

# THE ORIGIN, FUNCTION AND CONSERVATION VALUE OF SACRED NATURAL SITE IN GUJI SOCIETY: THE CASE OF ADOOLA REEDDE DISTRICT, SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA

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## Abstract

*Environmental conservation and protection of sacred places are prerequisites for humanity and are considered topical issues in the world in general and in Ethiopia in particular. The aim of this study was to investigate the origin, function, and conservation values of sacred natural sites among the Guji Oromo of southern Ethiopia. The finding of the study shows that the origin and expansion of sacred sites in Guji land were embedded in an inextricable mutual interaction of the Guji people with God and their environment including plants and animals. The valuable life experiences of indigenous religion and environmental protection passed down to the generations are surviving sacred natural sites and associated sociocultural practices. The rituals like Maqi-Basa, Wodessa-Mura, and Dabbale Qoru are among the ritual practices associated with sacred sites in Guji Society. Sacred sites are home to cultural and biodiversity resources. They are places serving as centers for the prayer for peace, fertility, rain, and order in life in society. Therefore, conservation of the sacred natural sites has an indispensable role for humanity since they have survived sociocultural practices and biodiversity resources exist in society.*

**Key words:** Abba Gadaa, Gadaa System, Waaqa, Guji-Oromo, Sacred site.

## INTRODUCTION

Sacred natural sites collectively refers to natural landscapes and seascapes including natural features, such as trees, forest regions, mountains, caverns, and rivers, which have been designated as set aside, holy, cherished, and venerated as a result of local belief system and traditions (Verschuuren, 2010). They include the areas considered as sacred by indigenous and local peoples, set aside as places of worship and commemoration (Rose, 2005). The sacred natural sites are natural areas of special spiritual significance that provide cultural function to local peoples (Gonzalo et al, 2005). They are important for survival of the cultures that created them. They have survived for hundreds of years and act as important biodiversity reservoirs. As discussed by Loh (2014), sacred natural sites are showcases for the existence, maintenance and preservation of bio-cultural diversity. In Africa, many of SNSs are unprotected by law and are under threats as a result of the impact of modernization and globalization including agricultural expansion; demographic changes; erosion of traditional values, particularly associated with widespread diffusion of institutionalized religions brought in by colonization processes, and which considered traditional beliefs as superstitious (Gonzalo, 2005). In Ethiopia, there are many sacred natural sites highly connected with local traditions in one way or another (Gemed, 2021). To mention a few, the sacred natural sites such as Wonsho of Sidama and Caatoo of Horro Guduru Wollega are socially conserved and respected sites which could have sociocultural and environmental importance in Ethiopia (Doffana, 2017; Lemessa, 2014). As noted by Mulugeta (2017), SNSs are not just ordinary places, but place which is irreplaceable and unchangeable, and have certain taboos. They are sites of religious and cultural rituals, respected and protected by all, and transferred from generation to generation. No matter how much the sacred site is far away from the people, they did not establish another place. Rather, they perform pilgrimage to such sacred sites because of the value attached to that place as it handed down from ancestor. Similarly, there are multiple sacred natural sites in Guji society, southern Ethiopia. According to Tadesse (1995), these shrines are common properties of the whole group and are found all over the Guji territory covering vast areas of land. A Guji people are performs pilgrimage to these sites for Gadaa system and other rituals. The considerable sacred natural sites found in Guji and west Guji zones are where diverse cultural practices have been performed as per the long-lived people traditions (Gemed, 2018). This indicates the sacred sites exist each with its own distinct purpose for a particular cultural tradition of society. Gemed (2021) noted that Guji people classified land as sacred and profane according to their indigenous environmental knowledge representing landscape functions. These sites were equivalent within sites that being selected by modern institutionalized religions. The sacred shrine of Guji is like churches of Christians and Mosques of Islam in terms of their sacred value among the people (Tadesse, 1995). Nagessa (2011) stated that most of the sacred shrines and ritual places among Guji are found in highland areas where dense forest and abundant trees are found than in lowlands. Nagessa further stated that Guji people undertake prayer rituals to their creator waaqaa on the sacred land. The representation of landscape in the culture is based on their

worldview of land as sacred and profane. Therefore, this study was conducted to explore the origin and functions of sacred sites in association with their conservation value as these points have not been further studied in society.

### **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

A qualitative research approach and an ethnographic research design were utilized to gather data for this study through in-depth interviews, focus groups, observation, and transect walks. Data were collected from community elders, Gadaa system custodian elders, and experts as well as heads of culture and tourism offices in the study areas. An in-depth interview was made with community elders, religious leaders, practitioners of the Gada system and experts of Culture and Tourism offices of the Guji zone and Adola Rede and Adola Woyyu districts. The group discussions were made with practitioners of the Gada system and community elders in Adola Redde and Adola Woyyu districts particularly where sacred places are found. The points of the discussion were forwarded by the support of moderators, and discussants raised existing experiences of the origin, functions and various perceptions oriented towards sacred natural site in the study society. Transecting walks is another data collection technique used in this study, in which it was, conducted an intensive combination of observation and interviews with local community elders, and those people who are active in the Gada system (Gadaa, Dori, Raba, Batu and Yuba) were another type of data gathering technique employed in the study. With the help of local community elders, this method has been used to really observe the sacred natural areas and their current situations. The fieldwork took three months starting from January 2022 to March 2022. Before being presented and analyzed, the collected data were reorganized into the theme. As soon as data collection began, concepts were separated and organized into categories based on related themes. Then, the data were organized by theme and qualitatively assessed using statements.

### **DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AREAS AND PEOPLE**

This study was conducted in two neighboring districts of the Guji zone- Adoolaa and Adola Woyyu specifically around Odaa Adola and Gomboba sacred natural sites. The Guji zone, which borders the East Bale zone, the West Guji zone, the South Borana zone, and the Sidama and North Gedeo zones of the South Nations Nationalities and People of Ethiopia region, is one of the 20 zones that make up the Oromia national regional state. Guji Zone currently consists of three town municipalities and 14 districts. The total area of land is 18,577 square kilometers (Teshome, 2016, Gemed, 2018). Based on the census conducted in 2007, the total population of Guji Zone was 1, 389, 800, of which 702, 580 are men and 687, 220 women with an area of 18,577.05 square kilometers and a population density of 74.81 persons/km<sup>2</sup> (PCCFDRE, 2007). Guji land is characterized by three ecological zones, Baddaa (high altitude), Badda-daree (middle altitude) and Gammoojjii (semiarid land) (Debsu, 2009), but Adoola Rede and Adola woyyu districts are found at middle altitude and highland ecological zones. The rainfall pattern is bimodal and the major season (Ganna) extends from March to May and the minor season (Hageyya) extends from September and November (Gemed, 2018).

There are three phratries that make up Guji Oromo. They are Uraagaa, Maattii, and Hookku. The founding father of Guji, Gujo, is said to have had three sons: Uraago, Maattoo, and Hookku. The names of the three Gujo sons are used to name the three phratries of Guji. The Gada system, an indigenous institution that has been in Guji since the dawn of time, is well known. Regarding the exact and accurate historical details of the beginning and development of the Gada system by the community's successors, nothing is known. Gadaa System, on the other hand, is a comprehensive organization that represents sociocultural, economic, and political facets of Guji society in general and the Oromo community as a whole (Debsu, 2009; Jalata & Schaffer, 2013; Jeylan, 2006; Legesse, 1973).

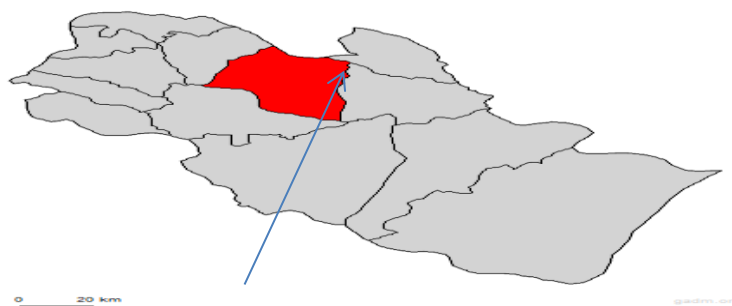
This institution represents the whole traditional way and worldview of the Oromo community (Legesse, 1973). Nevertheless, the diachronic analysis of the Gada system implies, that even though the institution was formerly strong in all dimensions, currently it has been reduced to sociocultural rituals than the political and military roles used to be played in the past (Debsu, 2009, Gemed, 2018). Despite significant changes, the Guji Oromo Gadaa system is currently mostly intact and has been used as a traditional form of government. In the sacred natural areas, the sociocultural authority of the system is peacefully and ceremonially passed from one party (Baallii) to another.

The Guji Gada system has five parties that alternate holding sociopolitical power every eight years. These parties are culturally organized, not like political parties. Halchiisaa, Dhallana, Muudana, Roobale, and Harmuufaa are the names of these five parties. As per the Gada system's guiding premise, each party has an eight-year term in office (Gemed, 2018). Geographically, the Adoolaa Reeddee and Woyyu areas have significant effects on Guji Oromo history and culture because Adoolaa is thought to be the origin of Guji (Jemjem & Dhadacha, 2011). These two districts are found along the main asphalt route that runs from Addis Abeba, the nation's capital, to Nagele, a town in the Guji zone.

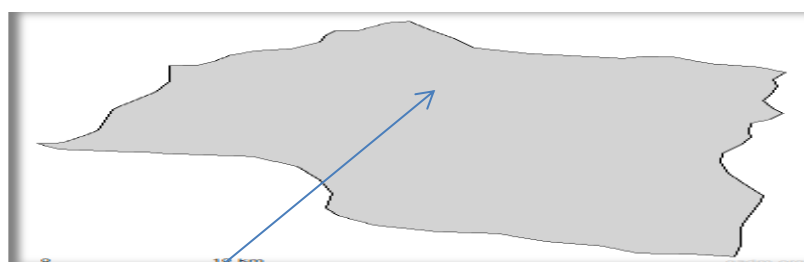


Source: <http://www.oromiatourism.gov.et/index.php/home> (accessed on 21 June 2017)

It is the sketched map of Guji land. The areas where this study focused on. Specifically, this research conducted in two Adola districts. The Adola Reda and Adola Woyyu were two sites that were selected as a case in this study. See the map of the study site below.



Guji zone map (this map doesn't included west Guji Zone; The Guji people has two administrative zones).



*Map of Adola district*

**Source:** <https://gadmm.org/maps/ETH/oromia/guji/adola.html>

Gadaa grades and parties (Baallii) are two basic components in the structure and function of Gadaa system of governance in Guji society. Gadaa grades refers to the stage of development through which all person's pass through carrying out the responsibilities that they have given and performing the rites of passage's associated for the advancement to new grade. Gadaa class is a group of people who share same status and perform rites of passage together. These two components are serving as the starting point and fundamental for the structure, nature and functions of the Gadaa system in the society. In this concept, Gadaa grades and parties in Guji society are the indicators of equality, peace, egalitarianism, security, order, love, and unity in the society. Because, all individuals are categorized under each party, and grades and there is no person excluded from these vertical and horizontal classifications. All people know their rights and responsibilities in the society as they are hierarchically categorized in different classes and ages and as they eager to carry out the responsibility that they have given in each grade and classes to be advanced from one step to the next. The advancement of gadaa grades by an individual in every eight years to reach the stage of ruling society is what keeps people practicing each task required in each stage. People are not look for prerogative position in the society rather than working, practicing, performing and advancing their stages to reach at the stage of ruling the society. People are categorized under five parties (baallii) in the society. There are no special roles and rights that one party has owed in the society. All parties have equal rights and

privileges in Gadaa system of governance. There is the system of check and balance that has been used in Gadaa system. These power balances includes whether the party currently handed the power has carefully undertaking the roles that are expected to be performed in its successive year or not. These activities that needed to perform have includes the rituals that performed around sacred places in the Guji land.

## **RISULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **The Origin of sacred natural sites in Guji Oromo**

Environmental conservation is being considered as a topical issue both globally and in Ethiopia. The Guji people have been protecting sacred sites by sustaining use of the sociocultural practices associated with them and by living in harmony with their environment. It is noticed that sacred shrines are exist pervasively in Guji society. In this concept, human societies are widely practice valuable things that largely enable them to survive with socially and utilizing their environment. In this way, it is useful to explore the indigenous meaning of sacred site and fundamental ideas associated with it before moving on to the narration about the origin and functions of sacred sites since this makes it simpler to grasp the history and significance of sacred sites in Guji society. The sacred natural site is locally called 'Ardaa Jilaa'. They are places that set aside for a variety of rituals with different purposes. These places are greatly cherished and respected because of the significance of the rituals perform on them.

As information provided from Adola Redde culture and tourism office shows, there are three hundred seventy-six sacred sites in Guji, and all these sites have equal status regarding respect and protection. The reason for equalizing status among sacred shrines is existence of the network of the ritual practices on these shrines. Each sacred sites has its own ritual which undertaken on it for why it had been sacralized, and these all rituals associated with each sites are carryout consecutively, and the failure of one can be devastate all sites and ritual practices associate with them. The Guji Abbaa Gadaa's and members are going across each sacred shrine by performing rituals associated with sites. As one of my key informants; Yuba Jarso Boneya stated, Gadaa councils cannot perform rituals that have not been ordered to the first site before carrying out the earlier rituals connected to first ordered sites. This equal attachment of socio-cultural practices to all sacred sites ensures the conservation of the Guji environment, which includes a variety of plant and animal species. It is thought that the connection of these rituals with sacred sites was established with the emergence of Gadaa system in Guji. It was identified that there are seventy-fourths power transitions take places in Gadaa system of Guji and the origin of this system of governance in the society was trace back to the beginning of fifteen century as per tentative estimation and calculation which is based on the round of power transition. This indicated that exact time for the formation of sacred natural site in Guji has no cleared evidence. Even though it is difficult to pinpoint the precise time for when sacred shrines are first appeared in Guji society, there are a several of explanations pertain with how they have been created in Guji Oromo. As a result of their deeply ingrained relationship with indigenous religion and their sociocultural way of life, the Guji people have developed a deep regard for the natural environment. Thus in order to understand how and why sacred natural site initially appeared in Guji culture, it is crucial to first investigate the function of indigenous religion and the relationship between Guji people and their environment.

### **Indigenous Religion**

Negesa (2018) identified that Guji believe in Waqa, super natural power, the creator who created heaven and earth, trees, grasses, mountains and rivers. Guji religious practices are embedded in the Gada system. The informant also confirmed that indigenous religion has a strong influence in the society; whereby it has plays an important role in the life of society. According to the informants, the role of religion is evident in the daily activities of the people. This is expressed when resolving conflict, annihilate inequality between people through equal distribution of resources, participating everyone in politics, teaching the laws of human and nature, human and animal and respecting and living together in harmony and seeking for truth. Based on this, the Guji people apart some places and made them for various rituals. The Guji have an indigenous religion, despite there is no evidence regarding when and how it began. However, the influence of indigenous religion has been manifested in all social activities. In this way, this religious valuable life experiences exist in the society was passed down from generation to generation, allowing people to critically examine how they relate to God, the environment, and animals. Because of seniority is revered and respected in Guji culture, any religious practices passed down through the generations are respected, valued, and applied in accordance with the indigenous values and norms. Consequently, indigenous religion of the Guji people has leads to part which can be manifested in the respect of environment including plants, animals, water bodies and soil. Guji people's interactions with waaqa and the natural environment (including plants and animals) in their daily lives have had an impacted to emergence of sacred sites in the society. This indicates that indigenous religion has a great role in the origin and expansion of sacred natural site in the society.

### **Relationship between Guji people and environment**

It is obvious that Guji people have strong relation within their environment including plant, animals, water and man. It means that Guji people believe that every creations which existing in the universe were functionally created by God. One of key informant stated that Waaqaa has been said to Guji people to answer all questions existing in the society and to lead future life. Therefore, they critically follow the message which manifest through environment via Waaqaa. Every

event has its own meaning in Guji society. Guji people believe that Waaqa communicate to them through the faroo (related to English word “omen”) and Kaayoo (literally meaning is luck). Faro and kayoo are two of the most crucial concepts for Guji people to comprehend any situation in life. One of the informants called Sidi Basaye (Dori Gadaa grade) said that *'lafti woyyuun akkanumaan hin filamne; Gujiin lafa tana filachuuf Afaan faroo fi kaayoo laaleeti'*. This Afaan Oromo version translated as "sacred sites" were not chosen lightly; rather, it was determined by a critical analysis of the sound of local birds' known as faro (literally, omen) and kayo (literally, luck). According to my informant, the Guji people interpret the concept of Kayo as critically analyzing what happens to the sky, the air, animals, and people in relation to their way of life. Kayo refers to any kind of practices that Guji people can recognize as being done on purpose in order to forecast future events, whether they will bring good or bad luck. Guji people seek for order in their lives, which is a symbolic meaning of this critical observation and examination of these *Faroo* and *Kaayoo*. The Guji people are study and evaluate the faro (literally omen) and Kayo to determine the state of disease, war, climate, and rain, and perform various rituals in response to their observations and analyses. Guji people have begun to see animals and plants as 'sacred' as a result of their creation and the role that they played in connecting Guji people with God. According to my informant, Ardaa jilaa (sacred site) was identified, when Guji people had prayed God to reveal them the way they rule themselves. Before the origin Gadaa system, Guji people had been ruled by kings and queen leadership system. It was the time when the male and female had been ruled the community for the long period of time consecutively. The ruling system was locally called *Mootii*. The kings and queen controlled the Guji people before the Gadaa system was emerged. During this period, there was not social, political, and economic equality between genders and clans. The king and queen had been manipulated the people as they wanted without taking human right into consideration. The Guji people had despised their subjugation by the kings and queen of the time. They had been seeking for a leadership that included all members of the society to combat the *mooti* system. It was thought that sacred natural sites in Guji community had begun after the kings and Queens leadership era was ended. However, some informants argued that some sacred places had been used before the emergence of Gadaa system and the numerous sacred shrines begun after the establishment of the system. According to Guji lore, sacred sites in Guji land were first appeared when Guji people started utilizing the Gadaa system and the associated rituals. It was also identified that sacred sites might a parted to use when Guji people begun to follow their indigenous religion and started to perform the rituals belong to the religion.

### **SOCIO-CULTURAL FUNCTION OF SACRED SITES IN GUJI SOCIETY**

The sacred natural site is an area of land and sacred trees that are set apart for variety rituals. The totalities of land and forest have been respected in Guji culture. Nagessa (2018) has further discussed that the socio-cultural function of the forest in Guji around shakiso woreda and stated that forest serving as source of food, honey production, shade, and sources of water for both human being and livestock. This provides lesson about how do the Guji people have been used the environment based on the values attached with forest and conservational value associated with environment. The functions of sacred natural sites and sacred trees that are set apart as sacred are an important and overlooked area of this study. It is obvious that sacred natural sites were not emerge out of the functions. Its origin depended on the function it provided to the Guji society on the bases of their world view of land. The rituals in Gada system are interconnected with sacred site and all way of life of the Guji society embedded in the Gada system of Governance. Therefore, the functions of sacred site were related with these rituals and activities performed around the sites.

Sacred natural sites have social, cultural and environmental functions. Obviously, every practice of society has its own significance. It is obvious that human beings do anything based on the usefulness of the things and leads their social life according to how they understand their world. The sacred shrine provides various benefits among the Guji people in the bases of rituals. They have spiritual, socio-cultural, ecological, political and economic functions in the society. Thorley and Gunn (2008) stated that sacred sites are a special place where relationships between both interpersonal and throughout the whole community, can be expressed and affirmed, a place especially associated with resource-gathering specially collecting medicinal plants or material for sacred or ritual ceremony. They are also places have special visits of religious observance or pilgrimage, significant relationship with astronomical order and/or calendrical phenomena, e.g., astronomical alignment, celestial-Earth correspondence, seasonal ritual or festival. As many sacred sites exist in Adola Rede district, various rituals are performing on these places. The *Gomboba* sacred site is among the place where these rituals are celebrated. It is observed that rituals like *maqaa baasuu* (maqi baasa), *woddeessa muruu*, and *dabballee qoruu* are among well-known rituals that practicing on sacred places in the Guji society. To know the social and cultural functions of the sacred site, it is crucial to explore the various festivals held on these places.

### **MAQI BASA RITUAL (NAME GIVING)**

Maqi Basa (name giving) ritual is one among the rituals that take place in Guji Gada system at different sacred sites. This ritual is performed by Abbaa Gadaa and members of three phratries of Guji and the ritual of maqaa baasa (name giving) is widely practice at Gomboba sacred site found in Adola Rede district of Guji Zone. This ceremony is performed by Abaa Gadaa and members. This ritual is celebrated by the all three phratry (Uraaga, matti, Hoku) in Guji. One of my key informants said that the ritual of name giving is performed ones in eight years by the Abbaa Gadaa and members. This ritual is takes place after the members of Abaa Gadaa have completed the rotation on the Hagana shrines and finalized the rituals that need to undertake on the different sacred shrines consecutively. It is identified that there are several

responsibilities that given to Abbaa Gadaa and members during their duration on power. The Gomboba sacred site is a place where final ceremony of Abbaa Gadaa of Hoku and members performed before they move to give over power to the newly succeed generational classes. As the group discussant mentioned, this ceremony entails the following activities. The day that ritual will perform is fixed by counting ayyaana (calendar) which guide daily life of the society by members of Gadaa and hayyuu (knowledgeable individuals selected from the members of society). Therefore, to undertake ritual of maqi Basa, milk is prepared by mixing with water which is locally known as *camola*. The *camola* is prepared by qorii (wooden container) and Abbaa Gadaa and members of people who share equal position with him hand the *qori* within full of *camola*. Each member's wife takes a seat beside their husbands and their children line up in order of age, from oldest to youngest, in front of their father and mother. The father then holds the *haddu* (literally blade) in one hand, while the mother holds the (wooden milk container) in the other. Therefore, she pour the milk mixed with water on the hair of son and/daughter and father shave the hair of children's by the blade saying phrases;

Inquirer *Ilma maqaa baafadhaa naa dhage!* X2

Then, they say, *ilmi sii dhage'u!* Listen to me I am going to name the son let the son hears for you!

*Intala maqaa baafadhaa naa dhage'i!* X2

*Intalli dhirsaa haa dhageetu!* Listen to me I am going to name the daughter x2 let the daughter hears to husband!

The primary aim of maqi baasa ritual practice in Guji society is to name the children. It not means that the children do not have the name by which they known and called since they have born. The name is given to children at birth similar to other most cultures throughout the world. The symbolic representation of the phrase; *ilma maqaa baafadhaa naa dhage'i!* (Listen to me I am going to name the son) is that the children of Abbaa Gada and his equivalent member join Gada grade (age set in anthropological concept) at a moment of maqi baasa ritual. The children of these members are joining new age set called *Dabale* (lower gadaa grade) and start to develop their position by performing different rituals in the next forty years. It is identified that the children of Abba Gadaa's are reach Gada specific age set (VI) to take over power after four generational classes succeed consecutively in next forty years by passing the power in every eight years. Women were assigned the same Gada grade equivalent with husband. The statement "let the daughter hear to the spouse"! Indicate that the female do not spend much time with her parents. A woman's home is believed to be with the family or clan with who she is going marries. After marriage, both women and their husbands advance their Gada Grade together. This is comparable with the previous statement regarding moms putting milk on their children's heads during *maqi basa* ceremonies. It is understood that women are participate equally in the ritual of Gadaa system. The functional aspect of Maqi Basa ritual is not only for promotion it also embrace other purpose. One of my key informants mentioned that "namni maqaa hin qanne, ameessan hin qabu, awwaala hin qabu". It means a person who hasn't the name does not have gift of cattle and funeral ritual. When parents name their children, they also offer them a gift of livestock. This kind of gift is locally called *Ameessaa*. However, it does not mean that the gift of livestock only is given to children at this moment of the ritual; it means this kind of gift considered as rebirth in the community. The children don't known among the community before this Maqi Basa ritual performs. Then, the *Maqi Basa* ritual is performed by Abbaa Gadaa of three phratry and their members. This ritual is more respected followed to the ritual power transition ceremony at Me'ee Bokko. The significances of *maqi basa* ritual were one Guji people performed this ritual to make promotion to the entire community. All members of the community were developing their Gadaa grade (age set) within their rights and obligations. The second functional part of this ritual is to make resource or initial economy for children. It is believed that each family member gives cattle to their children in order for them to pass this period. The third, practical part of this ritual is that the individual who was promoted began to share various rituals with community members. This represents that when this person die, the cattle will be slaughtered as part of his funeral ritual, which is known locally as *awalcha*.

### **WODDEESSA MURAA RITUAL**

Wodessa muraa ritual is one among rituals that perform in Guji Gada system. People who are with the status in age set dori can perform the woddessa muraa ritual. When people progress from the Raba to the Dori stage, they perform the woddessa muraa ceremony. The *woddessa muraa* ceremony is held at the *haagana* and *cumicha* sacred natural sites. Gomboba sacred shrine is one among sacred sites where this ritual particularly performs. The woddessa Muraa ritual practice is considered as rite of passage for the group reach stages of Dori Gadaa grade. According to my focus group participants, people who progressed from raba to dori go through the woddessa-mura process. On this particular day, all members of the generation cut a stick of top shaped from a tree called woddessa which will be replace hororo. One of my key informants said that '*namni woddessa muree guyyaa saniin kaasee ulee saniin yeroo qalatu isiin hariirata!*' In English, it means "a person who performs a wodesa muraa ritual shall use that stick of wodesa for every ceremony, including the hariirti ritual." It conceived as the process of producing a permanent ceremonial stick from a woddessa tree is known as woddessa muraa. As discussant mentioned '*adoo muka wodeessaa hin muriniin dura aanan ittittuu fi marqa hidda mukichaa jalatti dhibaasan*'. It literally means "before they start cutting of the tree, they pour yogurt and marqa garbuu (butter-sauced with barley) under the beneath of the tree to be chopped." According to the Guji Gada system, individuals were not allowed to cut down trees that are gowing (young trees). The trees have been respected in the Gadaa system. Pouring yogurt beneath the tree is a symbolic representation of them pleading the tree and God to pardon them for felling those young trees, even though it was for a specific reason. This is to signify Waaqaa's request for save, in



which he wishes for the stick to be a scepter of abundance, peace, and stability. At the moment of wodessa muraa ritual take place, they all say 'woddesi woddesa nageyaati' which means "Let God make our stick the scepter of peace!"

### **DABALE QORU RITUAL**

The "Dabale Qoru" is among the rituals that have been undertaken in Gadaa system of governance in Guji society. This ritual performed by the Dori Hagana (members of people reached at Dori Gada grade). Dabale qoru rituals are like wodessa muraa rituals were performed at Hagana and Cumicha sacred shrines. The Hoku phratry is conducting the Debbale Qoru ritual at Gomboba sacred site. The Dabale Qoru ritual is performed when the Dori family's children reach at Dabale Gada grade or age group. In the process of Dabale Qoru, ceremony takes place by preparing some kinds of food items like marqa garbuu (prepared by barley saused with butter), yogurt and fresh milk. Therefore, to undertake ritual of Dabale qoru, milk is prepared by mixing with water which is locally known as caamola. The *Camola* is prepared by Qorii (wooden container) and *Dori* and members of people who share equal position with him hand Qori within full of *camola*. Each member's wife takes a seat next to her husband, and then their children line up from oldest to youngest in front of them. Then, father holds the 'hadu' (blade) and the mother Qorii (milk filled wooden container) in the other. As a result, she sprinkles milk mixed with water on her son's or daughter's hair, and the father blesses the children by shaving their hair with a blade and saying, "*Dabballee geetee qarree geyi!*" Which means you've arrived Dabale, and then, reach Qarre! This person had progressed to the dabbale level and was hoping for a chance to move through to the next Gada grade. This ritual's symbolic meaning is for parents to execute it in order to prepare their children for promotion to the next Gadaa grade (age set). The second is that this ceremony is performed by parents to show regard for their position. There is a triggering act among the society on who perform the ritual or not. This stimulating word is not meant to denote a terrible appearance or treatment; rather, it is utilized to reinforce the check and balance in Gadaa system. The socio-cultural function of the sacred natural site strongly connected with these rituals that undertake around different sites according to their functions.

It is observed that sacred natural sites have several functions in Guji society. These functions embrace one, it is place serving for the promotion of individuals in the society from one stage to next within their right and responsibility. Second, it is place serves as a socialization process of an individual in the society. The children learn the culture of society including values and norms by participating in these places. Thirdly, sacred natural site serving as a place where the people learn various games, songs, dances and other performing activities. In Guji Oromo culture, people play oral and physical game according to their position. Doroma is an oral game that people in the Gada grade play with each other. The Doroma Game can be played anywhere but it is most commonly performed in the sacred natural sites, because people wanted to classify them according to their position. Men and women perform different music and dancing styles based on their gender. As a result, they both learn to identify the music and dancing styles specified for both genders.

### **Economic functions**

Sacred sites are home for various plants and animal species. They have saved abundant forests which use for variety ways in the local community. One of my key informants mentioned that due to customary law prohibited the local community to cut down the trees found in the sacred land, there are several trees saved around the places that are culturally set apart for different rituals. Sacred trees and ordinary forest found in sacred places have been conserved in Guji culture because of the values associated with sacred places. Now a day, the forests that found on the ordinary areas are cleaning for the purpose of agriculture and infrastructural developments.

The forest found in sacred places still continued to be conserved by the local community. Then, the saved forests in the sacred natural site believe to attract the rain, source of food for livestock, and source for honey production. Any of plant species in the sacred site are not cut down for personal benefits. Even though trees in sacred place cannot be used for personal benefits, some of them believed to generate income through being source for honey production. The flowers of the trees like Halloo, mokkonnisa (*crotonmacrostachyus*), dabaqaa, woddesa (*Cardia Africana*), baddeessa (*syzygium quineense* subsp), qajimaa, reejji (*Discopodium peninervus*), ebicha (*Velnonia amygdalina*), rukensa, bidheessa, and gatamee (*Scheffera abbyssinsa*) are used seasonally to make the honey in Guji society during wet and dry season. Among these trees woddeessa, Badeessa, qajimaa, gatame, and dabaqa mostly found in high land area and Halloo, bidheessa, dabaqaa, and qajimaa are mainly found in the low land areas. In Guji culture, cutting down these trees within its flowers at any time and place is strictly prohibited. Sacred natural sites are also saved different animals because of the value that associated with them in local community. The saved forests on the sacred places are serving as home for different animals. In Gadaa customary law, killing of animals in sacred place is strictly prohibited. One of my key informants said that the animal that stitched by someone outside of sacred place and enter the sacred site within the blood does not followed by anyone to kill. These consecrate actions are followed to keep the value that associated with sacred places and to sustainable utilize it. It is observed that variety animal species have been survived in sacred places for long period of time due to the existence of forests and cultural values associated with these culturally set apart sacred site. It is also been observed that currently the forest that found in the outside of sacred places is cleaning for the purpose of agriculture and the animals exist in the areas escaped and inhabiting in the sacred places.

It is observed that sacred sites are places where medicinal plants are survived for long period of time. The forests have been cleaning on ordinary areas for variety reasons are still remained as conserved on the sacred site in Guji society.

These plants are serving as medicinal plants that used for various healing purposes. This indicates that sacred natural sites do not merely place where cultural and bio-diversity survive, but also serve as sources of medicinal plants which save human health within their conservation. This indicates that the existence of sacred natural sites helps for the sustainable use of socio-cultural traditions and biodiversity conservation. They have saved cultural resources, human, animals and plants in the area.

### **Spiritual function**

Negesa (2018) identified that Guji believe in Waaqa, a super natural power, the creator who created heaven and earth, trees, grasses, mountains and rivers. Guji religious practices are embedded in the Gada system. According to one of the key informants, there is no one that has ever seen the waaqa (God). God is revealed by His works. This means that God answers everything they pray for. According to Guji people, God has a son, and he will punish who touches his son. His son is 'truth' as they call it. They believe that God may punish those who annihilate the truth. This allowed all communities to live with respect for people and their environment. The statement "he will punish who touches his son" indicates that there are laws in the Gada system concerning God, human and environment that entails religious and customary laws that allow the people to do and prohibit them to not to do. The person who failed to do one of these laws which is applicable for God, human and environment would be castigated by God. Therefore, sacred sites are areas that are set apart, venerated or consecrated and so connected with religion or belief systems, or set aside for a spiritual purpose.

It is identified that indigenous religion and Guji Oromo daily life are inextricably linked. The Guji religion is closely related to the economic, social, and cultural lives of the people. It was also observed that religious manifestations are displayed in people's daily actions. Sacred sites associated with living cultures that always have institutions and rules associated with them. These institutions are usually religious or spiritual in nature and may be distinct from other parts of society, while in some communities of indigenous and traditional peoples; sacred site institutions are closely integrated within society with little distinction between the sacred and the secular, the religious and the civil (Verschuuren, 2010). This is not to say that religion does not relate to other social activities. The religious system is governed by its own set of norms. It manifests itself, however, in the works of existence and social life. From the very beginning, the origin of sacred natural sites associated with indigenous religion. Guji people believe that God had given sacred sites to them as to they practice different religious rituals and pray around these sites. The identification of sacred places in Guji was based on the message that has been manifested to the people via animals and birds. It was embedded in the way Guji people categorized events or situations as *faro* and *kaayoo* in which they identify things as for good or bad lucks to guide their way of life. This indicated that the origin of sacred places did not base on the choice of the people rather the places were selected by God. Thus, the place has pivotal significance in the Guji people since its identification was mainly religious by its nature. Every ritual that has been undertaken around sacred sites does not out of religious practice. One of the key informants mentioned that the Guji people pray God for human, livestock, rain, peace, and good luck by gathering at sacred shrines. In the Guji people, prayer is conducted continuously at dawn in the morning and at sunset in the evening, and when the community is together, when there is happiness, sadness, for discussion, when there is gain, when there is loss.

### **Conclusion**

Environmental conservation and protection of sacred places are being considered as a topical issue both globally and in Ethiopia. The origin and expansion of sacred sites in Guji Oromo land is embedded in the interaction of Guji people with Waaqa (God), and their environment. In this concept, it is thought that sacred natural sites are the gift of God which have been used and conserved by community for the centuries. They are vital resources that given to Guji society to use and conserve them in a sustainable way. There is no clear evidence regarding when and how sacred sites in Guji society have emerged. However, some narration shows that sacred sites in Guji were emerged when Guji people began to use the Gadaa system and rituals that undertaken in the system as well when the concepts of indigenous religion was developed in the society. In line with this, it is thought that sacred sites might be sacralized when Guji people began to follow their indigenous religion and started to perform the rituals belongs to the religion. The study shows that Guji society have an indigenous knowledge regarding their interaction with environment which enabled them to understand their world and gave an interpretation to the any events in their ways of life, to use and manage environment, to act in accordance with norms and values. In this concept, Guji people categorized any events into *faro* and *kayoo* which are helping them to understand and forecast the future conditions. The interpretation of *faro* and *kayoo* is the basic factors for the origin and expansion of sacred sites as per finding of this study shows.

This study found that different ceremonies such as *Maqi-Basa*, *Wodessa Muraa*, and *Dabale Qoru* have been performing at sacred sites. These rituals are necessary for the advancement of age-sets by person in the society from one stage to the next within maintaining their rights and responsibilities. They are helping as socialization of person in the society. These rituals also provide people with psychosocial support. Sacred sites are centers for different prayer rituals. In this concept, the place where these rituals are performed cannot be replaced by any other places and they are only associated with each other as per relation of these rituals in the Gadaa system. It indicates that the threatening of one of these sites can scourge the total rituals associated with them. It also shows that the existence of sacred sites and related rituals are essential to the activities in Guji Gadaa system. This means *Abbaa Gadaa* and members are undertaking various rituals by going across sacred places found in Guji land. After the generation class that inhabited the position completed these rituals that should



be performed around these places, the rituals that take place at the community level began to perform. These rituals are performed based on the categorization of people into specific Gadaa grades (age-sets) and preparation of them to join new grades in assuming the roles that they have given. Gadaa grade is a crucial component in the structure of Gadaa system. This study found that when rituals that undertake at different sacred sites are not performed, the power in the Gadaa system cannot be passed down to newly succeeding generational classes. As a result, if there is no steps forward in Gadaa grade, no one will go forward to take over the power from the generational class that currently handed the power. It is obvious that there will be no change in a society's class structure, if there is no change in Gada classes and grades. This demonstrates the significance of sacred sites in Guji society.

In another way, this study finding shows that sacred sites are home to a variety of plant and animal species. They have preserved numerous forests, which are used in a number of ways by the local community, and it is thought that the forests found in the sacred places are serving as several purposes for the Guji people. Forests are said to attract rain, and the plants found in the area are used for medicinal purposes. For this reason, they have been protecting forest in general and trees in particular. The finding shows that local community has been identified as custodians of the sacred shrines. They have been conserved sacred sites based on the cultural values associated with them and biodiversity resources exist in the sites. However, sacred shrines are perceived by religious followers through spiritual acts related with them. Sacred places are perceived as places where sin is committed in modern institutionalized religions. The ideological variance between generations was caused by religious teaching that contradicting with ritual practices related with sacred sites. By depending on these modernized religions, young people are endangering sacred natural sites. In another way, government (development project planners and implementers) has not been considered the cultural and biodiversity resources that have been survived at sacred natural site in Guji society. Even though there are differing viewpoints on sacred sites, the preservation of sacred sites is important for humanity. It is where animals and plant species have been survived. The preservation of socio-cultural traditions, practices, and biodiversity resources is important for the long-term use of local culture and strengthens the link between humanity and the environment, as both are interdependent. In this case, conservation of sacred natural site is not only for preservation of socio-cultural practices associated with the sites but also to protect biodiversity exist around them. Therefore, this study paves the way for the sustainable conservation of environment in general and sacred natural sites in particular.

### **Recommendation**

This research tried to assess the origin and functions of sacred natural site in Guji Oromo. Therefore, using this study as an introductory, it is possible to begin further study as "Environmental anthropology field of study" for more problem-solving means. The finding of this is revealed that the presence of several sacred sites in Guji community. Many of the sites have rituals that take place on each of them once in every eight years. People have begun to destroy sacred sites as a result of the lateness of these ritual practices as they seeking to expand their farm land. As a result, it is recommended that these sites need to be categorized according to their geographic locations so that concerned bodies whether members of Gadaa or local government should undertake site inspections on a regular basis. It is strongly recommended that whenever national project are proposed and planned, the socio-cultural practices, political and economic aspects of the local community in their natural environment is needed to be considered in an anthropological lens to maintain a balance between the local context and the national plan.

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