones are at odds on multiple levels. Jurisdiction unclearness among customary institutions is one of them. For instance, according to Kahsay (2025), elders such as Abogereb undermine legal certainty by operating in a legal vacuum with no explicit legal frameworks for intra-communal conflicts. However, the two violations of human rights continue to interact due to inadequate inspection. Research from Ethiopia has shown that persistent human rights violations, gender-based exclusion, and political involvement with female elders are often unwelcome. In addition to this, Elders in Oromia are one example of how the customary court is viewed from a political perspective rather than as authentic local customs and as a threat to cultural practices, which is another reason why elders are now opposed to state co-optation (ISS Africa 2025).

3. Methodology

The details of the methodological framework employed to investigate the reconfiguration of governance and civic responsibility in post-war Tigray. To explore the complex, lived experiences and social processes within the Raya Azebo community, a qualitative research approach was deemed essential. The study utilized an explanatory case study design, integrating descriptive and exploratory elements to systematically document, probe, and ultimately explain the role and functioning of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms as core local institutions. The following sections outline the specific strategies for data collection and analysis, including the study area,

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sources of data, sampling techniques, and the ethical protocols that guided the entire research process.

3.1. Research Approach

This study was anchored in a qualitative research approach, grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. This foundational choice was driven by the study's objective to achieve a deep, contextual understanding of the complex social phenomena of governance and civic responsibility as they are lived and interpreted by the Raya Azebo community. The qualitative approach prioritizes meaning, experience, and social processes over quantification, making it the most appropriate method for exploring the nuanced workings of indigenous institutions, cultural norms, and subjective perceptions of legitimacy and effectiveness. The qualitative approach acknowledges that reality is socially constructed and that the researcher's task is to interpret the meaning participants ascribe to their social world, in this case, their systems of order and duty.

3.2 Research Design

The research employed an explanatory case study design. The primary purpose of the design is to investigate how and why indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms operate as core institutions of governance in Tigray's specific post-conflict context. The design is intrinsically case-oriented, treating the Raya Azebo community within Mohoni Woreda as a bounded, information-rich case that illuminates the broader phenomenon. To achieve its explanatory purpose, the design strategically integrated descriptive and exploratory elements. Descriptive components were used to systematically document the structures, actors, and processes of the shimagile system. Exploratory components allowed for probing into the adaptive and contested nature of these systems in their interaction with a weakened state. This integrated design facilitated a holistic analysis, moving from describing what exists to explaining why it functions as it does within the given political and cultural landscape.

3.3 Study Area

The research was conducted in Mohoni Woreda, located in the South-Eastern Zone of the Tigray Region, with a specific focus on the Raya Azebo community. Four *tabiyas* (administrative

subunits), Wargiba, Genete, Marsa, and Tsigea, were selected as the primary study sites. This area was chosen purposively as an information-rich case due to its active use of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, known locally as shimagile, and its experience of the recent conflict, making it a pertinent location to observe the reconfiguration of governance at the grassroots level.

3.4 Data Collection Tools and Methods

Three principal qualitative tools were employed for primary data collection: semi-structured in-depth interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and non-participant observation.

3.4.1 In-Depth Interviews

In-depth interviews were a primary qualitative instrument in this research. This method was selected for its capacity to elicit detailed, nuanced, and contextual narratives from participants, allowing them to elaborate on personal experiences, perceptions, and tacit knowledge regarding indigenous governance and civic duty. Semi-structured interview guides, composed of open-ended questions, provided a flexible framework. This format facilitated deep probing and allowed the researcher to explore emergent themes while ensuring core topics related to the resolution mechanism, perceptions of legitimacy, and redefined civic responsibility were systematically covered.

Key informants for these interviews were purposively selected with community assistance to ensure they held extensive and experiential knowledge of the shimgilina system and local social dynamics. The sample encompassed a diverse range of participants, including respected elders (*shimagile*), community leaders, and other individuals of varying social stature known for their active role in traditional governance processes.

3.4.2 Focus Group Discussions

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were employed as a complementary data collection technique to capture collective perspectives, generate interactive dialogue, and identify areas of consensus or divergence within the community. This method was particularly valuable for exploring shared

cultural understandings, community norms, and the social dimensions of conflict resolution that might not surface in individual interviews.

A total of four FGDs were conducted with distinct, homogenous groups to foster open communication. These included separate sessions for community elders and religious leaders. Each FGD comprised approximately eight participants, a size considered optimal for managing group dynamics while allowing all members to contribute meaningfully. The discussions, guided by a thematic protocol, were instrumental in gauging the spectrum of community opinions, observing the social construction of knowledge, and generating rich, collective narratives on the function and value of indigenous institutions in the post-conflict landscape.

3.5 Sampling Technique and Procedure

The target population for this study comprised individuals within the four selected *tabiyas* who possessed direct knowledge or experience with indigenous governance and conflict resolution. This included elders (*shimagile*), community leaders, and other respected members actively involved in the resolution system. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was rigorously applied. Participants were deliberately selected based on their specific expertise, social standing, and firsthand involvement in the phenomena under study, ensuring the data came from the most knowledgeable sources. The sampling procedure involved initial identification of potential participants through community referrals, followed by a snowball technique where initial informants suggested other key individuals.

The study's overall participant count of thirty was determined using the principle of saturation, which holds that data collection should continue until no new themes or insights emerge from additional interviews or focus group discussions (FGDs). In a post-conflict environment where formal institutions are scattered, information is not distributed fairly. It makes sense that the study employed a purposive, non-probability sampling technique.

This procedure was carried out sequentially and iteratively: two focus group discussions (FGDs) and five key informant interviews were conducted in the tabiyas of Wargiba and Genete to gather

material, which was immediately followed by preliminary analysis using open coding to find emergent themes. Based on these preliminary results, two more focus group discussions (FGDs) and additional key informant interviews were carried out in Marsa and Tsigea.

Transcripts were examined following each data collection activity before going on to the next, enabling a real-time determination of whether saturation had been reached. When a number of indicators converged, saturation was deemed to have been reached: (1) the same themes in particular, the preference for indigenous mechanisms over formal courts, resistance to corruption, time efficiency, and the win-win approach appeared consistently across participant groups without new variations; (2) no new codes emerged from the final three interviews and the last FGD, with all new data fitting within the existing coding framework; (3) later data collection served to deepen understanding and confirm findings rather than introduce new dimensions or contradictions; and (4) participants maintained a thorough audit trail detailing the emergence and development of themes.

In order to ensure a thorough yet manageable scope for in-depth qualitative analysis, the sample comprised a varied mix of key informants for individual interviews and participants for the focus group discussions. It is acknowledged that the results are analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable, in line with the objectives of qualitative research, even though saturation was reached within the particular setting of the four tabiyas in Raya Azebo.

3.6 Method of Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data were analyzed using a systematic thematic analysis approach. This involved a multi-stage process: first, verbatim transcription of interviews and FGDs; second, repeated reading of the transcripts and field notes to achieve immersion and familiarity; third, manual coding of the data to identify initial concepts and patterns; fourth, grouping these codes into broader, coherent themes that directly addressed the research questions on governance and civic responsibility; and finally, interpreting these themes in relation to the study's conceptual framework and existing literature to build a meaningful explanation.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was paramount throughout the research process. Prior to commencement, the research proposal received full ethical review and approval from the relevant academic committee at Mekelle University. Informed consent was obtained from every participant; they were clearly informed about the study's purpose, their right to participate voluntarily, and their absolute right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained by using pseudonyms and securely storing all data. The researcher adhered to principles of cultural sensitivity, ensuring respect for local norms and avoiding any language or action that could cause discomfort or harm to participants or the community.

4. Analysis, Findings, and Discussion

The post-war Tigray situation offers a powerful case study of how the collapse of formal state structures and the survival of resilient cultural institutions radically reconfigure governance and civic accountability. The empirical findings, which are based on four focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews conducted throughout the tabiyas of Wargiba, Genete, Marsa, and Tsigea in Raya Azebo, challenge prevailing models of post-conflict reconstruction and shed light on a clear transition from state-centric to society-centric systems of order and duty.

4. Analysis and Results

The post-war governance landscape in Raya Azebo provides a powerful empirical case study of how state collapse triggers a transition from state-centric to society-centric systems. The following analysis integrates the voices from Wargiba, Genete, Marsa, and Tsigea with the three core theoretical pillars of this study.

4.1. The Collapse of Vertical Authority and Hybrid Political Orders

The most significant finding is the disintegration of the formal governance model and its associated conception of vertical civic duty. As Boege et al. (2009) theorize in Hybrid Political Orders, when a state's monopoly on administration fragments, power reconfigures into a shared space. One community elder in Genete captured this fragmentation: *"The government we once knew is gone. What remains does not command our trust or our loyalty.* "When formal structures fail, legitimacy

migrates. This is seen in the refusal to engage in traditional state obligations like taxation. A participant in Wargiba noted, *"Why would I pay taxes to a system that cannot protect me or provide for my family? The money would disappear."* This confirms that the Hybrid Order in Tigray is one where the formal state exists as a shell, but the functional authority has moved back to the community.

4.2. Social Capital and the Shift to Horizontal Responsibility

The data reveal a dramatic shift from "bridging capital" (links to the state) to "bonding capital" (internal kinship ties), as conceptualized by Putnam (2000). In Tsigea, a key informant described this horizontal duty: *"When a family loses its home, we do not wait for the government... the neighborhood gathers... this is what it means to be part of a community."*

This redefinition of civic duty as a kinship obligation is further evidenced by the Marsa FGD, where a participant stated, *"Contributing to the burial fund is not optional. It is a duty that defines us as a people."* Theoretically, this proves that in the absence of a state-led social contract, bonding social capital becomes the primary mechanism for survival. The sacred nature of these communal acts stands in stark contrast to the perceived futility of state taxes, which a Wargiba participant described as a vanishing contribution.

4.3 Adaptive Legal Pluralism and Restorative Justice

The preference for *shimagile* (elder mediation) over formal courts validates the theory of Adaptive Legal Pluralism. Contrary to the "Static Theory" that views tradition as a relic, these findings show institutions strategically innovating to provide efficiency. A key informant in Marsa explained, *"A dispute that would take months in the formal courts is resolved in days through our traditional processes.* "This is not just about speed; it is about the Restorative Justice framework described by Lederach (1997). A participant in Genete reflected on this, *"We walked away with our relationship intact. The court would have given us a judgment but destroyed our kinship."* This highlights that indigenous systems are more adaptive to post-war needs because they prioritize social harmony, a core tenet of restorative justice, over the adversarial nature of state-centered legal models.

4.4 Cultural Identity and the Inward-Looking Social Contract

The fusion of political grievance with cultural identity creates a narrative of collective dignity (*hizbawi netib*). A key informant in Tsigea noted that while international NGOs come and go, the *beteseb* and elder networks *"have always been here and will remain."* Another informant added, *" Our culture has sustained us... It is not something we will abandon for a foreign system that has failed us."* Theoretically, this suggests that governance is now occurring despite the state, driven by cultural endurance. However, this carries the risk of "exclusive solidarity" within the hybrid order. As one Wargiba member warily confessed, *"We have learned to trust only ourselves."* While this inward-looking duty ensures immediate survival, it poses a challenge for the future reconstruction of a broader, inclusive national civic contract for the rest of Ethiopia.

In the end, there are two sides to this blending of political and cultural identities. It offers a strong incentive for group survival and reconstruction, but it also runs the risk of solidifying an exclusive kind of civic duty. Long-term reconciliation with other Ethiopian communities and the reconstruction of a more inclusive national civic contract may be hampered by this inward-looking solidarity, even while it is necessary for immediate survival. *"We have learned to trust only ourselves. This is survival after all we have been through. However, I'm curious about the implications for the future of our children and the rest of Ethiopia, " one Wargiba FGD member warily confessed.*

5. Findings and Conclusions

This Manuscript article has argued that the post-war Tigray region is governed through a hybrid system where formal political structures, weakened by conflict and contested legitimacy, are supplemented and often superseded by informal institutions rooted in the region's cultural fabric. Civic responsibility, consequently, is expressed primarily through horizontal duties of kinship and communal solidarity, which in turn perform essential governance functions. This reality emerges from the specific interplay of Tigray's fractured political context and its resilient cultural context.

The implications are significant. For policymakers both within Ethiopia and in the international community, the lesson is that effective engagement in Tigray must recognize and work with these endogenous governance systems. Supporting community elders, kin-based aid networks, and

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traditional justice mechanisms may be more impactful in the short term than focusing solely on rebuilding a formal bureaucracy viewed with suspicion. For theoretical scholarship, the Tigray case underscores the need to integrate cultural analysis more deeply into the study of hybrid governance and post-conflict civic life.

Future research should pursue comparative studies with other regions in Ethiopia (e.g., Amhara, Oromia) to understand different models of state-society relations. Once conditions allow, empirical fieldwork is urgently needed to document the precise mechanisms and equity implications of this hybrid governance, particularly regarding the roles of women, youth, and marginalized sub-groups within Tigrayan society. Ultimately, understanding the complex dance between the political and the cultural in Tigray is not merely an academic exercise but a prerequisite for any sustainable and legitimate path forward for its people.

6. Implications and Recommendations

6.1 Institutional Integration and Policy Reform

Policymakers should transition from a conventional state-building model to one that recognizes and integrates resilient community structures. By establishing formal partnerships with culturally legitimate actors like the shimagile (mediators) and Aba Gars, the state can fill governance gaps and ensure that reconstruction efforts, such as public works, align with existing community labor contributions (wudubat). This requires the Ministry of Justice to develop a "legitimacy gradient" framework, allowing for the conditional referral of civil and resource disputes to accredited indigenous institutions while maintaining liaison offices at local courts to ensure procedural harmony.

6.2. Humanitarian and Community-Based Development

Humanitarian agencies must adapt their operational modalities to leverage kinship-based governance. Direct aid delivery should be coordinated through trusted beteseb (kinship) networks and neighbourhood committees, which maintain higher levels of local legitimacy than damaged formal channels. To support long-term social cohesion, development programming should invest in the capacity of these informal institutions, conducting nuanced power mapping to avoid

unintended conflict. Furthermore, any reconciliation processes should be framed around the concept of hizbawi netib (collective dignity) to foster local ownership and sustainable peace.

6.3 Knowledge Preservation and Public Awareness

To sustain these mechanisms, regional authorities and academic institutions like Mekelle University should systematically document the principles and case histories of the Gereb and Shimgilina systems. This academic foundation should support training modules that brief elders on modern legal standards and educate government officials on restorative justice values. Finally, local administrations should launch strategic media campaigns via FM radio and Community Theater to educate the youth on indigenous mediation. Publicly rewarding elders who successfully resolve complex disputes will validate these mechanisms as essential, dynamic partners in the regional peace-building process

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