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# Breaking the Cycle of “Black Blood”

Amdetsion Woldeyes Sisha

Over time, humans have made significant advances in technology, culture, and affluence, eradicating many negative and destructive beliefs, behaviors, and cultures and replacing them with positive and beneficial thoughts and practices. We are getting rid of things that are harmful to our progress and prosperity, even in our own lives. So, in this day and age, do we have to accept the crime of vengeance murder that hurts ourselves, our families, our communities, and our country?

I believe that the church and elders hold the responsibility for raising public awareness that murder is an abhorrent and despicable act. Actions that praise murder should be replaced by actions that critique and condemn murder. All rituals, sayings, and attitudes that commemorate murder must be changed. Peaceful conflict resolution is a positive method that should be appreciated and practiced. This paper will discuss (1) root causes of conflict in the community and (2) the restorative justice process that is breaking the cycle of revenge in Ethiopia.

## I. Background

In the northern region of Ethiopia—in particular the northern part of Shewa—the places called Debre Birhan and Mehal Meda are recognized for religious adherence to “Black Blood,” a generations-old tradition of spilling blood as a way of addressing conflict. What has caused this way of life for this community? I believe the root of the issue stems from following the teaching found in Genesis 9:6, whereby “whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed, for in his own image God made humans.” For those adhering to

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this passage, since God created humanity in his image, anyone who bleeds human blood will also shed human blood.

As a result, the custom of “wearing Black Blood” has caused problems for generations. When a member of one family murders a member of another, blood feuds between the individual families occur. Kin groupings band together and attempt to assassinate the killer or one of his or her relatives. Vengeance is so highly respected that a person who fails to revenge the killing of a kinsman is mocked at social gatherings. In Black Blood practice, settlement of specific disputes between the parties is handled by revenging the offender himself or his relatives.

The cycle of practicing Black Blood needs to stop. Toward this end, in this essay, I will focus on the role of the restorative justice practice of the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC) in Ethiopia, which is the seed of Anabaptism that is promoting the necessary discourse to bring about long-lasting peace in the region.

The following story illustrates the current problem:

My name is Boja Fayisa Sunbeto. I live in a kebele<sup>1</sup> called Abaya in Amhara Regional district, and I earn my living by farming. I am married and the father of a son. In my past life, I had good communication with the local people and I was praised and praised by the local community for my good behavior. However, my life could not continue in the same way. The reason is that because of the death of my younger brother 15 years ago, I had revenge in my heart. Because of growing up, I was charged with murder for killing my brother's killer in 2016. I was sentenced to 18 years and entered Debre Birhan prison. As a result, I entered the darkness I never knew in my life; my story was messed up, I couldn't be myself, and I was in trouble many times. I spent 5 years in prison reeling with remorse. However, during my 5-year stay, I can't pass without thanking Jabesa Bru, who is the prison ministry chaplain. He helped me through counseling and taught me, and made me capable of taking responsibility for my mistakes. He helped me learn the regular class lesson that I didn't learn because I was a farmer. During my time in prison, I learned a lot about the severity of crime. I learned regular class lessons, and now I am a 6th grader, and I am also trained in weaving.

Even though my life is fixed in this way, I am not happy unless to meet the family I wronged and ask for forgiveness. I was asked for reconciliation before and told to refuse, but after many individual meetings with the victim and the offender, reconciliation was started for me through Meserete Kristos Church's Prison Ministry chaplains, and I made the reconciliation before I left the prison's house; I want to live in peace while teaching the community about the evil of revenge and protecting my family.

Murder is a dreadful problem not only for the deceased but also for the perpetrator and the community. It disrupts local peace and deepens poverty. It destroys

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1 Kebeles are municipalities, the smallest administrative division in Ethiopia.

not only marriages and families but also property. But this need not be the case. Conflicts that would otherwise escalate to murder can be readily handled via constructive dialogue and negotiation. Full energy can be used to fight poverty by restoring broken relationships and preserving harmony.

For this to happen, however, people must first be taught about the causes of such terrible disputes and how to settle them. One group that provides such teaching is the Meserete Kristos Church Prison Ministry, an organization that establishes restorative justice practices in the community in order to stop long-time cycles of vengeance killings.

## II. Root Causes of Conflict

Of all the Ethiopian regions, the Amhara area has suffered the most over the course of many generations from cultural bondage to blood feuds, vendettas, witchcraft, extravagant ritual feasts, and Black Blood practices—a customary duty to exact violent revenge on family members for wrongdoing. The primary cause of conflict in the communities is competition for limited natural resources, including farming and grazing land. Conflicts commonly arise between brothers and relatives in communities because they share farming and grazing lands. Other contributing factors that have become normalized in the communities include immoral acts such as fornication and adultery, and too much drinking. In addition, the patriarchal and authoritarian culture of the Amhara ethnic group emphasizes that men are superior to women. Simultaneously, the females exhibit a very considerate attitude toward the murderer (as the hero) as well as toward the established system.

All of the above has significantly contributed to the ongoing crisis in the Amhara region. The attitude of retaliation, the low regard for human life, and hasty decisions to kill someone instead of having a dialogue to solve the issue, have had a fatal effect, obstructing the resolution of problems. In an attempt to address this critical situation, the government established “Dem Adrik,”<sup>2</sup> a community-based organization that operates in a top-down manner to educate and demonstrate the gravity and ramifications of intergroup violence. These indigenous dispute resolution practices are preferable to the traditional method of conflict resolution. As of yet, however, this has not broken the cycle of compounded death.

The Dem Adrik resolution process begins with an event associated with religious activity, where a decision maker, or Dem Adrik, becomes aware of a new conflict in one of two ways: (1) One alternative is for the injured party to address the society meeting at the church, whereupon the warring parties’ families or

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2 Dem Adrik is the process of using traditional beliefs and practices of the society to resolve criminal causes of conflict.

neighbors convince the victim to pick someone to help them resolve the problem. (2) A second alternative is for the elders to directly interfere in order to help resolve a quarrel. This is routinely done in murder cases to avoid exacerbating the conflict through the use of blood revenge. When elders intercede, they first persuade the murderer's and victim's families to seek compromise. They then select experienced and important individuals to handle the disagreement.

In yet another process, the killer may enter the church and ring the church bell to symbolically apologize and request reconciliation with his adversaries. Families of the victim, who may be pursuing the murderer to avenge the death, never kill him/her after he/she enters the churchyard. When the community hears the bell ring, they congregate and choose respected individuals to handle the situation. This form of symbolic apology has frequently been used, but the outcomes have not always satisfied everyone.

These indigenous dispute settlement techniques are based on the understanding that Ethiopians behave out of respect for their culture; they do not want to violate the principles that are linked to the community's beliefs, culture, and traditions. They will accept the outcomes because they are terrified of the stigma created by society otherwise.

In Ethiopia, the legal system has used punishment (prison sentences) to rehabilitate criminals (prisoners). The practical outcome of this method is repetition of the same crime, with the same folks returning to prison over and over again. It's clear that the prison sentence just tackles the symptoms rather than resolving the fundamental causes of the crimes. Even though there is such real proof of the inadequacies of the current punitive system, the government has not developed alternatives to this method.

In general, there are no organized or successful procedures for ex-prisoners to reintegrate into society after their release. Most communities do not accept ex-prisoners, even their own former members. And most former prisoners refuse to return to their original communities for fear of being killed, since, if they had committed murder or attempted murder, the victims or their families could exact retribution by killing them in turn. Instead, ex-prisoners often travel to regions where their background is unknown, thus severing social links to their families, relatives, and acquaintances. In an integrated model between the traditional conflict resolution mechanism and the MKC restorative justice and reconciliation program, the perpetrator and victim could address this prevalent problem in society.

Most of the inmates in prison have committed crimes motivated by retaliation and are frequently housed in prison alongside the relatives they have wronged. Meserete Kristos Church—the Mennonite church in Ethiopia—has been working in Amhara prisons for more than twenty years to break the cycle of vengeance. They began with one prison in Debre Birhan and were so effective in breaking the Black Blood cycle of vengeance that they were encouraged to expand into

another prison in Mehal Meda, another Amhara village. The ministry’s core strategy focuses on using restorative justice practices.

### III. Restorative Justice Process Breaks the Revenge Cycle

“Restorative justice is an approach to justice that focuses on the needs of victims and offenders” rather than on the need to satisfy the abstract principles of law or the need of the community to exact punishment.<sup>3</sup> Victims are given an active role in a dispute, and offenders are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions, with a primary goal of “repair[ing] the harm they’ve done”<sup>4</sup> by apologizing, returning stolen money, or doing community service.

Meserete Kristos Church is doing restorative justice in the following way: (1) conducting counseling sessions for inmates in prison; (2) providing counseling services for the victim’s family at their village; and (3) holding victim-offender mediation services at the prison as well as inside the prison.

Typically, being charged with homicide and then facing the abrupt loss of everything in their life causes newly jailed inmates great anguish.<sup>5</sup> For prisoners to experience recovery, their counselors must provide guidance, affection, support, help, and care. Professional counselors and chaplains will provide the service both individually and collectively. Each jail that is participating in the restorative justice process has two psychology graduates working as professional counselors. These professionals address the more serious issues while chaplains and co-counselors, who have received in-house training, take care of the other prisoners who require assistance. Inmates who get counseling are more likely to make amends and reintegrate into their communities.

According to MKC Prison Ministry’s past experience, the majority of victims’ families are eager to move forward with the reconciliation process, while a few hesitate, vacillating about whether or not to move toward reconciliation. Prison counselors and chaplains must devote more time and attention to this latter group, making frequent visits in order for healing to occur after victims’ families decide to meet their enemies. Unfortunately, because it is difficult to forecast ahead of time, this type of unexpected activity incurs additional costs for the project. For those who choose to enter this process, it will be provided at the village homes in the presence of other stakeholders such as religious leaders, community elders, and peace committees. The Meserete Kristos Church Prison Ministry can learn

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3 “CJC 240: Monte Carlo Quiz #4 Flashcards,” Quizlet, accessed April 3, 2024, <https://quizlet.com/120040393/cjc-240-monte-carlo-quiz-4-flash-cards/>.

4 “Restorative Justice—The Micah Mission,” accessed April 3, 2024, <https://themichamission.org/index.php/restorative-justice/>.

5 “Restorative Justice—The Micah Mission.”

the technique for counseling from professionals and address the villages as the initiative progresses.

One of our prison ministry's main goals is reconciliation, which makes mediation essential to building a harmonious community. The mediation process is as follows:

- Each prison is responsible to choose which convicts will be reconciled.
- Restorative justice training is provided for mediators from each inmate's village, who meet the inmates in the prison.
- After conducting the training, the mediators meet to determine how to proceed and share responsibilities.
- They obtain from the prison administration a list of inmates who are eligible and willing to participate in the reconciliation process.
- The team of counselors in the prison (which includes chaplains, psychologists assigned by the government in the prison, co-counselor inmates, and peace committees) talk to the offender in the jail and determine if he/she is ready to address his/her victim's needs.
- Mediators then visit with the victim's family and try to contact them until they show willingness for the reconciliation process—without pressuring, threatening, or manipulating them.
- When the victim's families are ready, the mediation team meets with the offender's family and waits until they are ready to meet with the victim's family and settle their disputes.
- Once both families have demonstrated their preparedness, a Family Group Conference will be held between the two families in the presence of mediators and security officials.
- Once both sides have achieved an agreement, the mediation team will schedule a victim-offender conference at the village or jail in the presence of security officials, during which communication will take place.
- The offender/offender's family will publicly apologize to the victim's family for the wrongdoing.
- If the victim's family requests restitution, it will be resolved in a participation manner, and a document will be signed by the parties.
- Finally, according to community tradition, there will be a feast and eating together so that no one abandons the covenant. After all of this, the reconciled inmate awaits his release from the prison. He will then rejoin his family and resume his previous life. Restorative justice has then occurred.<sup>6</sup>

Communities that have had a long practice of restorative justice processes have experienced reduced occurrences of retaliation as well as reduced crime

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<sup>6</sup> GraceandGrit, "Safe Passage," *Mystery and Wonder—The Journey Continued* blog, February 12, 2021, <https://buckshefusetiopia.wordpress.com/2021/02/12/safe-passage>.

rates. Inmates’ respect for themselves has improved, and they’ve taken up a variety of income-generating activities. As traditional and religious leaders are learning about restorative justice principles, collaborative engagement cultures are emerging as they create a harmonious society.

#### **IV. Hope for the Future**

Conflict emerges, escalates, and de-escalates. Before conflict erupts, structural forms of violence often exist. One or two groups may perceive an unfair distribution of resources or violation of others’ rights. Peacemaking intervention should occur before, during, and after conflict. Preventive peacemaking programs intervene before mass violence becomes more serious. Early warning and timely response projects should monitor conflict in their early stages before violence begins. Otherwise, conflict in its negative aspect may lead to violence, death, injuries, destruction of property, and/or environmental damage. As a result, people may lose their beloved family members, have their properties destroyed, and/or be displaced and left in a hopeless situation.

It is human tendency to retaliate when attacked; one side assaults first, then the other side responds. When the other side repeats the attack, the sequence of attacks continues. This mutual vengeance will not bring enduring peace to a society. But reconciliation has the potential to alter the tide of violence by breaking its cycle. Reconciliation of past violence is the point at which a former relationship comes to an end and begins anew. Though circumstances may sometimes seem impossible to address, there is always a chance for reconciliation and the start of a new relationship.

Steps in the restorative justice process include mediators identifying what the conflict is about, who is affected or involved, what should be done to resolve the conflict, what divides and connects people, and what fosters vulnerability to conflict. The more those mediators understand about the context, the more likely they will be to successfully achieve their intended goal.

All relationships based on equality and harmonies improve. It is an open door for them. The idea-based connection of the restorative justice process is founded on truth, justice, and change, which prevents the evil of the past from happening again. Research findings so far suggest that the restorative justice process is often successful. This has been shown to be true in the Amhara region, where the process has been used by the Meserete Kristos Church Prison Ministry to break the cycle of Black Blood practice and offer hope to the people. It follows, then, that the government should introduce victim-offender reconciliation programs directly accountable to justice offices and other compensation schemes to guarantee restitution of the victim and accountability of the offender.