

# GADAA SYSTEM AMONG GUJI IN SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA

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## ABSTRACT

The Gadaa system is a time honored age and orientation set system practiced among Oromo people who regarded the system as their common heritage and as one of their major identity makers. This system has been practiced by Cushtic family in general and Oromo in particular such Guji, Borena, Karayu, Tulu Tulama, Arsi, Ittu, Humbana, Afran Qallo, Akichu, Macha, and Gabra clans. The present study is qualitative in nature and primary data have been collected by employing interview schedule, observation, focus group discussion and interviews with key informants in Guji area of Oromia region in Southern Ethiopia. In conclusion, when it is compared to the developed western political system, the Gadaa system is believed to be the best model for modern political system to maintain peace and harmony in governing the society as per their norms.

**KEYWORDS: Democracy, Egalitarian, Guji, Institution, Oromo**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gadaa is a system of governance and leadership that the Oromo society has practiced since time immemorial. [1] expressed it as, “an invaluable ancient civilization that the Oromo offered to the world as an intangible cultural heritage”. Similarly, [2] argues that Gadaa is “a system of generational classes (lubaa) that succeeded each other every eight years in assuming political, military, judicial, legislative, and ritual responsibilities.” It is an egalitarian socio-political and cultural system of governance not only among the Oromo but also in the other Cushitic peoples, like the Sidama, the Konso and the Gedeo. The Oromo, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, has exercised this system as a core and fundamental institution of governance through which they organize and lead their social, cultural and economic lives across long centuries of time. According to [3] and [4] the Oromo society have practiced the Gadaa system as a profound age-set and generation-set social and political organization through which they sustain their relationships with each other, with their natural environment and the supernatural power. Therefore, the Gadaa system has a strong similarity with and relevance for the conventional democratic governance and widely known as African indigenous democracy. It is known the indigenous democratic governance widely accepted and is honoured among not only the Oromo, but also other ethnic groups in Ethiopia and beyond. As it embodies principles, values and practices that are relevant for enrichment and democratization of conventional governance, the Gadaa system has to be studied in combination with the conventional governance perspectives. In other words, it is when the Gadaa system is studied in combination with such perspectives that the relevance of the system for development and expansion of culturally sensitive and people’s interest driven democratic governance becomes practical in Ethiopia in particular and Africa in general. As it is fundamentally democratic system, the Gadaa has significant roles in democratization process and establishment of democratic governance in Ethiopia. That is why the Gadaa system has been recognized and registered by UNISCO as a world heritage. As of recent time, there is an emerging interest to study, learn, promote and globalize the Gadaa system and its relevance for democratization and establishment of democratic governance in Ethiopia. More than any time in the past, a profound interest in studying and utilizing the Gadaa system has been raising from researchers, academicians, politicians, and leaders. Therefore,

the present paper is an attempt to delineate socio-cultural, religious, political and economic aspects of Gadaa system in Guji community of Oromia region in the Southern Ethiopia.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The present paper has been developed on the basis of qualitative data. Primary data have been collected by employing interview schedule, observation, focus group discussion and in-depth interviews with key informants in Guji area of Oromia region in Southern Ethiopia. Both primary and secondary source data were used to elicit the information on Gadaa system which deals with socio-cultural, economic, political and religious aspects of the Guji community in Oromia region of Southern Ethiopia.

## 3. THE GUJI ETHNIC GROUP

Guji are among the many groups of Oromo people in the nation. The Guji people belong to the Oromo ethnic group. They speak Oromo language and practice the original Oromo culture. According to the present administrative structure of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the Guji people are part of the Oromia Regional State [5]. They are, even, considered to be the ones who have sustained the original Oromo traditions. In other words, the original Oromo traditions are still active in practices of the Guji society. In their ways of life and dialect, the Guji Oromo seem to be distinct from Oromo of other parts of the country with the exception of the Borana Oromo. With the Borana Oromo, they share some ways of life and speak a relatively similar dialect [6]. The Guji Oromo consist of seven major groups, namely, Uraagaa, Maattii, Hookkuu, Haloo, Weessituu, Ootuu and Sheelloo. However, only four of these: Uraagaa, Maattii, Hookkuu and Haloo have currently settled evenly adjacent to each other, while the other three have been engulfed in other ethnic groups and settled separate from the other Guji groups [7] and [8].

## 4. GADAA SYSTEM IN GUJI COMMUNITY

Structurally speaking, the term Gadaa has been defined in different disciplines in several ways. For instance, Gadaa is considered by social-anthropologists as “an age grade that divides the stage of lives of individuals from childhood to old age into a series of formal stages.” Tadesse referring to the Gadaa System among the Guji stated that there are thirteen stages and transition ceremonies to mark the passage from one stage to the next. Moreover, Gadaa divides powers and functions, accords rights and responsibilities along the age-sets. Gadaa was developed over five centuries with purpose to foster social, political, economic and military matters collectively. Structurally speaking, it is age and genealogical based grouping of male generation and division of labor among the classes [9]. [7] Listed the fourteen Gadaa grades as dabballee, qarree duraa (I), qarree duubaa (II), kuusa, raaba, doorii, gadaa, baatuu, yuuba, yuuba guddaa, jaarsa guduruu, jaarsa qululluu, jaarsa raqiya and ginyaa. The Oromo of Ethiopia recognized the Gadaa system as part of their cultural heritage and as a contemporary system of governance that functions in concert with the modern state system. The Gadaa is a crucial organizing structure among the people and its social, political, ritual and legal aspects provides the framework for order and meaning of life. Gadaa organizes society through Yaa’aa (councils), laws and injunctions, outlining rights and duties of its members. Therefore, the Gadaa system is an inclusive social system in which every member of the society has specified roles and duties during once life course; this begins when sons join the system as members of Gadaa class forty years of their fathers and continuous passing from one Gadaa grade to the next every eight years.

### 4.1 Gadaa as Social and Cultural Institution

Gadaa system as a profound social and cultural institution that organizes, contains and sustains the various and rich values, norms, philosophies and world views of the Oromo and other societies. It shows that Gadaa is a system of generational classes (lubaa) that succeeded each other every eight years in assuming political, military, judicial, legislative, and ritual responsibilities.” The Oromo, society has practiced the Gadaa system as a profound age-set and generation-set social and political organization through which they sustain their relationships with each other, with their natural environment and the supernatural power. It is widely accepted and obeyed as a social and cultural system of the Oromo society through which they formulate the norms, values and customary practices on which their everyday social and cultural lives are based. In the Gadaa system, the Oromo organize themselves into age-set known as the luba and generation-set known as balli. Besides, the Gadaa institution contains values for environmental protection, social and economic wellbeing, peace building and political solidarity and these values are relevant for holistic societal development.

As stated by [10], in each steps of Gadaa grade and ritual performance, there are labour divisions that females share. They play significant role in supporting their husbands on Gadaa power by mobilizing families of torbi (the seventh/Guji groups) in Gadaa system. Wives of each torbi are responsible to Hadha Bollaa (title for wife of Abba Gadaa). Guji Oromo Female participates in Gadaa system through their husbands’ baallii. the wife of Abba Gadaa

is responsible in leading the wives of Abba Gadaa team under torbi and the structure goes down to community. At Ardaa-Jilaa women play mainly facilitation role walking in front of the Abba Gadaa. Haadha Bollaa that at Dori (final stage to pass to Gadaa) stage, female would have Guutuu on her head when her husband is taking power. If her husband became successful to Gadaa power (become Abba Gadaa), her title will be Haadha Bollaa. While her husband have Ulfaataa/phallic on his fore head, her Guutuu upgraded to Guutimaala. Only abba Gadaa's wife entitled to put Guutimaala on her head in Guji Oromo culture. Some Ardaa-Jilaa like Darartu with many sacred sites dominated by women ritual practices. Therefore, female's contribution in Gadaa system on is not simplistic.

#### **4.2 Gadaa as Social Governance system**

Gadaa has been considered as a uniquely indigenous democratic and just system than other forms of governance in the region. A number of scholars who have studied the Gadaa system positioned it as an African democracy that could inform constitutional thinkers. Gadaa has guided the religious, social, political, and economic life of the Oromo in general and Guji in particular for centuries, and also their philosophy, art, history and method of time reckoning. The Oromo social values and traditions such as gudiffaacha, moggassa, qalluu, irreechaa, and siqee/sinqee, etc. institutions are embedded in the Gadaa system. In Guji culture there are five parties such as Halchisa, Robale, Harmufa, Muudana and Dhalana taking power after every eight years. The transfer of power is taking place peace at major sacred culture center Mie boko.

Gadaa council is executive body of Gadaa government and it consists of six members. They are: a President (Abba Gadaa also known as Abba kallacha). Three Guji tribes abba gadaas( Uraga, Mati and Hoku) and three senior councilors (Hayyuu) of the three tribes. According to the Guji customary law, all the members of the Gadaa Council are required to live together from the moment of their election upto coming to power. The Gadaa executive body also embraces senior Gadaa councilors (Hayyuu). These are the retired abba Gadaas of the three Guji tribes. The Gadaa Council has assistants commonly known as executive officers (Jaldhaba). These are responsible to guard the executive council and take necessary measure and actions on criminals. Guji General Assembly is the legislative body of Gadaa government. The Gadaa General Assembly is committed to discuss and deliberate on customary laws and norms of the Guji as a whole. As a legislative organ of Gadaa government; rather it is one of the well functioning Gadaa systems of governance among the Guji people. Every Guji is allowed to summon to the Gadaa General Assembly. Differences in terms of age or status are not bar an individual from participating in the assembly. Most scholars consider it as the most inclusive political discussion and decision-making scene. The Guji strongly believe that the Mie-boko General Assembly has the highest political authority as compared to the powers and functions of Gadaa Council and other Gadaa institutions.

#### **4.3 Economic and Environmental Governance of Gadaa system**

Communal land holding is the guiding principle of natural resources management in Guji societies. The procedures to govern, laws and regulations of management are based on Gadaa system. The Gadaa system of governance is also rich in institutions for Environmental and resource management. The system has proven its significance in the assignment of property rights, allocation of resources as well as in the management and conservation natural resources. The Gadaa system has devised elaborate rules for environment and resource utilization. The Guji general assembly Mie-boko devised rules for resource utilization. No one is allowed to cut certain species of trees and there are Gadaa rules, which generally protect forests and the use of water resources. For utilization of resources and interrelations instance, Abbaa Maddaa (the father of water wells) is responsible for digging water wells and managing the utilization of water with assigned committee. There is another institution which is economically significant for the community to rehabilitate the socially and economically affected ones. This institution, which is a legacy of Guji Gadaa/customs, is called Ameessuu/ Hirbuu. The term, therefore, signifies contribution to support the needy. It was largely a restocking process. Accordingly, the Guji contribute (usually heads of cattle) and help those who are affected by war and natural catastrophes. Reciprocity is the main future of Gadaa system among Guji to help the needy in their community.

Guji elders play significant roles in their Community. They settle disputes, regulate marriages and execute rules and regulations in resource allocation and utilization like grazing land, water wells (eelaa) and others by sitting under Oda tree where decisions are made by the local community. Whenever things go wrong in their community, elders take appropriate corrective measures. Though they do not enact new laws or give general principles and amend Guji laws, which are the mandates of the Gadaa Assembly (Gumii Mie-boko), they deal with individual cases using customary laws in solving them.

#### 4.4 Symbolic relationship with forest under Gadaa System

Indigenous knowledge is considered as understandings, beliefs and practices of the Guji in sustainable use of forests land obtained as a result of protracted interaction with their environment. Forest land refers to thickly standing trees covering large areas as well as patches on small areas. In Guji tradition, people do not settle in forests, but out of forests. They use forests as shades for animals during dry season and those who do not have cattle are not usually allowed to settle in forests [11]. It is observed that the indigenous knowledge of the Guji embedded in Gadaa System has helped in conservation of forests and related resources. The laws in Gadaa System have helped the society to use their indigenous ways of conserving forests and the related resources (water and grass). Those who violate the laws were punished physically and socially (through social exclusion and giving their property in kind, for instance, slaughtering bulls). The Guji respect big trees as their elders and give care for young trees as their children and they punish those who violate these norms and destruct the trees. The care given to trees is based on their uses and the beliefs of the society. The Guji believe that cutting big trees is equivalent to killing elders and that for those who cut young trees children will not grow. Therefore, the many uses of forests or trees for which they are conserved as mentioned in the summary part and the belief system of the society that misusing creations, forests or trees brings punishment from the creator or Waaqaa, might have made my father take the actions.

It is observed that Indigenous knowledge is important to the Guji Gadaa systems of land resource management and it can be best understood along with their traditional socio- political and belief systems. The Guji holds that vital natural resources (land and forest) are sacred. They believe that land resources are the indigenous gifts, blessing and creation of God or the supreme deity (waaqaa), which is the source of life, livelihoods to the past, present and future generations. Waaqaa provided the Guji with knowledge of proper use, management, conservation and a responsibility of passing the land resources to the next generation. As they found no harm in this ancestral experience with nature, they continued applying and passing this lived experiences from generation to generation for un-identified period, probably thousands of years.

#### 4.5 Gadaa system as Religious Institution

There are three interconnected entities in which Oromo view their world. These entities are complex and cannot be explained separately as they are inseparable by nature. It gives birth to each other. These embedded components are known as Ayyaana, Uumaa and Safuu. It is important to understand each concept as it has connection with natural environment which is the concern of this study. The confirmation of the existence of Waaqaa by the Oromo is through observation of physical world, such as heaven (Waaqaa/sky) and earth (lafa) with all their components. "For the Oromo, the existence of Waaqaa is confirmed by the very existence of Heaven and Earth, and by the orderly movement that takes place within them" [12].

Ayyaana refers to the way and date Waaqaa create something. It is the causing factor for something to happen as well the time when event to happen. Ayyaana also represent the spirit of one's parent can be father or mother or both. Ayyaana is the complex way that Waaqaa manifested his deeds to man according to Oromo worldview. Uumaa is an Oromo term which in interchangeable way to represent creator and created. It is only Waaqaa who can create all things. Therefore, Uumaa is another word which can represent Waaqaa replacing the English word "creator". The third components of Oromo worldview is Safuu. This concept is everywhere at every time according to Oromo worldview. Things are at their right position because of Safuu. Safuu plays a mediation role inter and intra Uumamaa (the physical world) and Ayyaana (spirit). Safuu draws boundary line between/among two or more things inter-actions. Safuu keeps the balance between Uumaa (Creator) and Uumamaa (creatures/physical world); between human and non-human nature as well as between Ayyaana and Uumaa (Waaqaa).

Religiously, the Guji were/are traditionally Waaqeffata, who believe in Waaqaa (God) as do other Oromo groups. A number of ritual activities are carried out in different parts of the zone. The main tenet of the rituals or the worship is not to the physical features like trees but to Waaqaa, who created these beautiful and graceful physical features. In relation to this, <sup>[13]</sup> states that the Guji do not worship physical objects but the spirit of Waaqaa that is believed to dwell in them. The Qaalluu of the Guji, a religious leader, seems to act as „priest in Christianity“ for the people. The Guji also believe in the existence of dursinee or durriisa /seexana, devil whose main function is said to mislead people to do something wrong. There is also a concept called “ kaayoo”, which is not a thing but a symbolic representation of good or bad/evil [4]; [13]; [6]. The Guji traditional belief is, presently, called Waaqeffannaa, which has been defined as a belief in one God who has created everything and above all in his power.

Qaalluu institution is non-secular institution interconnected with other Gadaa institutions and its role in the Gadaa system cannot be undermined, it is at the moral side of public administration. As mentioned by [14], the most important and ancient institution of the Oromo in general and that of the Guji in particular is the Qaalluu institution.

The belief system, Waaqeffanna among the Oromo officiated by high ranking “priest” known as the Qaalluu for male and Qaallitti for female. Both the Qaalluu and Qaallittii are sometimes referred to as the guardians of the laws of creator (Waaqa) on earth. The Qaalluu institution is the preserver and protector of the Oromo culture in general and Guji in particular. It also provides them with spiritual guidance in their day to day life. The traditional ritual hall of the Qaalluu/Qaallittii is known as Galma and the ritual activity of the Qaalluu/Qaallittii is called dalaga. The Muudaa (Blessing and anointing ceremony) and the Jila(ceremony) are also important concepts associated with the Qaalluu institution. Qaalluu status is possessed by Aladdu group which is one of the sub-sects of Guji Ethnic group who are specialized in performing religious ceremonies. Another major role of Qaalluu in Gadaa system is to offer Qumbii which is traditional food offered to newly elected abba gadaa on the occasion of taking an oath as part of declaration and official approval by the religious leader Qaalluu. Eating Qumbii is a symbolic representation making the newly elected abba Gadaa powerful.

Worship to waaqaa is taken place near sacred place such as steam points, mountains and under trees like Oda, Kilta, Birbisa, Dambi and etc. It is observed that these species of trees and sacred place are protected by the Guji community as part of their culture and symbolic relation with nature. Heaven and lands are the primary sacred things, this is our rule. Secondly, father and mother are sacred, this is our rule. Thirdly, gadaa is sacred, this is our rule. Fourthly, trees are sacred, this is our rule. Trees on the road side are not cut down when trees are cut down and it should not be from the root. Fifth, Stream is sacred, this is our rule. Sixth, river bank is sacred this is our rule. Seventh, roads are sacred, this is our rule. Eighth, wife’s mother is sacred, this is our rule. Finally, most of the sacred lands or ritual places (ardaa jilaa) in Guji culture are found in high land areas where dense forest and abundant trees are found than in low lands. Similar Observation was made by [15], on tree symbolism, conservation and threat in Oromo of South Ethiopia.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Gadaa system constitutes a dynamic living culture that grants a sense of identity and continuity for Oromo people in general and Guji community in particular. The Gadaa values regulate contemporary Oromo /Guji political, social, economic and environmental and religious life. It evident that dense forest is found in Guji area where the Gadaa system is strictly followed by the local community. The Gadaa system as a cultural institution, functions as a mechanism of socialization, conflict resolutions, judicial administration, religious expressions, and social harmony. The contemporary social system and culture of Oromo /Guji community are shaped by the evolved traditions of Gadaa system. Federal system has to accommodate Gadaa rule into the 21st Ethiopian Constitutional order; to materialize this, the federal as well as Oromia National Regional State governments shall be committed to that end and looking beyond maintenance of the status quo for the best interests of today’s people and generations to come. Therefore, it is recommended that the Federal Government of Ethiopia may adopt the Gadaa system of governance which is very much required to harmonize the Ethiopian society since the Constitution of Ethiopia emphasizes the motto of egalitarian society.

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