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Ethiopian Reconciliation Commission

THE GADAA SYSTEM OF THE EAST SHEWA -OROMO

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ABSTRACT

The paper briefly introduces and explains the essence of indigenous gadaa (Oromo democracy) and its main characteristics that are relevant for the current condition of Africa in general and Oromo society in particular. It also illustrates how Oromo democracy had functioned as a socio-political institution by preventing oppression and exploitation and by promoting relative peace, security, sustainable development, and political sovereignty, and how the gadaa (Oromo democracy) system organized Oromo society around economic, cultural and religious institutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Oromo people are the largest of the Cushitic speaking groups of people in Africa and also the largest ethnic group of Ethiopia. The Region has common border with all Regional States of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, except Tigray National Regional State.

The Oromo people, like the other peoples and nationalities of the country, have immense tangible and intangible heritages which have been created over centuries in the interactions of the people with natural and social environments and which stand as the manifestations of the identity of the people.

They share common language, history and descent, and once shared common political, religious and legal institutions. What makes the region even more special is that these cultural and natural resources are managed within an ancient traditional governance system, the Gadaa (Oromo democracy) system, which is rich in democratic principles and with its roots spread throughout the Oromia area.

2. THE PEOPLE AND THE AREA

East shewa (shawaa Bahaa) is one of the zones of the Ethiopian region of oromia. This zone takes its name from the kingdom or former province of shewa. East shewa is located in the middle of oromia, connecting the western regions to the eastern ones. This zones is bordered on the south by the west Arsi zone, on the south west by the southern nations, nationalities and peoples regions, on the west by south west shewa and oromia special zone surrounding finfinne (Addis Ababa), on the northwest by North shewa, on the north Amhara region, on the northeast by the Afar region and the southeast by Arsi. Towns and cities in east shewa include Bishoftu, metehara and Ziway.

Based on the 2007 census conducted by the central statistical Agency of Ethiopian (CSA), this zone has a total population of 1,356,342, of whose 696,350 are men and 659,992 women; with an area of 8,370.90square kilometers, east shewa has a population density of 162.03.

Political Participation is open to all East shewa, decisions are taken under the guidance of the ritual leaders, the Abba Gadaa (Leader of gadaa system) and the councilors. Attending power transfer ceremonies, rites of passages from one grade to another and other gatherings are meant to be as transparent as possible. The Gadaa System distributes power across generations and down to community members and creates strong link between successive generations. Oromo philosophy, art and calendar are based on Gadaa as an expression of Oromo civilization.

3. THE GADAA SYSTEM

Gadaa (Oromo democracy) system is a variety of democratic political organization that the Oromo have developed and used at least for the last five hundred years. The Gadaa system is a time-honored age and generation-set system practiced among the Oromo people who regarded the system as their common heritage and as one of their major identity makers. The Gadaa is crucial organizing structure among the Oromo people and its social, political, ritual and legal aspects provides the framework for order and meaning of life. Gadaa organizes society via councils (yaa'aa), laws and injunctions, outlining rights and duties of its members. The Oromo 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.

According to my informants, the East shewa Oromo reported back to Habtagorgis the tangible penalties of neglecting Gadaa. Habtagorgis regretted for his deed and allowed them to continue their usual practice. Immediately, things came back normal. The East shewa Oromo, therefore, strongly believe that without Gada, there is no prosperity, peace, happiness, wealth and health throughout the community. The Gadaa officials could reconstruct the ruptured relationships between Waaqa (creator) and man through prayers and blessings; they could resolve disputes and restore peace.

Among the East shewa Oromo, Gadaa more or less, remains the same in its basic structures. For instance, the five Gadaa sets, the eight years' time period of Gadaa set, the forty years' time difference between two consecutive generations, the hereditary principle of membership into a given Gadaa class, etc have persisted. The East shewa Oromo have had five Gadaa sets known as Birmajjii, Horataa, Melbaa, Michillee and Roobalee. The five Gadaa sets are misensas, which literally means members. It is with the coalition of these sets that the entire Gadaa organization is functioning. Each Gadaa set passes through similar Gadaa grades. Literature on Oromo reveals that names and numbers of Gadaa grades differ in time and space. But every grade lasts for eight years.

3.1 GADAA CLASSES

The class forms its own internal officials (adula hayyus) and its own assembly (ya'a). Regarding persons with special responsibilities, the Abba Gadaa (Leader of gadaa system), the elected chairman of the class leadership presides over the assembly. The Gadaa councilors must pass through a rigorous training for years about the laws and the customs of East shewa , and the wisdom of leading a society before they take the position of authority in Gadaa. The Gadaa men and Yuba's duties also includes transferring knowledge and skills associated with the functions of the democratic Gadaa System to the members of succeeding grades. The gadaa classes are recruited on the basis of genealogical generations. The following are the Gadaa grades and their descriptions.

3.1.1 GRADE 1: DABALLE FROM AGE 1-8

Dabale is the first of all grades and it is always occupied by a class of people sharing a common identity by virtue of the fact that they are all the sons of the gadaa class who are in power as leaders of East shewa society as a whole. The dabballe stand out in East shewa society because of their striking hairstyle, known as “guduru”.

3.1.2 GRADE 2: JUNIOR GAMME (GAMME DIDIKO) FROM AGE 8-16

The transition ceremony by which the sons pass from the dabballe into gamme grade. The dabballes’ shave their hair and given names. In the gamme hairstyle, the hair is shaved in the middle, and the rest is allowed to grow long and cure with a regular treatment with better. At this stage, they are in up-coming period of their life cycle capable of herding and also competing with peers and have to wait further eight years before they come a Kuusaa.

3.1.3 GRADE 3: FOOLLEE /SENIOR GAAMMEE FROM AGE 16-24

The gamme to foollee transition rites takes place at the shrine of Dhaddacha Dhera in the vicinity of Arero. At this place the father will shave the hair of his son/s. The transition rite thus came to an end and the “foollee” proceeded with the Lallaba ceremony, the grand event in which the “election results” were announced to the assembled representatives of all east shewa clans.

3.1.4 GRADE 4: RAABAA AGE 25-32

At this stage the raba’s tend to learn art of governance and this time is when they gate marry. The raba grade has mostly defense responsibility.

3.1.5 GRADE 5: DOORII AGE 33-40

This Dori Grade is where males expected to have sons and could start procreating so as too soon acquire the aspired and respected status of fatherhood; with crucial responsible household-head .The Doroma; when they were planning to take power in the next Gadaa period. The remarkable stage where the Dori’s gained arts of leadership and philosophy.

3.1.6 GRADE 6: GADA AGE 41-48

Gada Grade is the stage of full political maturity and became the ruling party for the following eight yeuars. This is the peak of social and political career of Gadaa and the optimum age of having maturity skill and capacity of holding and practically showing societal responsibilities.

3.1. 7 GRADE 7: YUBA AGE 49 AND ABOVE

The Gada retires and becomes a Yuba elders; the most important responsibility of retired Gadaa class (Yuubaa) isto oversee the ceremonial activities of the luba in power. The Yuba still takes over advisory functions and act as mediator, ritual experts and peacemakers.

3.2 MAJOR PRIVILEGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF MEMBERS

Gadaa is an invaluable ancient civilization that the Oromo offered to the world as an intangible cultural heritage. The concept Gadaa could refer to the whole system, the eight-year period of government or the class in power. In this piece of writing, it refers to the whole system of governance that entails social, economic, political and religious life of the society. It is a complex system in which the Oromo were divided into age groups and enjoyed rights and disposed duties and responsibilities. Duties and responsibilities in military, political, legal and cultural affairs were placed on individuals of each Gadaa group from childhood to adulthood known as *miseensa* or parties. Each *miseensa* had specific roles and functions to perform in five stages of eight years. Although the Gadaa class in power held the administrative position, the responsibilities to run social, religious and economic aspects of the society rested upon different sections of the society. For instance, when the elected Gadaa leaders administered justice, maintained law and order, the local councils followed Gadaa laws and practices in the same way at grass root level. This nature of the Gadaa system provided the Oromo with the mechanism for participation in public affairs or self-government.

In the Oromo social life, Gadaa system assigned rights as well as obligations to all the males in the society. Activities and social roles are formally defined, both in terms of what is permitted and in terms of what is forbidden. Among other functions, the separation of men into grades is a division of labor. Individual male as part of a permanent group, contributed his labor power in different capacities to the society as a whole and was prohibited from settling permanently until he had completed the cycle. The grades were also periods of initiation and training as well as periods of work and performance. The most important element that regulates the Gadaa *system* is the responsibilities and rules attached to the age-grade system. Every Oromo of specific age-grade is expected to perform a certain function according to specified rules and regulations. Hence, by leaning the customary law and law of Waaqaa(God/Creator), every person was expected to contribute to the social development. The gadaa grades and the socioeconomic and political duties associated with the grades are as follows

1. DABALLE

The name refers to and has the meaning “He (*Waaqaa*) added them to the people.” They were born, ideally, when their fathers’ gadaa set is in office. As the members are immature and hence are considered as holy children and source of blessing. Among the East shewa this childhood is known by the name of Dabballe. Before the maqbaasa (name giving) ceremony, they were not given real names, and they were still between Waaqaa and their people. The members were identified with their amazing hairstyle known as Guduruu/gaammee, which was a symbol of childhood. This grade was known as socialization age into the society and the Gadaa culture. Just as girls, they were privileged in the society in that families and members of the society were expected to love, give attention and protection to them (Asmarom, 1973). The family had to show witness of their affection for the calm and sensible spirit. Customary law prohibits their parents from punishing them physically. Families (especially mothers) were expected to sing cultural songs that praise children of this age. As the Dabballee were immature, no specific political roles were associated with them. At initiation ceremony to the next gadaa grade, they had hairs shaved off to remove all the bad things of the childhood symbolizing to have another identity.

2. JUNIOR GAMME (GAMME DIDIKO)

Members of this age and girls commonly called *sookkee* (early teen-age) were required to learn counting numbers with analogies and genealogy on fathers and mothers line. This age a fertile time to study Oromo myth, riddles, stories of different types, geerersa, cultural songs. (Jabessa, 1970) The contents of training at this stage is civic related subjects to inculcate in the minds of children certain societal values of the people such as respect and dignity for humankind, accountability and responsibility to the community, patriotism and love for the fatherland, and family identity and history. Some methods of instruction were war songs known as *geerarsa and faarsaa* (praising). In such away elders *taught them by* tracing the family lineage several generations back and narrating story of historical events in society such as major battles fought; natural disasters (drought, epidemics, and crop failure); migration etc (Melaku, 2001). In this regard, boys of this age were provided with instruction in Oromo ethics and societal values. Some of the topics covered in this area revolve around the concepts of family, values of teamwork, resource sharing, community interactions, justice, and loyalty to the rule of Gadaa (Alemayehu, 2009).

3. FOOLLEE /SENIOR GAAMMEE

This is the most important stage in the gadaa cycle when the members shoulder family responsibilities and engage in military training. In other words, this period was the period of excitement and military training. In domestic life, they engaged in how to prepare and use plowing materials in agriculture, utilization of property, family management and social life by observing the aadaa (culture) and seeraa(Law) of the society. Young boys of this age were also encouraged to work and keep property for their future life. This is why most of their geerarsa convey the quality of hard working and being self-sufficient abhorring poverty life. They were expected to know the custom, habit, tradition, and way of life of the society and obey the laws of Gadaa system. The members guard the Luba (men in power) and mostly included in military service under the leadership of Abba duulaa (war minster) (Dereje, 2000). The Foollee had to develop a quality and capacity of fighting against injustice at least in their clan.

4. KUUSAA /RAABAA) /QONDAALA

This was a matured stage for formal military service under the direction of the Abbaa duulaa (leader of war) (Lemu, 1971). The kuusaa were attached with dual tasks in the society: military service and training for gadaa leadership. As junior warriors the kuusaa were purely fighters categorized into sections of cavalry, lafoo (soldiers) and Buttuu (special fighters).The members of this group continue undertaking military training of the earlier grade. The Abbaa duulaa and senior warriors trained this class advanced military talent like wrestling, miliqee (skill of defending attack) and other skills (Jabessa, 1970). Martial De Salviac described the Oromo military strength as follows “The Oromo is animated with warrior spirit in the highest quality. The vitality and durability of this people, who have traversed centuries, maintain its autonomy and integrity of its custom are due to the courage, to the bravery, to the energy, which it deployed in the struggle “Ayalew, 2007). The military organization of the Oromo is said to have made the people one of the strongest ethnic groups in the Horn of Africa between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries (Asafa, 2010).

In Gadaa system, both male and female of this age were considered as matured group for social responsibilities. According to rakoo (marriage rule), only girls of three gadaa periods (twenty four years old) were allowed to marry. This seems to have been significant in family planning by controlling early marriage and family related problems among the Oromo. For both male and female sexual intercourse before marriage and social evils like rape and alcoholic addiction were strictly forbidden. Male of this gadaa stage were not allowed to marry and have children as they were serving the nation as military force. The logic behind is the fact that if they died in fighting, the family would be at risk. Hence, to control social justice, they did not have this social privilege until they accomplished military service for eight years. Therefore, each man fought as free man but with passionate as reported by Bahrey the... {Oromo} went to war either to kill or die.” (Tesema, 1980; Mohammed, 1990).

5. DOORII / RAABAA

The stage was also a period of preparation for leadership to take over power from the exiting lubaa *or* gadaa leaders. The competency, achievement and recorded contributions at both kuusaa and Doorii stages accounts more in the election to be gadaa official. Hence, they served as apprentices to the ruling council, elected leaders from their own group at the former grade, and prepared to take over power. They observed the ruling council, attended their meetings nevertheless were not given any decision-making opportunity until the formal transfer of power at the end of this stage (Lemu, 1971).

One of the social privileges associated to the dooroma was performing marriage but they were not expected to have children mainly at early years of this stage because generation gap with their son would be violated and the children could not act as senior councilor if they were not born at the right time into the gadaa cycle (gogeessa). Children that were born to before their fathers' initiation to Lubaa grade were referred as ilmaan Jaarsaa that were reduced to a hiriyjaa (peers) group and involved in the gadaa administration only as Jaldhaaba (police).

6. GADAA /LUBA

It refers to men that accomplished all the five stages and then graduated. This is the optimum age of having maturity, skill and capacity of shouldering and discharging societal responsibilities. The most significant stage in the political life of Oromo males came when they entered this stage, in which they gained full privileges and acted as the political leaders (Jabessa, 1970). At the transfer of power, the members held ceremonies and became the ruling party for a period of eight years. Its leaders exercised full decision-making power and responsibility regarding military and civil matters. When the new leaders were entrusted with defense and governance of their society, the leaders of the previous miseensa retired into an advisory role (Lemu, 1971).

7. YUBA

Yubaa were generally advisors of the gadaa government and educators of the gogeessa. They received a great deal of respect as wise experienced authorities and repositories of law (Jabessa, 1970).

3.3 CURRENT STATUS OF GADAA SYSTEM

Considering the symbolic significance of Gadaa for the Oromo, as well as its structural innovations, researchers in law, indigenous studies, and pan-Africanism are exploring how the system could be utilized in the 21st century. The gadaa system technique of consensus through dialogue is unique but firmly rooted in western democratic norms and thus well suited to adoption with in Ethiopia's federally structured democracy. The gadaa system is the constitution of the Oromo society through which the society administered, defended their territory, maintained and developed their economy and it is the self-sufficient system that influenced every aspect of Oromo society, from politics to religion until recently.

During our recent information-gathering among the East shewa we have particularly observed that the *Gadaa* system has proven its significance in the assignment of property rights, allocation of resources as well as in the management, prevention and resolution of conflicts.

i. INSTITUTIONS OF RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND GOVERNANCE

In the utilization of scarce resources of the region the system of conflict management has been one of the central components of the history of the East shewa. The constant competition for resource with the neighboring non East shewa also has been a pointer towards developing mechanisms of conflict resolution. Gufu Oba has clearly indicated the historical background to the strict rule of resource utilization among the East shewa.

ii. INSTITUTIONS OF CONFLICT PREVENTION AND RESOLUTION

Interestingly enough, the East shewa have a very strong traditional mechanism of resolving or settling disputes among the society. They have their own indigenous knowledge of adjudicating both civil and criminal cases. Especially in criminal offences such as war between two clans, the Abbaa Gadaas of each clan and elders (jaarsa biyyaa) shall come together, weigh the evidences of cases brought before them and reconcile the issue rendering decisions and passing their verdicts based on the simplicity or complexity of the matters.

iii. INSTITUTION OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION

The other important institutions of the Gadaa system which have been remarkable in the history of the Oromo society at large and the East shewa in particular are Guddifachaa and Moggaassaa. The former has been the practice of adopting Oromo or non-Oromo male or female individuals usually at a young age by a given family. In this case, the adopted sons or daughters would have equal rights and privileges with the biological sons or daughters.

3.4 WOMEN AND THE GADAA SYSTEM

The role of women in the Gadaa political power has created controversies among scholars. Some argue that women were completely excluded from the Gadaa system while others strongly indicate that the women held a significant position particularly by referring to their institutions of Ateetee and Siinqee *also spelt as* Siqqee. Women among the East shewa and other Oromo branches are highly respected and they do have their own respectful institutions among which the Ateetee and Siinqee institutions are prominent. Ateetee is a ritual ceremony exclusively practiced by women in the belief that it makes them fecund, happy, wealthy and prosperous.

The role of women and the young are limited, the traditional institutions play a very critical role in decision making in the community, especially in conflict resolutions and/or peace making that run from creating harmony within the family to the creation of societal peace at the level of the larger community. Furthermore, the democratic credentials of the East shewa Gadaa are clearly reflected in periodical elections that are held every eight years with a clear term limit. And, if elections are said to be the central attributes of democracy, the East shewa Gadaa system can easily pass any test of democracy. That is why the East shewa community is still adhering to its traditions and conducts its daily affairs with it.

3.5. PROBLEM ON GADAA SYSTEM

- ✓ Gadaa system is established pattern of behavior that can be objectively verified with in a particular social setting.
- ✓ A right enjoyed through long custom rather than positive law
- ✓ The relevant actors consider it to be law
- ✓ There is no methodology to know what practices and norm actually constitutes customary law
- ✓ Gadaa system is not supported with technology like computing devices
- ✓ Most people think as gadaa system used for conflict resolution mechanism.

3.6 SOLUTION FOR PROBLEM ON GADAA SYSTEM

- It must accommodation of both as they now theoretically exist in different realms of reality;
- The government create awareness about the advantage of custom law;
- The Gadaa Leaders must prepare document about gadaa system.
- The system must be integrate with technology by way of crate motivate of the people like technology people (software engineering, computer science, IT).
- Don't use the system for only conflict resolution mechanism; we can use social, economic and political development and also we can use research area and educational system.

4. RECONCILIATION INSTITUTION

Reconciliation has emerged as a topic among moral theorists who discourse the ethical issues that arise in the aftermath of every day forms of wrongdoing, such as transgression with in friendship or family relationship. Reconciliation forms a crucial aspect of most commission, in some case peace agreement or the terms of transfers of power prevent court prosecutions and allow impunity for former riles accused of human right violation or even crimes against humanity. Reconciliation commission held discussion today with stakeholders with view to ensuring sustainable peace by promoting social capital.

5. ETHIOPIAN AND RECONCILIATION INSTITUTION

The Ethiopian scenario does not perfectly fit into the common trends of transition where a country make a direct transition from dictatorial regime to a democratic government or from continued civil war to peace. However, in recent time, the Ethiopian government is undertaking a deep reformation. One of the core aims of this reformation is to ensure perpetual peace, justice, democracy, national unity, consensus and reconciliation among Ethiopian peoples. With a view to achieving this aim, on December 25, 2018, the Ethiopian parliament has established Reconciliation Commission after a series of arguments against a need to establish it, especially from the incumbent political party, the Ethiopian People’s Democratic Revolutionary Front (EPDRF) (Parliaments Approval of the Ethiopian Reconciliation Commission, 2019). In Ethiopia, there were long time legacies of egregious human rights violations that remain unaddressed from the time of modern state formation in Ethiopia.

Ethiopian has huge experience traditional reconciliation mechanism which lay foundation for peace and development. Ethiopian plays a central role in promoting stability and economic integration in east Africa’s building on historic opportunity provide by last year peace agreement with Eritrea. Today announcements reinforce the EU’s commitment to supporting Ethiopian in achieving the ambitious political social and democratic transition that will not only transform the live of Ethiopian but inspire change across the region.

6 ABOUT THE STUDY

The study would be significant from the following perspective .first, it would provide valuable information and understanding about the roles of gadaa system conflict settlement mechanism plays among Oromo people. Second, it would reveal the preference of people related to conflict settlement mechanism and the rationale behind it.

CONCLUSION

The democratic credentials of the East shewa traditional institutions can be checked at several levels. First and foremost they are products of the East shewa society and rooted in the Oromo society, i.e. not imposed by any one from anywhere. To put it differently, they are not alien to the Oromo society as they are not imposed by any outside force. Secondly, they have contained and enriched by the time-tested wisdom of the East shewa society over the generations for centuries. Thirdly, the relationship of the elders with the ordinary folks within the larger East shewa community are defined and negotiated by tradition and not imposed by any superior authority, including the formal government institutions. Fourthly, decision-makers with the traditional sanctions influence people not force people, earn respect from the larger community, and not impose themselves by the use of force like the modern institutions. In fact, in their *modus-operandi*, they are generally invited to solve societal problems by the consent of the parties in conflict rather than intruding themselves into the private affairs of citizens. Fifthly, if elections are said to be the central attributes of democracy, the East shewa Oromo elders are not hereditary as they are elected according to the basic tenets of the Gadaa system. Above all they have been seen as legitimate institutions in the eyes of the community and as such preserved by the free will of the community for centuries. Despite their obvious limitations in areas of gender relations, in the Ethiopian context they can be judged as more legitimate and democratic institutions compared to their modern counter-parts.

In our readings of the secondary literature among the East shewa, what we have observed is that, they have continued to adhere to their traditional institutions under the direction and influence of the Gadaa system and have continued to manage their affairs by using them. Despite the existing tension between the government institutions and the traditional institutions of the community, we have learned that the traditional institutions and modern systems of governance largely live side by side. We have clearly observed that most of the local problems and issues are often solved or settled through the traditional institutions of the Gadaa among the East shewa. Furthermore, despite the limitations regarding the role of women and to some degree that of the young the traditional institutions are universally accepted, respected and are legitimate in the eyes of the East shewa community.

More importantly, as can be judged by our preceding discussions the traditional institutions are preferred by the community on the following grounds:

1. They are better rooted in the society and are closer to the hearts and minds of the people.
2. They are nearer to the society and the ordinary citizens can get services without much hurdles, which also saves time and money;
3. Their focus is reform and rehabilitation of the wrong doers than punishment of them;
4. Their conflict resolution mechanisms are more durable and thus create more harmony and tranquility in the society.

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5. As the local people are involved in most of the deliberations by their own free will, they are more participatory and effective.

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