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Xinjir la daadiyey xab baa lagu dhaqaa: "Bloodshed Can Only Be Washed by Umbilical Fluid": The Somali Culture of Intermarriage for Reconciliation

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper analyzes how intermarriage acts as a mechanism for resolving conflicts in Somali cultural context.

Methodology: Through qualitative case study research and an ethnographical overview of past literature, the author seeks to clarify the cultural and legal foundations of intermarriage as a security architecture through kinship obligation. Additionally, the author also traced the history of intermarriage, from pre-colonial pastoralist societies to its current resurgence.

Findings: Ultimately, this research demonstrates that intermarriage provides more than just a symbolic expression of peace; it provides a structural solution that can reshape kinship obligations, redistribute responsibility for providing security and establish peace at the core of the social networks among the clans that are parties to the agreement. Furthermore, this research addresses the critical role of gender politics and emphasizes women's agency, the ethics of obtaining their consent, and the daily lives of brides who serve as 'human bridges' between warring clans. Three detailed case studies combined with an overall comparison of Africa-wide customs including those of the Acholi, Dinka Nuer, Oromo, Southern African, West African and Nigerian peoples provide examples of both the similarity and diversity of kin-based systems for mediating conflict.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: This paper provides contributions to the body of knowledge regarding customary peace-building by framing Somalis' use of intermarriage as a complex form of transforming conflict into sustainable peace, locating it within a wider continental tradition of kinship-mediated security governance and ultimately offering suggestions for ethical guidelines and hybrid models of governance that balance customary legitimacy with contemporary standards for accountability, rights and inclusivity in peace-building.

Keywords: *Xeer, Diya, Intermarriage, Reconciliation, Peacebuilding, Somalia, Shir, Guurka Nabadda, Women's Agency, Customary Law*

1. Introduction

The importance of intermarriage as a mechanism for social reconciliation is encapsulated by the Somali proverb *Xinjir la daadiyey xab baa lagu dhaqaa*, "Bloodshed can only be washed by umbilical fluid" which is not a poetic flourish but rather contains a legal and moral philosophy compressed into a single line: that the most durable redress for violence is not punishment but relational transformation, the forging of kinship ties that convert former enemies into people with obligations toward one another (Lewis 1999, 1–25; Hersi 2023). The practice this paper examines is *guurka nabadda*, the marriage of peace: strategic intermarriage between warring clans, deployed as a formal instrument of conflict resolution within the normative order of *Xeer*, Somalia's customary legal system.

When the state collapsed in 1991, it dissolved overnight every formal institution of Somali governance: the army, the judiciary, the civil service, the police. The international response, from Operation Restore Hope to UNOSOM II, proved largely ineffective because external actors persistently misread a clan organized society as amenable to externally brokered frameworks with no purchase in its actual governance structures (Menkhaus 2007; Zartman 2000; Ahmed 1999; Bradbury 2008). Through those years and since, *guurka nabadda*/ *Godebreeb* has operated where state law cannot reach: a formally recognized element of *Xeer* jurisprudence, embedded within collective liability frameworks, and validated by both customary and Islamic normative traditions, producing durable if imperfect peace from Somali inhabited regions on Kenya and Ethiopia.

This paper makes a threefold contribution. It documents the cultural and legal logic of intermarriage as a peace mechanism: how it works, why it works, and what institutional architecture sustains it (Lewis 1999; Abdile 2012). It critically centers women's roles, both as the primary subjects of *guurka nabadda* and as autonomous peace agents, engaging directly with the consent problem (Cockburn 2007; Kapteijns 1999). And it examines contemporary challenges, including Al-Shabaab's disruption, urbanization, and minority exclusion, proposing ethical guardrails and a hybrid governance model (Menkhaus 2007; Hersi 2023). Section 2 establishes the theoretical framework. Section 3 introduces *Xeer*, *diya*, and the *shir*. Section 4 develops the theory and practice of *guurka nabadda*, including Hersi's (2023) *Ila Hadal Walaal* framework. Section 5 centers women's agency and the consent problem. Section 6 presents five case studies. Section 7 situates the Somali model in comparative African perspective. Section 8 addresses limitations and proposes a hybrid governance model. Section 9 sets out ethical principles. Section 10 concludes.

2. Conceptual Framework: *Xeer*, *Diya*, and the Social Architecture of Somali Peace

2.1 *Xeer* — Somalia's Living Customary Law

Xeer is an orally transmitted, continuously renegotiated body of norms governing virtually every dimension of Somali social life: marriage, inheritance, resource allocation, and, most critically, the management of inter-clan conflict (Lewis 1999, 195–210; Van Notten 2005, 3–22; Abdile 2012, 89–92). In the Somali context it is not a supplement to state law. It is the foundational normative

order within which social life is organized. *Xeer guud*, general Xeer, provides universally applicable norms analogous to international humanitarian law: prohibitions on attacking women, children, elders, and Muslim clerics known as wadaado; protections for wells, pasture, and trade routes. *Xeer sokeye*, specific Xeer, encompasses the particular agreements negotiated between and within specific clan groupings, including diya rates, intermarriage and alliances (Abdile 2012, 90; Aden 2011, 14–18).

Xeer is not a fixed code. It is a dynamic and politically contested social process, and it has always known how to survive. It has historically marginalized women, junior men, and minority communities, while showing a remarkable capacity for adaptation, surviving colonial disruption and persisting through the Barre government's nation building drive (1969–1991), which sought to forge a unified civic identity that transcended clan divisions, viewing national solidarity as essential to state building (Van Notten 2005, 11–17; Menkhaus 2007, 80–84). Those policies gradually reduced the institutional space in which customary governance had operated. But when the state collapsed in 1991, Xeer rose back to the surface as the only governance structure with genuine social legitimacy (Menkhaus 2007, 80–84; Ahmed 1999, 114–116).

2.2 Diya - Blood Compensation and Collective Accountability

Central to Xeer's management of inter-clan conflict is the institution of diya, an Arabic term (also transliterated as diyah or wergeld in comparative legal contexts) that Somalis render as mag. Diya is the system of collective compensation paid by the kin group of a person who has committed a harmful act, most importantly homicide to the kin group of the victim (Lewis 1999, 162–180; Gundel 2006, 8–12). It is important to grasp the full institutional logic of diya, because its collective rather than individual character is precisely what makes it both a powerful conflict resolution tool and a structural mechanism linking individual acts of violence to inter-clan political relations.

The unit of diya obligation is the *jilib*, or mag-paying group typically a group of between one hundred to few hundred adult males linked by close agnatic (patrilineal) kinship (Lewis 1999, 162–180; Gundel 2006, 8–12). The members of a *jilib* are jointly liable for the actions of any member: if one man kills a member of another *jilib*, all members of the killer's *jilib* collectively owe diya to all members of the victim's *jilib*. Conversely, they collectively receive diya if any of their members is harmed. This collective liability arrangement functions, in effect, as a mutual insurance system: individual Somalis are embedded within a kinship group that both constrains their behavior (since their recklessness creates collective liability for their kin) and protects them (since any harm to them becomes a collective political and security matter) (Gundel 2006, 10; Aden 2011, 22–25). The *jilib* is, in this sense, the primary unit of security in the absence of a functioning state (Yusuf 2026, 5; Lewis 1999, 162–180). The traditional diya payment for a male homicide victim has historically been set at one hundred camels — an immense sum in pastoral terms, representing the accumulated wealth of many households and symbolizing the seriousness of the offense. In contrast, the rate for a female victim has been established at fifty camels (Lewis

1999, 163; Yusuf 2026, 5). This gender asymmetry, though deeply rooted in Somali customary practice and reflective of certain classical juristic positions, has long been the subject of critical debate. Section 4 of this paper engages with this issue directly, arguing that while such asymmetry may have emerged from historical socio-economic contexts, it reinforces broader structures of inequality embedded in traditional *Xeer*. The analysis suggests that these norms should be revisited with wisdom and reform, rather than idealized or romanticized (Lewis 1999, 163; Abdile 2012, 95).

Beyond homicide, *diya* scales extend to a wide range of categories, including bodily harm, property destruction, and violations of honor. Each of these categories carries specific rates of compensation, negotiated within *Xeer sokeye* agreements between particular clans. These negotiations are not merely technical or financial; they are deeply embedded in the moral and social fabric of Somali society. The *diya* system functions as a collective insurance mechanism, binding kin groups together in shared responsibility and accountability.

What makes *diya* an instrument of peace rather than simply a mechanism of settlement is its relational logic. When *diya* is paid and accepted, the act is not merely a financial transaction. It is a public acknowledgment of harm, a declaration of collective responsibility, and a reaffirmation of normalized relations between groups. The payment transforms an act of individual violence into an inter-group political event, and its resolution transforms an inter-group political conflict back into an occasion for coexistence. This transformation of the relational context rather than the transfer of material resources — is the core function of *diya* in Somali peace architecture (Abdile 2012, 95; Zartman 2000, 43).

The philosophical depth of *diya* lies in its ability to convert violence into reconciliation. It embodies the principle that justice is not only about punishment but about restoring relationships and reaffirming communal bonds. In this sense, *diya* resonates with the higher objectives of Sharia (*maqasid al-sharia*), which emphasize the preservation of life (*hifz al-nafs*), the protection of dignity (*hifz al-ird*), and the pursuit of justice (*adl*). By embedding reconciliation within collective responsibility, *diya* ensures that peace is not fragile or temporary but structurally reinforced through kinship obligations.

Against this backdrop, intermarriage as reconciliation (*guurka nabadda*) acquires profound meaning. While *diya* addresses the material and honor dimensions of harm, intermarriage addresses the structural dimension, forging enduring kinship bonds that render future violence socially and politically costly. The marriage of peace creates bridges across clan boundaries, transforming former adversaries into relatives bound by obligations of care, loyalty, and mutual protection (Lewis 1999, 162–180; Gundel 2006, 8–12). Together, *diya* and intermarriage form complementary pillars of Somali conflict resolution: one compensates for past harm, the other prevents future harm by weaving kinship ties into the very fabric of peace.

2.3 The Shir Council of Elders as Peacemaking Institution

The institutional vehicle through which Xeer is interpreted, diya is negotiated, and guurka nabadda is proposed and formalized is the shir; the council of elders that constitutes Somali customary governance's primary deliberative and judicial body. The authority of the odayaasha (traditional elders) who comprise the shir derives not from electoral mandate or administrative appointment but from lineage seniority, accumulated practical wisdom, cross-clan social networks, and the moral weight accorded by communities to men who have lived long enough to have witnessed multiple conflict cycles and their resolutions (Gundel 2006, 14–20; Ahmed 1999, 118). Elder authority is also legitimated by Islamic jurisprudence: Islamic scholars frequently participate in or bless shir proceedings, and the authority of the Quran and Hadith is regularly invoked to reinforce the moral weight of Xeer norms that are compatible with Islamic values (Ahmed 1999, 118; Abu-Nimer 2003, 45–62; Abdile 2012, 98).

Different types of shir exist for different purposes. Internal clan councils address disputes within a single lineage segment; inter-clan assemblies also known as shirka nabadda, or "peace conferences" are convened specifically to address conflicts between different clan groups and represent the most politically significant and structurally complex form of shir. The convening of a shirka nabadda typically follows a ceasefire declaration brokered by neutral third-party elders (often from clans not party to the conflict), and it proceeds through a structured deliberative process: opening prayers and invocations; formal recitation of grievances by delegates from each side; counter-recitations; negotiation of diya terms; discussion of preventive measures; and, in the most serious and consequential cases, the proposal and arrangement of marriage (*Godebreeb*) for cutting off hostility as capstone guarantees of the peace (Zartman 2000, 43; Gundel 2006, 18).

The spiritual and moral dimensions of the shir process deserve emphasis, because they distinguish it from purely transactional dispute resolution. Elders who facilitate a shirka nabadda are understood to be performing an act of communal service with both worldly and spiritual significance in Islamic terms, *islah* (reconciliation or reform) is a religious duty. The formal recitation of the peace agreement at the conclusion of the shir, before witnesses from both communities, is a public performative act: an oath before God and community, the violation of which would carry social and spiritual consequences beyond mere material sanction (Abu-Nimer 2003, 45–62; Abdile 2012, 98). This performative and spiritual dimension is part of what gives shir-produced agreements their remarkable durability — they are not merely contracts but covenants (Ahmed 1999, 118; Abdile 2012, 98).

3. Guurka Nabadda: The Marriage of Peace

Somali customary mediation utilizes two forms of traditional restorative justice, Guurka Nabadda (Peace Marriage), and Godebreeb (cutting hostility). The purpose of these mechanisms is to convert conflict into kinship and social harmony by establishing blood ties for rival clans through inter-marriage. By developing a familial bond through marriage, clan members eliminate their need for vengeance as well as restore their faith in one another so they may live together peacefully.

Both methods place an emphasis on community recovery, dialogue, pardon and each party's shared obligation. As such, the methods reflect the Somali conviction that long-term peace will be realized not simply by means of agreement, but rather by lasting human bonds and family ties.

3.1 The Logic of Kinship as Security Architecture

To understand why intermarriage functions as a conflict resolution mechanism in the Somali context, it is necessary first to understand the structural logic of Somali kinship as a security system. In a society organized around clan identity and collective security where the *jilib*, not the individual or the state, is the primary unit of protection, accountability, and liability the creation of kinship ties between groups is not a merely personal or ceremonial matter. It is a structural political event with long-term implications for security, alliance formation, and conflict deterrence. Because the *jilib* collectively bears responsibility for the actions of its members, any expansion of kinship networks directly alters the architecture of obligation and reciprocity between groups. Intermarriage therefore becomes a mechanism that reconfigures the boundaries of solidarity: it transforms former adversaries into affines whose honor, safety, and future are now interlinked. In this sense, marriage is not simply a social contract between two individuals but a recalibration of the political landscape, redistributing risk and embedding peace within the fabric of kinship itself (Lewis 1999, 176; Hersi 2023). By creating shared descendants and mutual obligations, intermarriage generates cross-cutting ties that make renewed violence not only morally problematic but strategically irrational, thereby functioning as a culturally legitimate and structurally effective tool of reconciliation.

When a woman from Clan A marries a man from Clan B, she becomes, in the deepest structural sense, a human bridge between those two social units. The social and moral cost of renewed violence between those clans rises dramatically, because such violence would mean, quite literally, attacking one's own relatives and in a society where kinship obligations are not merely sentimental but legally enforceable within the Xeer framework, this is not an abstract consideration. A man contemplating an attack on the clan that contains his mother's family, or his sister's new household, must calculate not only the military and political costs of the attack but the kinship obligations it violates and the social censure it would attract (Lewis 1999, 176; Aden 2011, 30). The marriage creates what might be called, in contemporary security studies language, a deterrence structure rooted in relational rather than material cost (Abdile 2012, 95; Hersi 2023).

Perhaps more important, in the long term, is the status of the children of such a marriage. They hold dual lineage — belonging simultaneously, in different ways, to both their father's clan and their mother's clan and they become, in their very persons, permanent human embodiments of the peace agreement (Lewis 1999, 176; Aden 2011, 30). Their existence creates a continuing community of people with cross-cutting kinship loyalties who have material and emotional interests in maintaining good relations between the two clans. Over generations, a strategic marriage alliance between two previously hostile clans can fundamentally transform the relational landscape of a region, creating dense networks of cross-cutting affiliation that make large-scale

inter-clan violence socially and politically irrational for an increasing proportion of the population (Lewis 1999, 176; Yusuf 2026, 5).

This logic can be analyzed productively through the lens of social contract theory, though with important qualifications. Scholars like Van Notten (2005) have argued that Xeer represents a genuinely consensual social contract, negotiated and renegotiated by communities rather than imposed by a sovereign (Zartman 2000, 38–42; Menkhaus 2007, 85). The marriage of peace, within this framework, is not merely ceremonial but legally binding which is a formal extension of the Xeer agreement between two groups, with concrete obligations and enforceable consequences for violation (Hersi 2023; Lewis 1999, 175). The "living guarantee" character of the peace bride the idea that she embodies the terms of the agreement in her very person — gives the marriage a legal weight that purely textual or declaratory agreements lack. Unlike a signed communiqué or a UN resolution, a marriage cannot be "unsigned"; the kinship ties it creates persist regardless of political will, and they create ongoing obligations that outlast the political moment of their creation (Zartman 2000, 38–42).

3.2 Historical Practice - Pre-colonial and Colonial-Era Evidence

The practice of intermarriage as political alliance is not a modern innovation or a desperate improvisation born of state collapse; it has deep historical roots in Somali pastoral society. Lewis's (1999) landmark ethnographic and historical study of northern Somali pastoral society documents how marriage alliances between lineage groups were standard instruments of political consolidation among the major Somali clan confederacies — Hawiye, Darood, Isaaq, Dir, Digil, and Mirifle (Rahanweyn) long before the colonial period (Lewis 1999, 45–60; Bradbury 2008, 32–40). In the northern pastoral economy, where access to water and pasture was chronically uncertain and inter-clan raiding was both a source of wealth and a source of deadly conflict, the ability to build alliance networks through strategic marriage was a core political competence of lineage leadership.

Lewis (1999) documents specific instances in which the great clan confederacies used strategic marriages to build alliances across vast territories, creating networks of obligations that could be activated in times of military need and that provided a framework for peaceable coexistence in times of relative calm. The Rahanweyn confederacy — an agro-pastoral grouping of the Bay and Bakool regions of south-central Somalia, notable for its unusually inclusive approach to lineage membership — provides particularly instructive examples of how intermarriage and adoption were used to incorporate outsiders and manage relations across clan lines (Lewis 1999). The Rahanweyn's more open kinship system, which allowed for the formal adoption of members from other lineages, represents a version of the same underlying logic: that the creation of formal kinship ties across group boundaries creates structural incentives for peace.

The colonial period — British in Somaliland from 1884, Italian in Somalia proper from 1889, with brief and catastrophic Italian occupation of the whole territory from 1940 to 1941 and then trusteeship from 1950 — disrupted but did not eliminate these mechanisms. Colonial

administrators interacted with clan elders in ways that sometimes reinforced and sometimes undermined elder authority; they introduced written law and administrative boundaries that cut across traditional pasture and movement patterns, creating new sources of inter-clan tension (Ahmed 1999). However, the fundamental social logic of Xeer, including the role of intermarriage in managing inter-clan relations — proved remarkably resilient. Colonial law applied primarily in urban settings and in disputes involving the colonial administration itself; in the pastoral interior, Xeer continued to govern the basic terms of social life.

The Barre regime's relationship with customary governance was more hostile and more consequential. Barre's Scientific Socialism, proclaimed in 1969, explicitly targeted "tribalism" as an enemy of national unity and modernity. The regime banned public expressions of clan identity, replaced elder councils with officially appointed "National Committees," and attempted to substitute state law for Xeer in dispute resolution. These measures had real effects: they disrupted the institutional continuity of elder authority, created a generation of Somali urban professionals with attenuated connections to customary governance, and, by suppressing the legal scaffolding on which diya and intermarriage peace operated, removed the institutional brakes on escalating inter-clan violence (Ahmed 1999, 114–116; Bradbury 2008, 55). The catastrophe of 1991 can be partly understood as the collision of intense clan-based political competition, exacerbated by the regime's state centric approach that undermined clan based social structure, with the institutional vacuum created by the suppression of the very customary governance mechanisms that had historically managed communal conflicts. The collapse reactivated those mechanisms including guurka nabadda — as the only available governance structures, but it did so in a context of massive trauma, massive arms availability, and profoundly damaged social trust (Ahmed 1999, 114–116; Lewis 1999, 45–60).

3.3 The Ritual of the Marriage of Peace — Practice and Symbolism (Revised, No Hyphens)

The practice of guurka nabadda as it has been documented in the post 1991 period, including in the Wajir region of northern Kenya, in Somaliland, and in south central Somalia, follows a recognizable ritual pattern that integrates elements of customary Xeer practice with Islamic ceremonial forms. Understanding this ritual pattern is essential to grasping both the mechanism's cultural legitimacy and its practical operation. Although regional variations exist, the underlying logic remains consistent: the marriage is not simply a union between two individuals but a political act designed to embed peace within the kinship architecture of the clans involved (Gundel 2006; Hersi 2023).

The marriage of peace is typically proposed at the final stage of a shirka nabadda, after the diya terms have been agreed and the principal grievances have been addressed. Senior elders introduce it as a capstone guarantee, seeking a structural assurance that peace will endure. The proposal usually comes from the offending clan, which offers a bride to the aggrieved clan as a gesture of deference and acknowledgment of responsibility (Lewis 1999, 175; Hersi 2023). This act signals

that reconciliation is not merely transactional but relational, requiring the offending group to place something precious, a daughter or sister, into the care of those they have wronged.

The aggrieved clan receives the offer in a dual symbolic light: as a gift of trust and as a kinship encoded warning. On one hand, the offending clan is offering something irreplaceable, demonstrating sincerity and vulnerability. On the other hand, the marriage creates a new kinship tie that makes any future aggression morally fraught and socially costly. An attack on the aggrieved clan would now be an attack on one's own affines. This dual meaning, reconciliation and deterrence at the same time, reflects the relational sophistication of the mechanism. The transfer is not a commercial transaction; it is the creation of a new social reality, a redrawing of the relational map between two groups.

A powerful illustration of this logic can be seen in the Issa and Gurgura intermarriage practices in Ethiopia, particularly in the Dire Dawa and Shinile zones. These two groups have historically contested grazing lands, water points, and administrative boundaries, leading to periodic cycles of violence (Markakis 2011; Tubiana 2014). During moments of heightened tension, elders arranged intermarriages as deliberate peace interventions. Oral testimonies emphasize that such marriages created "children of both bloods," *caruur isku xiran*, whose presence made renewed violence socially unacceptable. The existence of these children obligated each side to restrain its youth, maintain communication, and uphold the peace agreement even during political crises. The Issa and Gurgura case demonstrate how *guurka nabadda* functions as a stabilizing institution in borderland settings where state authority is weak or contested.

The associated rituals reinforce the public, communal, and sacred character of the event. The formal peace agreement, *xeerka*, is publicly recited before the assembled community, often in the presence of clerics or *wadaado* who bless the proceedings. The exchange of *diya* payments is made visibly, ensuring that the material and symbolic dimensions of reconciliation are witnessed by all. A communal feast, the *mandeeq*, is prepared and shared across clan lines, the act of eating together functioning as a performative assertion of restored sociality. Eating together signals that enmity has ended (Gundel 2006, 17; Hersi 2023). The wedding ceremony integrates Islamic requirements, including the *nikah*, the recitation of *mahr*, and the public declaration of consent, *ijab wa qabul*, with customary protocols in ways that reinforce both the legal and the spiritual legitimacy of the union (Abu Nimer 2003, 50; Ahmed 1999, 118).

The symbolism of the ritual is rich and multi layered. Conducted publicly, the marriage becomes a political institution rather than a private affair. The children of the union are understood as "children of the agreement," *caruurta xeerka*, living embodiments of the peace. The bride herself, as she crosses from one clan to another, personifies the transformation the agreement seeks to achieve: turning separation into shared destiny and enmity into affinity. Her movement is a living metaphor for the transformation of grievance into obligation and of conflict into kinship.

The Issa and Gurgura experience reinforce this symbolic logic. Elders in the Shinile Zone describe the bride as "the bridge of peace," *buundada nabadda*, whose presence in the affinal clan serves as

a constant reminder of the moral and social stakes of maintaining harmony. In this way, *guurka nabadda* becomes not only a mechanism of conflict resolution but also a pedagogical institution that teaches communities to imagine peace as kinship, obligation, and shared future.

3.4 The Ila Hadal Walaal Framework - Systematizing the Practice

The most recent and theoretically significant attempt to formalize and extend the tradition of *guurka nabadda* within a contemporary peacebuilding framework is the Ila Hadal Walaal model — "Let Us Talk, Brother/Sister" -developed by Dr. Hersi (2023). This model represents a significant contribution to the field precisely because it bridges the gap between informal customary practice which has historically been undocumented, inconsistently applied, and legally unenforceable outside the specific community context in which it arises and formal institutional recognition, which is necessary for its integration into the hybrid governance structures that currently characterize most of Somalia's political landscape.

The Ila Hadal Walaal model organizes the reconciliation process into four sequential but overlapping phases. The first phase Trauma Acknowledgment — recognizes that sustainable peace requires more than material settlement; it requires the formal acknowledgment of harm and the creation of space for affected communities to name their experience and their losses. This phase draws on the restorative justice tradition in conflict resolution scholarship (Zartman 2000), recognizing that communities cannot move toward reconciliation without first being allowed to fully inhabit their grief. The second phase — Trust Building — involves a series of structured inter-clan interactions designed to rebuild the relational foundations for cooperation: joint economic activities, shared religious observances, and facilitated dialogue sessions that deliberately create positive joint experiences to counteract the accumulated trauma of conflict.

The third phase is Jilib-Aro Integration which is where traditional practices including intermarriage are formally incorporated into the reconciliation process. Jilib-Aro refers to the blending of *mag-paying* groups through the creation of formal kinship ties, and it includes *guurka nabadda* as the most binding and durable form of such integration (Hersi 2023). Crucially, the Ila Hadal Walaal model's engagement with intermarriage specifies that it should be proposed, discussed, and arranged with the full participation of the women involved and their families — a reform of the traditional practice that the model presents not as a departure from *Xeer* but as a fulfillment of Islamic consent requirements that have historically been honored in form rather than substance (Hersi 2023; Abu-Nimer 2003, 50). The fourth phase of Institutional Anchoring involves the formal recording of peace agreements, including marriage alliances, in community registers and, where possible, within the formal legal structures of Federal Member State administrations, creating a paper trail that makes the agreements legally visible and enforceable beyond the immediate community context (Hersi 2023; Menkhaus 2007, 85).

The Ila Hadal Walaal framework matters not only because of its specific content but because of what its existence signals: that the generation of Somali peacebuilding practitioners who have emerged from the post-1991 conflict landscape are engaged in a genuine and sophisticated process

of critical reflection on their own traditions — neither romanticizing them uncritically nor dismissing them as incompatible with contemporary values, but seeking to retain their deepest insights while reforming their most problematic features. This is precisely the kind of insider-led reform that external peacebuilding actors have historically been unable to perform, and it is the kind of intellectual and institutional work that the international conflict resolution community should be actively supporting rather than merely observing.

4. Women in the Architecture of Peace: Bridges, Not Instruments

4.1 The Paradox of Cross-Clan Identity

Women occupy a structurally paradoxical position in Somali kinship and governance. In the patrilineal kinship system that organizes most Somali social life, women are born into their father's clan and married into their husband's clan. They are not "members" of either clan in the full political sense: they cannot vote in the shir, hold formal elder authority, formally represent their clan in negotiations, or inherit the livestock and land that constitute the core material basis of clan wealth in the pastoral economy (Lewis 1999; Gundel 2006). In the diya system, as noted above, a woman's life is valued at half the diya rate of a man's — a formal, codified gender asymmetry that reflects and reinforces women's structural subordination within the Xeer framework (Cockburn 2007, 95; Abdile 2012, 96).

And yet this very structural exclusion generates a form of informal power that is unique to women. Because a woman holds simultaneous — if formally subordinate — affiliations with both her birth clan and her husband's clan, she is uniquely positioned to move between groups, carry information, build social relationships across hostile boundaries, and broker informal communications that male leaders, constrained by the honor politics of formal negotiation, cannot easily initiate. Her dual affiliation, which marks her as fully belonging to neither clan in the political sense, paradoxically makes her the most effective bridge between them in the social sense (Kapteijns 1999, 12–28; Conciliation Resources 2015, 4). This is the structural paradox at the heart of women's role in Somali peace processes: exclusion from formal political institutions enabling a distinctive form of informal political agency.

This paradox has been noted in the comparative literature on women and peacebuilding: Cockburn (2007) documents similar patterns in which women's exclusion from formal power structures creates both the social mobility and the moral credibility to operate as mediators in deeply polarized conflicts (Conciliation Resources 2015, 6–9). In the Somali context, women's cross-clan mobility is not only socially recognized but embedded in cultural norms in which a woman can travel between hostile clan territories in ways that men cannot, because her dual affiliation provides a form of protection and because her movement between clans is consistent with normal social expectations about women's lives. This practical mobility has historically been converted into political agency in times of conflict, as women have used their freedom of movement to carry messages, gather intelligence, and facilitate the early stages of peace contact that must often precede formal shir processes (Conciliation Resources 2015, 6–9; Adan and Pkalya 2006, 18).

4.2 Buraanbur -Oral Poetry as Feminist Peace Advocacy

Perhaps the most formally recognized vehicle for women's public voice in Somali political culture is buraanbur — a genre of oral poetry performed exclusively by women, typically in the context of social celebrations, mourning, and community crisis. Buraanbur is not mere folk entertainment; it is a formally recognized public speech act within Somali oral culture, governed by its own aesthetic conventions, performed before community audiences, and accorded a social weight that reflects the deep importance of oral literature in Somali cultural life (Kapteijns 1999, 34–67; Hersi 2023).

In the context of conflict, buraanbur has historically functioned as a form of feminist peace advocacy — a culturally legitimate mode through which women could publicly articulate positions that the formal institutions of the shir excluded them from expressing. Buraanbur compositions have been used to publicly mourn the dead on both sides of a conflict, naming losses in ways that humanize the enemy and make violence feel less heroic; to shame warriors whose aggression has brought destruction on their communities; to call upon elders to convene a shir and seek peace; and to celebrate the making of peace and the restoring of community bonds (Kapteijns 1999, 34–67; Conciliation Resources 2015, 6–9). In a cultural context where public speech by women in formal settings was constrained, buraanbur provided an authorized — indeed, celebrated — mode of public speech that carried real moral and political weight.

Kapteijns (1999) documents numerous examples from the northern Somali pastoral tradition in which buraanbur compositions by specific named women are credited with having shifted community opinion, shamed specific actors into seeking peace, or celebrated peace agreements in ways that reinforced their social legitimacy. This is restorative justice discourse in its most culturally specific form: women naming harm publicly, calling communities toward accountability, and celebrating the restoration of right relationship. The fact that buraanbur is formally a women's genre — and that its conventions include forms of social criticism and moral exhortation that would be inappropriate in the male-dominated shir — means that it constitutes a space of genuine, if circumscribed, women's public authority within the architecture of Somali customary governance.

The implications for contemporary peacebuilding practice are significant. If buraanbur represents a formally recognized mode of women's public speech with established peace-advocacy functions, then supporting and amplifying women's oral poetry traditions in conflict-affected Somali communities is not a culturally alien intervention but a reinforcement and extension of an existing indigenous institution. Contemporary peacebuilding programs that dismiss oral cultural traditions as politically irrelevant miss an important existing vehicle for women's peace leadership — one that communities are already primed to recognize and respond to.

4.3 Women in the Wajir Model - An Empirical Case

The Wajir Peace Accord of 1993–1995, discussed in more detail as a full case study in Section 5, provides the most thoroughly documented empirical example of women's autonomous peace leadership among Somali communities. The Wajir case is notable not simply because women participated in peace processes but because women — specifically, a group of Somali women from multiple sub-clans living in Wajir town, northeastern Kenya — initiated the peace process, created its first institutional structures, and brought warring male sub-clan leaders to the negotiating table before any formal male-led shir process had begun (Adan and Pkalya 2006, 22–35; Conciliation Resources 2015, 10).

The catalyst was a series of devastating inter-clan clashes among Degodia, Ajuran, and Murule sub-clans in 1992–1993 that left hundreds dead and disrupted the economic life of Wajir's market town. Somali women traders, whose livelihoods depended on a functioning market and whose cross-clan social networks gave them visibility into the human costs of the conflict across clan lines, began meeting informally to discuss how peace might be restored. Under the leadership of figures including Dekha Ibrahim Abdi — later a recipient of the Right Livelihood Award they organized the first formal inter-clan meeting, deliberately using their cross-clan social relationships to bring together men from hostile sub-clans who would not otherwise have sat in the same room (Adan and Pkalya 2006, 22–35; Conciliation Resources 2015, 10).

From this initial meeting grew the Wajir Peace and Development Committee, a multi-clan, multi-sector institution that coordinated both immediate conflict management and longer-term peacebuilding activities, including diya negotiations, economic recovery programs, and the formalization of inter-clan marriage alliances as part of the reconciliation package. The formal male-led shir that ultimately produced the Wajir Peace Accord built upon the groundwork the inter-clan conversations, the preliminary trust-building, the identification of negotiating counterparts — that the women's network had already laid (Adan and Pkalya 2006).

The Wajir case makes visible what the formal shir process tends to obscure: that peace processes rarely begin in formal sessions. They begin in informal conversations, in the backchannels opened by people who have relationships across conflict lines, and in the willingness of individuals to take personal risks in the service of community restoration. In the Somali context, women are structurally positioned to open those backchannels — and the Wajir evidence demonstrates that when they do so with organizational skill and political courage, they can drive peace processes that male-led formal institutions then formalize and ratify. The exclusion of women from formal shir processes is not, the Wajir case suggests, a functional necessity; it is a political choice that leaves the most effective peace initiators structurally marginalized in the institutions they helped create.

4.4 The Consent Problem — A Critical Engagement

No honest engagement with *guurka nabadda* can avoid the ethical tension at its heart: the question of women's consent. If the peace bride is the most important actor in the peace architecture — its "living guarantee," the embodiment of the agreement in her own person — then the question of whether she has genuinely chosen to assume that role is not a peripheral feminist concern but a central moral and political question whose answer determines whether the practice is to be understood as a form of women's agency or a form of women's instrumentalization (Cockburn 2007, 88–102; Abu-Nimer 2003, 60).

The historical and contemporary evidence does not permit a simple answer. It is necessary to distinguish between at least three meaningfully different scenarios, each of which has been documented in various sources. In the first scenario, a woman from the aggrieved clan — often a woman who has personal or family connections to the other clan, who understands the peace context, and who sees the marriage as both a personal opportunity and a community service actively participates in and endorses the arrangement, experiencing it as an act of solidarity with her community rather than a sacrifice imposed upon her. In such cases, which exist and deserve acknowledgment, the *guurka nabadda* may be experienced by the woman as a form of agency — the exercise of her uniquely cross-clan positioned social capital in the service of peace.

In the second scenario — probably more common historically — family and community pressure are such that while the woman may technically have the option to refuse, the social costs of refusal (the damage to family honor, the accusation of prioritizing personal comfort over community need, the loss of social standing) are so high as to make refusal practically impossible for most women. This scenario describes a situation in which formal consent is obtained but meaningful individual choice is not — a morally significant distinction that contemporary peacebuilding frameworks must take seriously. The Islamic requirement for the woman's explicit consent the *ijab wa qabul*, the formal offer and acceptance that is a legal prerequisite for a valid **nikah** — provides a potentially powerful internal cultural resource for addressing this scenario (Abu-Nimer 2003, 52), since it mandates not merely family approval but the woman's own audible, public assent. The problem is that this requirement has often been honored in form rather than substance: women have been coached to speak the words of consent without the process that would make those words meaningful (Cockburn 2007, 88–102).

In the third and most troubling scenario, women have been arranged in marriages as part of peace deals with little or no meaningful agency — treated, in Cockburn's (2007) terms, as "human sacrifices on the altar of male political interests," the symbolic weight of their embodied presence mobilized for a peace agreement in whose terms they had no voice. This scenario is not merely historical; it has been documented in contemporary cases in conflict-affected Somali communities, and it represents a genuine ethical failure of the practice that must be named and addressed rather than explained away by appeals to cultural relativism or the functional value of the peace it produces.

The paper's position is clear: these three scenarios are morally distinct, and any contemporary engagement with *guurka nabadda* must take that distinction seriously. The practice can be reformed without being abandoned. The Islamic consent requirement, the growing authority of women's civil society organizations, and the increasing influence of women educated in both Xeer traditions and international human rights frameworks provide concrete resources for reform (Abu-Nimer 2003, 52; Cockburn 2007, 88–102). Specifically, contemporary peacebuilding frameworks building on *guurka nabadda* must ensure that: women proposed as peace brides receive independent counseling before any agreement is finalized; their consent is sought in a process genuinely free from family and community coercion; alternatives to marriage are available as peace guarantee mechanisms; and the agreement is invalid if consent is withheld (Hersi 2023; Cockburn 2007, 88–102).

5. Case Studies in Practice

5.1 The Wajir Peace Accord (1993–1995), Northern Kenya

The Wajir District of northeastern Kenya — a semi-arid expanse bordering Somalia and Ethiopia, populated predominantly by ethnic Somali sub-clans — provides one of the most thoroughly documented and analytically instructive cases of indigenous Somali peace mechanisms at work. The conflict that the Wajir Peace Accord addressed was rooted in the intersection of chronic resource scarcity (water and pasture in a drought-prone environment), the proliferation of small arms following the collapse of the Somali and Ethiopian states and accumulated inter-sub-clan grievances that had been building since the late 1980s. By 1992–1993, the Degodia, Ajuran, and Murule sub-clans were engaged in a cycle of retaliatory violence that had produced hundreds of deaths, large-scale displacement, and the near-total collapse of the Wajir town market — the economic lifeline for all three communities (Adan and Pkalya 2006, 25–40; Conciliation Resources 2015, 12).

The peace process began not with a formal conference but with the informal initiative of a group of Somali women traders, as described in Section 4.3. Late Dekha Ibrahim Abdi and her colleagues leveraged their cross-clan social networks to create the first safe spaces for inter-clan dialogue, demonstrating that the informal, relationship-based phase of peace processes is not preliminary to "real" peacemaking but constitutive of it — the phase in which the conditions for formal negotiation are created. Once those conditions existed, male sub-clan elders were brought together in a formal *shirka nabadda* process facilitated by neutral elders from clans not party to the conflict (Adan and Pkalya 2006, 25–40; Conciliation Resources 2015, 12).

The *diya* negotiations at the heart of the formal accord addressed specific killings and property destructions, establishing a compensation framework and a timeline for payment. Alongside these material settlements, the accord included strategic marriage alliances between the previously hostile sub-clans — arrangements in which families with members on both sides of the conflict formalized kinship ties that created ongoing obligations of mutual protection and support. The Wajir Peace and Development Committee — the institution that emerged from the process that

continued to function as an inter-clan governance body for conflict management long after the immediate crisis had passed, drawing on its legitimacy from both the formal accord and the network of kinship ties that the marriage alliances had created (Adan and Pkalya 2006, 25–40; Conciliation Resources 2015, 12).

The outcomes were substantial: the cessation of large-scale inter-clan violence; the revival of the Wajir market; the establishment of a durable inter-clan governance institution. The limitations were real as well: the peace was tested severely by subsequent droughts in 1999–2000 and 2011, by the influx of arms from the Somali civil war, and by the Kenyan state's persistent neglect of the region's governance and development needs. The Wajir case demonstrates both the power of indigenous reconciliation mechanisms and their vulnerability when not adequately embedded in and supported by formal state institutions — a finding directly relevant to the hybrid governance argument developed in Section 6.

5.2 The Borama Conference and Somaliland's Stabilization (1993)

If the Wajir case provides evidence of indigenous peace mechanisms operating in a cross-border diaspora context, the Borama Conference of 1993 provides evidence of their operation at the level of proto-state formation. The Grand Conference of the Northern Somali Communities, convened in Borama (northwestern Somaliland) from January to May 1993, is widely regarded as one of the most successful indigenous peace conferences in post-Cold War African history — and as the institutional foundation of Somaliland's exceptional political stability in comparison to the rest of Somalia (Bradbury 2008, 90–112; Ahmed 1999, 120).

The conference was convened by Somaliland's Guurti — the traditional council of elders — in the aftermath of a brief but devastating civil war within the Isaaq clan, the dominant group in the northwest, which had destroyed much of Hargeisa, Somaliland's capital. It brought together some 150 clan delegates over four months of intensive deliberation — the sheer duration of the conference reflecting the complexity of the grievances to be addressed and the thoroughness of the deliberative process that Xeer requires. The conference produced a National Charter establishing the basic institutions of Somaliland's government, a power-sharing arrangement distributing political offices across the three major clan groupings of the northwest (Isaaq, Dir, and Darood), and a framework of family alliances — including strategic marriage arrangements at the elite level — that cemented the inter-clan political compact (Bradbury 2008).

Bradbury (2008, 90–112) argues persuasively that Somaliland's subsequent political development — its establishment of functioning institutions, relatively peaceful transfers of power, and comparative security is directly attributable to the legitimacy of the Borama process and the durability of the social compact it created. Unlike externally brokered peace agreements that lacked community ownership and enforcement mechanisms, the Borama conference produced an agreement whose terms were understood, endorsed, and enforced by the very communities it governed (Ahmed 1999, 120). The family alliances — including marriage alliances that accompanied the formal political compact created a network of cross-cutting kinship obligations

among Somaliland's political elite that gave key political actors personal stakes in the maintenance of inter-clan peace (Bradbury 2008, 90–112; Hersi 2023).

The limitations of the Borama process are also instructive. Women were largely excluded from the formal conference proceedings present as observers and supporters but not as delegates or decision-makers. The alliance was built primarily around the interests and relationships of senior male lineage elders and their political allies. The communities most marginalized within Somaliland particularly minority groups including the Gabooye (occupational castes), were not represented in ways that gave them meaningful influence over the agreement's terms. These exclusions have created ongoing tensions within Somaliland's political order, as excluded groups have sought recognition and inclusion that the Borama framework did not provide (Bradbury 2008). They are precisely the kinds of limitations that the hybrid governance model proposed in Section 6 must address.

5.3 Reconciliation in the Bay and Bakool Regions (2000–present)

South-central Somalia — the most conflict-affected part of the country — provides a more challenging environment for indigenous reconciliation mechanisms, but also evidence of their remarkable persistence even under the most difficult conditions. The Bay and Bakool regions, home to the Rahanweyn (Digil and Mirifle) clan confederacy, have been sites of repeated agro-pastoral conflict involving disputes over cultivable land, water access, and livestock in a region where the distinction between farming and herding communities creates distinct and sometimes opposed economic interests (Yusuf 2026, 8; Menkhaus 2007, 90).

UN HABITAT and UNDP documentation of local reconciliation processes in these regions describes cases in which *guurka nabadda* has been employed as part of *diya* settlements following specific incidents of inter-sub-clan violence. In several documented cases, cross-clan marriages were arranged in the period following a *shir* agreement, with families from both sides of the conflict choosing to formalize their commitment to the peace through the creation of kinship ties. Community leaders and NGO workers interviewed in these processes report that communities in which marriage alliances accompanied the formal peace agreement showed lower rates of retaliatory violence in the years following the accord than communities in which only material *diya* compensation was exchanged (Yusuf 2026).

A significant limitation of the evidence from the Bay and Bakool region is the near-total absence of formal documentation. The events described above are rarely captured in written records; they are known through oral accounts, community memory, and the field notes of researchers and practitioners who have worked in the region. This absence of documentation is itself a systemic problem: it means that the practice cannot be evaluated, monitored, or built upon in the systematic way that documented practices can. It also means that the consent and agency of individual women involved in these arrangements cannot be assessed from available evidence — a gap that is both analytically frustrating and ethically concerning. Addressing this documentation deficit is one of

the most important practical recommendations that follow from the analysis presented in this paper.

5.4 Al-Shabaab and the Disruption of Traditional Mechanisms

Any account of indigenous Somali reconciliation mechanisms that does not engage seriously with Al-Shabaab's deliberate strategy of disrupting those mechanisms would be incomplete. Al-Shabaab — Harakat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujaheddin, the jihadist insurgency that has controlled significant portions of south-central Somalia since 2006 — has pursued a governance strategy that is in many respects the mirror image of the one this paper advocates: rather than building on indigenous institutions, it has systematically sought to displace and destroy them (Marchal 2011, 14–22; ICG 2014, 5–9).

Al-Shabaab's assault on traditional reconciliation mechanisms has operated through several channels. Elder leaders who convene or facilitate shir councils have been targeted for assassination, particularly those who advocate for inter-clan reconciliation rather than alignment with Al-Shabaab's political project. The organization has effectively banned independent shir processes in areas under its control, replacing them with its own dispute resolution system — theoretically based on a rigid interpretation of Islamic law but in practice serving the organization's military and political interests (Marchal 2011, 14–22). It has also exploited diya grievances as a recruitment mechanism: communities whose legitimate diya claims have gone unaddressed by either the government or customary institutions have been receptive to Al-Shabaab's offer of "protection" and justice — even at the cost of subordination to its political agenda (ICG 2014, 5–9).

The organization has also targeted intermarriage-based reconciliation specifically, in at least two ways. First, by imposing its own marriage regulations — including requirements for women to seek organizational approval for marriages — it has disrupted the social networks through which families from different clans would normally arrange alliances. Second, by promoting a jihadist identity that explicitly subordinates clan loyalty to religious solidarity, it has sought to dissolve the very kinship structures on which *guurka nabadda* depends — replacing them with an ideological community that provides security and identity without the clan-based mutual obligation system that *Xeer* enforces (ICG 2014, 5–9; Marchal 2011, 14–22).

Despite these sustained attacks, customary reconciliation mechanisms have shown remarkable resilience. In areas where Al-Shabaab's control has weakened or been expelled, shir processes have re-emerged almost immediately — evidence of the deep social roots of these institutions and the genuine demand for their services. Marchal (2011) notes that Al-Shabaab's own justice system, while providing some services that communities valued (notably speed and decisiveness in dispute resolution), has not succeeded in replacing the legitimacy of elder-led customary governance in the eyes of most Somali communities. This resilience is itself an important finding: it suggests that the disruption of traditional mechanisms by armed actors is temporary and reversible, provided that the communities that sustain those mechanisms survive and maintain their social cohesion.

6. Intermarriage as Reconciliation in Comparative African Perspective

6.1 The Comparative Logic: Kinship as the Architecture of African Peace

The Somali proverb *Xinjir la daadiyey xab baa lagu dhaqaa* — "Bloodshed can only be washed by umbilical fluid" — encodes a philosophy of peace rooted in kinship transformation rather than mere conflict cessation. It is tempting, from within the particularity of Somali cultural experience, to regard this philosophy as uniquely Somali. The comparative evidence does not support that reading. Across the African continent, customary peace systems share a common architectural logic: that the most durable form of peace is not a signed treaty but a transformed relationship, and that transformed relationships are most reliably created through kinship (Zartman 2000, 38–42). The Somali *guurka nabadda* is the Horn of Africa's expression of this logic — but it is far from exceptional. Societies from the Acholi of northern Uganda to the Dinka and Nuer of South Sudan, from the Oromo of Ethiopia to the Zulu and Xhosa of southern Africa, have developed marriage-alliance-based peace mechanisms that operate through the same structural principle: embed peace in human bodies, in family bonds, in shared children, and in the collective obligations of bridewealth and kinship debt. To understand the Somali model in comparative perspective is both to illuminate its strengths and to identify, from the experience of analogous systems, the reforms that might make it more equitable and more durable (Adan and Pkalya 2006; Diala 2025).

6.2 The Acholi of Northern Uganda — Mato Oput and Clan Kinship Restoration

Among the Acholi people of northern Uganda — a pastoral and agro-pastoral community whose experience of protracted conflict, including the two-decade insurgency of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), has made them one of the most intensively studied cases of indigenous reconciliation in contemporary Africa — the principal customary peace mechanism is *Mato Oput*, literally "drinking the bitter root of the *oput* tree." The structural logic of *Mato Oput* is strikingly similar to that of the Somali *shir* and *guurka nabadda*: when a homicide occurs between two clans, both the perpetrator's clan and the victim's clan are implicated — the entire clan bears collective responsibility, in a pattern that mirrors the Somali *mag-paying jilib* almost exactly (Rettig 2008).

The *Mato Oput* ceremony involves a sequence of stages that parallel the Somali *shirka nabadda*: truth-telling and public acknowledgment of harm; communal negotiation of compensation in livestock and goods; a ritual act of reconciliation — the shared drinking of a bitter liquid prepared from the *oput* root, mixed with animal blood — that symbolizes the transformation of a bitter relationship into a shared experience; and, critically, the arrangement of inter-clan marriage alliances between the formerly feuding families, cementing the peace in biological terms that are functionally identical to the Somali *guurka nabadda* (Rettig 2008). Children born of such unions hold dual lineage obligations across the formerly hostile clans, and their existence creates the same structural deterrent against renewed violence that Somali peace children embody.

The parallel disruption of the *Mato Oput* system by the LRA which, like Al-Shabaab, systematically targeted traditional leaders, banned customary councils, and attempted to replace

community governance with its own coercive structures underscores the comparative generalizability of the finding that armed non-state actors regard indigenous peace mechanisms as threats rather than resources. And, as in the Somali case, Mato Oput demonstrated remarkable resilience: where LRA control receded, customary reconciliation processes re-emerged rapidly. One significant difference, however, deserves emphasis as a resource for Somali reform efforts: in the Acholi Mato Oput tradition, women are explicitly incorporated as active participants in the ritual ceremony itself, not merely as peace brides. Women from both clans drink the bitter root alongside the men, and women elders may take facilitative roles in the preparatory stages of the ceremony. This formal, ritual inclusion of women — not merely as subjects of the agreement but as participants in its making — represents a degree of women's institutional integration that the Somali shir has not historically achieved, and it constitutes a meaningful precedent for reformers seeking to expand women's formal roles within the gurka nabadda framework (Rettig 2008; Zartman 2000).

6.3 The Dinka and Nuer of South Sudan — Cattle, Cross-Clan Marriage, and Conflict's Structural Logic

The Dinka and Nuer peoples of South Sudan share with the Somali a pastoralist cattle culture, an age-grade social structure, systems of collective liability for harm that are structurally analogous to diya, and elder-mediated peace councils that operate through oral deliberation and community consensus rather than written law (Evans-Pritchard 1940). Cross-clan intermarriage between Dinka and Nuer communities has been historically documented both as a mechanism of ethnic boundary-blurring — creating zones of social overlap in which rigid ethnic distinction gives way to networks of shared kinship — and as a deliberate peace tool deployed by elder leaders to manage inter-ethnic competition over cattle, water, and pasture.

Evans-Pritchard's (1940) foundational ethnography of Nuer social structure documents how the bilateral kinship obligations created by inter-clan marriage function, in the Nuer context, as structural deterrents to conflict that are analytically identical to the Somali gurka nabadda logic: a man whose mother's brother belongs to an enemy clan faces internal kinship obligations that directly conflict with the demands of clan-based solidarity, and these conflicting obligations create both an incentive structure favoring peace and a social network capable of facilitating it. When Dinka men marry Nuer women, or vice versa, the children of these unions carry — in their very persons — the possibility of a world in which the Dinka-Nuer boundary is not the primary axis of political identity. This is precisely the long-term, intergenerational transformation of identity that Somali peace children are understood to embody.

The 2021 Action for Peace agreement in Jonglei State — negotiated among Lou Nuer, Dinka Bor, and Murle communities following years of devastating inter-communal violence — incorporated commitments regarding abducted women and children that are best understood as a contemporary application of the same cross-clan kinship logic: the recognition that peace requires not only the cessation of violence but the restoration of the human bonds that violence has severed (Adan and

Pkalya 2006). The critical lesson that the Dinka-Nuer case adds to the comparative picture is cautionary: kinship bonds alone cannot prevent peace breakdown when political elites at the national level exploit ethnic division for partisan purposes. The catastrophic inter-ethnic violence of South Sudan's civil war from 2013 onwards occurred in a society with centuries of cross-clan kinship bonds — demonstrating that these bonds, while real and meaningful, are insufficient in the absence of political will at elite levels and functional state institutions capable of enforcing agreements. This limitation directly parallels the Somali experience under warlordism and the Barre regime, and it reinforces the paper's core argument for hybrid governance models that embed customary kinship-based peace mechanisms within constitutional rights frameworks capable of constraining elite behavior (Bradbury 2008; Menkhaus 2007).

6.4 The Oromo of Ethiopia — The Gadaa System and Marriage as Governance

The Oromo Gadaa system — inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2016 represents perhaps the most elaborately institutionalized example of kinship-based governance anywhere on the African continent (UNESCO 2016). The Gadaa system, which governs the political, economic, social, judicial, and ritual life of the Oromo people across Ethiopia and northern Kenya through a system of age-grade cycles of eight years each, integrates marriage alliances as a formal governance tool in ways that go significantly beyond what is documented in the Somali case, providing important comparative evidence for the institutional potential of kinship-grounded peace mechanisms.

Within the Gadaa framework, cross-clan marriages are not merely arranged as ad hoc peace measures following specific conflicts; they are systematically managed at the grade-transition assemblies (baallii) as part of the periodic rebalancing of inter-clan obligations that the system requires for its functioning. The Gadaa peace concept *nagaa Boraana*, or "Borana peace," in the terminology of the southern Oromo is holistic and comprehensive in a way that far exceeds the narrow conflict-cessation model of Western peacebuilding frameworks: it encompasses intra-personal peace, inter-personal peace, inter-clan peace, and ecological peace — the harmonious relationship of human communities with their natural environment (Aliye 2019). This holistic conception of peace as a multi-dimensional relational state, rather than merely the absence of organized violence, resonates powerfully with the relational logic of the Somali *guurka nabadda*, which understands peace not as a condition to be declared but as a relationship to be continuously maintained and renewed through kinship obligations.

The Gadaa system also provides a formally institutionalized model of women's governance participation that contrasts instructively with the informal, paradoxical position of women in the Somali *shir*. When an *Abbaa Gadaa*, a grade leader dies in office, his symbolic governance authority (*bokkuu*) passes to his wife, who holds it in trust until succession is formally determined. This is not merely a symbolic role: it represents a constitutive moment in which a woman exercises formal political authority within the Gadaa framework, recognized and enforced by the community (Aliye 2019). The Oromo example, together with the Acholi Mato Oput precedent, provides

powerful comparative evidence that indigenous African governance systems can accommodate women's formal institutional roles — and that the exclusion of women from Somali shir proceedings reflects a contingent historical choice rather than an inherent structural necessity. The recent revival of the Gadaa system in post-EPRDF Ethiopia as a recognized layer of formal governance, parallel to state institutions, also provides a model for the institutional anchoring of customary governance that directly supports the hybrid governance argument developed in Section 7 of this paper (Aliye 2019; Hersi 2023).

6.5 Southern Africa and West Africa — Lobola and Lineage Alliance as Pan-African Peace Logic

The comparative argument gains further force when extended to sub-Saharan Africa more broadly. In Southern Africa, the institution of lobola bridewealth among Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele, and Sotho communities' functions not merely as a transactional exchange between families but as a formal alliance-creation mechanism between two extended kin networks. Each cattle or cash transfer in the lobola negotiation creates specific obligations of mutual protection, hospitality, and conflict avoidance between the bride's and groom's families — obligations that are understood, enforced, and renegotiated over time as the families' relationship evolves. Diala (2025) argues, drawing on extensive fieldwork in post-apartheid South Africa and Nigeria, that bridewealth's remarkable persistence in contemporary African societies reflects its enduring role in "legitimising marriages and solidifying alliances between families" a function that is structurally identical to the Somali guurka nabadda even if its explicit conflict-resolution application is less formally codified in the Southern African context.

Yarbrough (2018) documents, in a detailed community study from KwaZulu-Natal, how lobola negotiations continue to function as complex inter-family diplomatic events that create and manage long-term relationships of mutual obligation — and how disruptions of these relationships (through non-payment or contested arrangements) can generate precisely the kind of inter-family tensions that the institution is designed to prevent. The structural parallel with diya is striking: just as diya transforms individual violence into a collective inter-clan political obligation, lobola transforms individual marriage into a collective inter-family alliance with enforceable terms. The comparison illuminates the shared logic: in both cases, the institution works by converting the private into the political, and the personal into the collective.

In West Africa, Togola (2024) documents how Malian society's traditional peace architecture was "woven together by diverse forms of mutual assistance and solidarity across established families, lineages and clans" — a structural description that maps directly onto Xeer's network logic. Among the Wolof of Senegal, inter-lineage marriages have historically served as the primary tool of diplomatic alliance between competing family confederacies, with the wedding ceremony functioning as a public ratification of the peace compact in terms functionally identical to the Somali shirka nabadda. The persistence of these mechanisms in contexts of modernizing state formation — in Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana, among other West African states with

functioning institutions that also provides evidence that kinship-based peace mechanisms are not incompatible with constitutional governance, directly undermining the assumption of mutual exclusivity between customary and modern legal frameworks (Togola 2024; Zartman 2000).

What these comparisons reveal, taken together, is that the Somali proverb *Xinjir la daadiyey xab baa lagu dhaqaa* — "Bloodshed can only be washed by umbilical fluid" — encodes a philosophy of peace that is not culturally parochial but expresses a pan-African epistemology of kinship as governance. From the Acholi of northern Uganda to the Oromo of Ethiopia, from the Zulu of KwaZulu-Natal to the Wolof of Senegal, the deepest and most durable form of inter-group peace is understood to be not a paper agreement but a human bond — the bond of shared children, shared ancestors, and shared futures (Zartman 2000; Diala 2025). What is distinctive about the Somali *guurka nabadda* is not its underlying logic — that logic is pan-African but its degree of legal formalization within *Xeer* and *diya*. The fact that intermarriage is embedded in an enforceable customary legal architecture, with specific *diya* implications, specific elder oversight, and specific ritual validation, gives the Somali model a structural robustness that more informally constituted marriage-alliance practices in other contexts lack. This formalization is simultaneously the source of the model's exceptional strength as a peace mechanism and the site of its most pressing reform challenge: because the legal framework that makes *guurka nabadda* binding also makes it difficult to contest, the women who bear its costs are most in need of the rights-protective guardrails that a hybrid governance framework can provide (Diala 2025; Hersi 2023).

7. Limitations, Modern Challenges, and the Need for Hybrid Models

7.1 Gender Exclusion and Consent

The consent problem identified in Section 4.4 is the most fundamental ethical limitation of *guurka nabadda* as it has been historically practiced, and it demands concrete institutional remedies rather than merely rhetorical acknowledgment. Several such remedies can be proposed, drawing on both Islamic legal resources and contemporary human rights frameworks.

First, community consent protocols must be developed and formalized: processes through which proposed peace brides are consulted individually, in settings free from elder authority and family pressure, by independent counselors drawn from women's civil society organizations. These protocols must be embedded in the formal *shir* process — not added as afterthoughts but built into the standard procedures that validate a peace agreement. Second, the Islamic requirement for the woman's explicit verbal consent (*ijab wa qabul*) should be enforced as a genuinely substantive rather than merely formal requirement, with *wadaads* (Islamic scholars) taking responsibility for verifying that women's assent is given freely rather than under duress (Abu-Nimer 2003, 52). Third, formal recording of consent — in community registers, and where possible in the records of Federal Member State administrations should be a prerequisite for the recognition of any *guurka nabadda* arrangement. Fourth, explicit alternatives to marriage should be developed and legitimated within the *Xeer* framework as peace guarantee mechanisms including formal cross-clan adoption, business partnership agreements, and joint community projects — so that peace

leaders are not faced with a binary choice between accepting guurka nabadda without genuine consent or rejecting it and leaving the peace without a structural guarantee (Hersi 2023; Cockburn 2007, 95).

7.2 Exclusion of Minority Clans

The Xeer framework, as currently constituted, is built upon and for the major Somali clan groupings. The communities that fall outside this framework — Somalia's minority communities, including the Jareer (also known as Gosha or Bantu Somalis, descendants of the agricultural populations of the Jubba and Shabelle River valleys), the Benadir coastal communities (including the Benadiri Arabs and mixed-heritage urban communities of Mogadishu and the coastal cities), and the occupational castes known as the Gabooye (previously, with pejorative intent, as Midgan, Tumaal, and Yibir) — have been systematically excluded from full participation in Xeer-based reconciliation and have been disproportionately victimized by clan violence without access to its remedies (Abdile 2012, 102; Yusuf 2026, 10).

The Jareer communities in particular — who have been subjected to enslavement, forced displacement, and communal violence throughout Somali history, and who continue to face severe discrimination in access to land, employment, and justice — cannot engage fully in diya systems because they lack the clan networks and the political standing that would make their diya claims enforceable. For these communities, Xeer-based reconciliation, as currently practiced, offers protection primarily to those who are already within the protection of a major clan network. Any contemporary framework that builds on Xeer without explicitly addressing minority exclusion risks reinforcing and legitimizing the very exclusions that make the practice unjust.

The hybrid governance model proposed in this paper must therefore include explicit mechanisms for minority inclusion: formal extension of diya obligations to cover harm done to minority community members, regardless of whether the victim's community can enforce those obligations independently; formal inclusion of minority community representatives in shir councils as recognized participants rather than observers; and, in the specific context of guurka nabadda, exploration of how marriage alliances between minority communities and major clan groups might be used to create the kinship ties that would bring minority communities within the protection of the Xeer system rather than leaving them outside it.

7.3 Urbanization and Diaspora Dynamics

The Xeer framework was developed by and for pastoral and agro-pastoral communities organized in relatively stable territorial units, with dense social networks, functioning elder authority, and enforceable kinship obligations. Urbanization and diaspora displacement — the twin engines of Somali social change over the past three decades — have transformed these conditions in ways that create significant challenges for Xeer-based reconciliation without eliminating its relevance (Menkhaus 2007, 92; Bradbury 2008, 140).

In Mogadishu, the population has swelled from fewer than one million in 1990 to over three million today, largely because of conflict-driven displacement from the rural south and center — clan identity persists as a powerful social reality, but the enforcement mechanisms of the shir have been severely attenuated. Urban displacement mixes clan communities that would in rural settings have been geographically separated; it creates contexts in which elder authority is weakened by the anonymity of urban life, the economic independence of younger adults, and the diversity of governance frameworks (state law, district administration, NGO programming) that compete with customary governance. Diya obligations are harder to enforce when jilib members are scattered across three million cities rather than living in adjacent encampments (Menkhaus 2007).

In diaspora contexts, the substantial Somali communities in Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Minneapolis, Toronto, London, and elsewhere — clan identity is maintained through social networks, marriage patterns, and community associations, but the territorial and enforcement basis of Xeer is absent entirely. Diaspora communities have attempted to replicate shir processes through online councils — video calls bringing together elders from different countries to deliberate on community disputes and through community associations that mediate inter-clan conflicts among diaspora members. These adaptations are creative and, in some cases, effective, but they lack the coercive enforcement capacity of the territorial shir: there is no mechanism through which an online shir council can compel diya payment or enforce a marriage agreement against a diaspora member who chooses to ignore its authority (Yusuf 2026).

7.4 The Hybrid Governance Imperative

The analysis presented in this paper leads to a clear conclusion: the choice between traditional customary governance and modern constitutional governance is a false one. Both frameworks have strengths that the other lacks; both have weaknesses that the other can address. The path forward is hybrid governance — a framework that deliberately integrates the community legitimacy, restorative logic, and kinship-grounded security architecture of Xeer with the individual rights protections, minority inclusion mechanisms, and formal enforcement capacity of constitutional law (Menkhaus 2007, 95–100; Zartman 2000, 50).

This is not a merely theoretical proposal. Somalia's Federal Government and its Federal Member States have, with varying degrees of seriousness and success, been attempting to develop hybrid governance frameworks that recognize customary institutions while embedding them within constitutional structures. The Somaliland constitution — though Somaliland remains formally unrecognized internationally, represents the most developed example of this hybrid approach: it incorporates the Guurti (council of elders) as a formal second chamber of parliament, giving customary governance a constitutionally recognized institutional role, while also mandating individual rights protections (Bradbury 2008). Puntland has similarly incorporated traditional elder councils into its formal governance structures. In south-central Somalia, the process is less developed and more contested, but the Federal Government's Ministry of Justice and Judicial

Affairs has engaged in consultations with traditional leaders on the codification of aspects of Xeer within formal legal structures.

The specific hybrid model that this paper advocates drawing on Menkhaus (2007) and Hersi (2023) would involve several elements: formal legal recognition of shir-produced agreements, including marriage alliances, within Federal Member State legal systems; the requirement that recognized shir processes comply with constitutional rights guarantees, including women's consent and minority inclusion; the establishment of community mediators — trained in both Xeer and constitutional law — who can facilitate shir processes in ways that meet both customary and constitutional standards; and the creation of community registers, maintained jointly by customary institutions and local administrations, in which peace agreements and their terms are formally recorded (Menkhaus 2007, 95–100; Hersi 2023; Zartman 2000, 50).

8. Ethical Considerations for Researchers and Practitioners

Research on indigenous peace mechanisms — and on intermarriage-for-peace in particular — raises ethical questions that deserve explicit engagement rather than implicit management. The following five principles are offered as a framework for ethical practice in this field.

8.1 Informed Consent as Non-Negotiable

Any research that documents guurka nabadda — including field interviews with women who have participated in peace marriages, oral history collection, and ethnographic observation of shir processes must apply rigorous informed consent standards. This means not only obtaining formal consent before interviews but ensuring that participants genuinely understand the purpose and potential uses of the research, that anonymization is available to all participants who request it, and that the research design protects participants from potential harms including the risk that documentation of their stories could be used by clan leaders or family members to pressure them. Given the sensitivity of the topic and the potential vulnerability of the women whose experiences are at issue, researchers should prioritize participatory methodologies that give participants meaningful control over how their stories are represented (Cockburn 2007).

8.2 Do No Harm Framing

Researchers and practitioners who work with indigenous peace mechanisms face a distinctive risk: that their enthusiasm for and celebration of those mechanisms may inadvertently legitimize harmful applications. The value of guurka nabadda as a conflict resolution tool does not make any specific instance of it ethically unproblematic; the question of whether a particular marriage was genuinely consensual remains morally urgent regardless of its political function. Scholars who romanticize traditional practices without engaging critically with their power dynamics provide cover, however unintentionally, for those who invoke tradition to resist accountability. The "do no harm" commitment requires researchers to maintain critical analytical distance even especially from practices they respect and wish to support (Zartman 2000).

8.3 Community Ownership

Reconciliation frameworks built on intermarriage traditions must be designed with communities, not for them. The history of external peacebuilding in Somalia is, in significant part, a history of frameworks imposed by international actors with insufficient understanding of local governance realities and insufficient commitment to community participation in design (Menkhaus 2007). This history argues for extreme humility on the part of external researchers and practitioners, and for a commitment to supporting community-led processes rather than substituting external expertise for local knowledge. In practice, this means prioritizing funding and institutional support for Somali civil society organizations and peace practitioners including women's organizations — over the design and deployment of externally conceived programs.

8.4 Intersectionality

The costs and benefits of intermarriage-based reconciliation are not evenly distributed. Gender, minority clan status, age, economic position, disability, and prior trauma all shape individuals' experiences of *guurka nabadda* in ways that aggregate analyses conceal. A young woman from a poor family within the aggrieved clan is in a structurally very different position from a young woman from an elite family who can negotiate the terms of a proposed peace marriage from a position of relative strength. A woman from a minority community without effective clan backing is more exposed to coercive arrangements than a woman from a major clan with extensive kin networks to advocate for her. Research and practice that fails to account for these intersections treating "Somali women" as a homogeneous category — will produce analyses and interventions that, at best, benefit the most advantaged members of the category and, at worst, actively harm the most vulnerable (Cockburn 2007; Abdile 2012).

8.5 Researcher Positionality

This paper is written by a Somali scholar with extensive insider knowledge of the communities, institutions, and practices it describes. This positionality is both an asset and a source of analytical risk. The asset is access: insider knowledge enables the kind of nuanced understanding of institutional logic, cultural context, and social dynamics that external researchers may lack, and it facilitates relationships of trust with community members that make deeper ethnographic engagement possible. The risk is naturalization: practices and assumptions that are culturally familiar can be difficult to subject to the critical scrutiny that rigorous scholarship requires, and the desire to present one's own cultural heritage in a positive light can create pressures toward apologetics rather than analysis. The author has endeavored throughout this paper to maintain critical engagement with the practice of *guurka nabadda* alongside genuine respect for the cultural and institutional framework in which it operates — to be, in the terms of the field, an insider-critic rather than either an insider-advocate or an outsider-critic. Readers are invited to assess the degree to which that balance has been achieved.

9.0 Conclusion

The saying "Xinjir la daadiyey xab baa lagu dhaqaa" encapsulates the Somali belief that reconciliation does not take place through vengeance however through forming a bond which will last for all time. This research has demonstrated that *guurka nabadda* (Peace Marriage) also known as *Godebreeb*, the severing of hostility; is a key element to the legal framework of inter clan peacebuilding and part of the larger architecture of *Xeer* and *diya*. Research has also illustrated how traditionally; peace marriages have taken hostile entities and turned them into kinsmen. Furthermore, the paper points out that women are not mere objects in peace building and are in fact, significant contributors to this process. However, there is an ethical complexity regarding their consent. Additionally, this paper illustrates that Somali peace marriages are part of a larger African tradition of kinship-based reconciliation. Therefore, although there may be similar logic at play with regards to reconciliations throughout Africa, there exist some unique formalities present within Somali customary law. Lastly, this research identifies several contemporary challenges (such as insecurity, urbanization and exclusion), which currently complicate the implementation of the practice and necessitate thoughtful reform. Furthermore, it posits that *Xeer* must continue to adapt to incorporate women, minority groups and young people in order to maintain its long history of being able to adapt. In conclusion, this research suggests that durable peace can only occur when former enemies establish irreparable kinship ties to create a common destiny.

9.1 Recommendation

It is necessary to recognize the critical role that women have played in shaping the post conflict environment in Somalia and to institutionalize these roles into formal peace building structures such as the *shirka nabadda* (inter- clan council) and the *Godebreeb* (decision on intermarriage). Secondly, it is essential that we provide adequate protection for those individuals participating in a *guurka nabadda* arrangement. Thirdly, there is need to create new forms of governance that will allow customary reconciliation processes to continue to operate in accordance with national laws while allowing customary law to retain its cultural relevance and community ownership. Fourthly, it is vital to reform *Xeer* so minority/marginalized people can once again get married outside of their clan, thereby restore full rights to intermarriage with ALL communities. In order to sustain long-term reconciliation and build upon the success of community-led peace initiatives, we need to invest in community-based peace infrastructure. We must document and preserve indigenous knowledge concerning *guurka nabadda*, the role of women, and the larger dynamics of Somali customary governance. In addition, international actors should begin to shift their focus away from directing reconciliation processes towards providing resources to support community-led reconciliation initiatives. Besides, we need to find ways to involve younger generations in peace processes. Lastly, there is much that can be learned from Somali communities by comparing their experiences with other African societies that rely on kinship relationships for reconciling conflicts.

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