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## The Politics of Symbols: The Incorporation of *Gadaa* Symbols into State Constitutional Rhetoric in Oromia, Ethiopia

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### Abstract

This article discusses the incorporation of *Gadaa* symbols into state political symbols in the context of the post-1991 Ethiopian federal system. The *Gadaa* system is an indigenous socio-political system of the Oromo, inscribed by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity in 2016. We employed a qualitative research approach to collect data through interviews, observations, and document analysis. Thematic content analysis is used for data analysis. The findings show that one of the Ethiopian federal units, Oromia National Regional State (ONRS), has incorporated symbols and terminologies of the *Gadaa* system into its state constitutional rhetoric to solicit popular legitimacy from the Oromo. However, the incorporation is often criticized for simply promoting the symbols alone without regard for the basic principles enshrined in the *Gadaa* system. In other words, *Gadaa* symbols have been used more for the public impression they create than for any meaningful material or political benefits the people draw from their use. Thus, the use of *Gadaa* terminologies and symbols has not brought about the much-expected outcomes in pacifying the grievances of the people and ensuring peace and stability in the region. Political parties have used the same symbols to contend for their respective political agendas and interests. Finally, this study shows the promotion of the system and its symbols is part of the post-Cold War retraditionalisation endeavours common elsewhere in the world and more noticeably in Sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, the retraditionalisation process entails the invention, reconstruction, and politicisation of the meanings and symbols of the system.

**Key words:** /Co-option/*Gadaa* symbols/Oromo/Oromia/Politics of symbols/Retraditionalisation/

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## 1. Introduction

The post-Cold War global political realities demonstrate the predominance of plural polities, including traditional authorities and state structures, regardless of whether traditions have persisted or been restored. Empirical evidence shows that 103 of the 193 member states of the United Nations recognise ethnic identities in their constitutions. Seventy countries have granted special cultural or political rights to their communities. Sixty-one countries have officially accommodated some forms of traditional means of governance and customary laws. In 57% of the world's population, customary and statutory laws are thought to coexist. The only exception is Europe, where traditional governance is nonexistent (Holzinger, Kern & Kromrey, 2016).

Traditional governance is recognised in a variety of ways across nations. In North America, it comprises federal systems that provide traditional leaders with a great deal of authority. In South America, indigenous rights are guaranteed, and in Ghana, a parliamentary house of traditional leaders has been established (Holzinger, Kern & Kromrey, 2016). In some cases, traditional governance acts as a local self-help group that claims rights (Englebert, 2002).

Since the end of the last century, there has been a wave of retraditionalisation in sub-Saharan African countries. In this region, the revitalisation of traditional authorities and the recognition of their roles in local governance and national politics have been evident (Buur & Keyd, 2007). African traditional institutions and their leaders have survived their critics and even flourished since the 1990s (Carolyn, 2009). For instance, Kleist (2011, p.25) shows the role of the Ghanaian chieftaincy in official governance, resolving disputes, codifying customary laws, organising rituals and festivals, as well as having custody of stool land,<sup>2</sup> organizing communal labour, and promoting socio-economic development. Obarrio (2010, p.263) describes how, paradoxically, post-cold war Mozambique has incorporated traditional authorities akin to colonial governance.

According to Buur and Keyd (2007), the restoration of traditional authorities takes three different forms. The first form is a successful, bottom-up initiative in which traditional institutions have increased their influence in local and national politics, such as the Asante chieftaincy in Ghana, the Kingdom of Buganda in Uganda, and the Lozi of Barotseland (southern African ethnic groups found in Namibia, Angola, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Zambia). The second trend is that traditional leaders have played an important role informally, as in the case of the traditional authorities in the Congo and Sierra Leone. In the last form, the states blend or reincorporate traditional authorities into state governance through legislation. Typical examples of this form of governance are Somaliland, Uganda, Zambia, Namibia, Cameroon, and Niger. In the Oromo<sup>3</sup> case, *Gadaa*<sup>4</sup> falls under the third form. The post-1991 Ethiopian Constitution (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995) gives each ethnic group the right to promote its culture and language, and the use of *Gadaa* symbols is part of this political environment.

The book entitled, "The Invention of Tradition," edited by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), is a typical example and pertinent to scholarly work on the relationships between African governments and traditional institutions. The idea of the invention of tradition was introduced into the study of Africa earlier in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Three theoretical positions were at the forefront in understanding the "invention of tradition" approach.

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<sup>2</sup> Ghana's customary land tenure system

<sup>3</sup> Under the post-1991 Ethiopian federal structure, the Oromo have established their own regional state called Oromia National Regional State (commonly called Oromia), which is one of the ten national regional states constituting the Ethiopian federation.

<sup>4</sup> The *Gadaa* is a holistic socio-political system that guides the economic, political, and social life of the Oromo. In 2016, UNESCO designated *Gadaa* as intangible world cultural heritage. This system has been functioning since at least the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Legesse, 1973). For instance, according to Borana informants and empirical evidence, currently, the Borana in southern Ethiopia have their 71<sup>st</sup> *Gadaa* leader for the *Gadaa* period of 2017 to 2025, with the *Gadaa* period being eight years (further discussion is under section 4).

The first argues that chieftaincy existed in some cases before the colonial period and the coming of the missionaries. The European colonialists and the missionaries incorporated the chieftaincies into a system of colonial rule. The Asantehene of Kumasi was the best example here (van Dijk & Adriaan, 1999). In Mozambique, the colonial rulers manipulated local values and organizations for the benefit of the colonial administration and the exploitation of the colony (Igreja, 2018). The second approach posits that chieftainship was a colonial and modernist invention where colonial rulers elected certain important figures for the communication channel and gradually started calling them chiefs. The third one refers to the situation where there was no modernist intervention in peripheral areas. In this case, non-Western hegemonic projects like the expansion of Islam caused the invention (van Dijk & Adriaan, 1999). The current topic fits none of these theoretical perspectives. Primarily, Ethiopia has little European colonial history<sup>5</sup>. Secondly, the *Gadaa* system was neither invented by the Ethiopian rulers for communication purposes nor by any other non-Western hegemonic projects; rather, it is indigenous to the Oromo.

The Oromo, who constitute the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, live both in Ethiopia and northern Kenya. They speak the common language, *Afaan Oromoo*, one of the Cushitic languages. Because of their incorporation into the modern Ethiopian state during the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and due to changes within Oromo society before and after the incorporation, the *Gadaa* system was under critical political suppression, and due to this, it was made to gradually lose its power. Despite this fact, the *Gadaa* has survived among the different Oromo groups. Since the downfall of the socialist regime (*Derg*) in 1991 and the coming into being of the ethno-linguistic political structure, a number of attempts have been made to revive and restore the system almost everywhere in Oromia. Over the decades, the Oromo have struggled against oppression and to achieve national pride, equality, respect for their identity, and ultimately, to restore the *Gadaa* system.

It is in these global, national, and regional political contexts as well as the local specificities that this article seeks to focus on the use of basic *Gadaa* symbols as a constitutional rhetoric of the ONRS in post-1991 Ethiopian macro politics. In this regard, the study is relevant to postcolonial theory. This theory explains the merits of recognising and restoring cultural practices of the colonized people that were suppressed during the colonial era. According to Rukundwa and van Aarde (2007), Postcolonial Theory emerged from the colonial experiences of the colonized peoples. The vital force behind the revival mission of the colonised people is to find their cultural roots as cultural forces for representation. Put differently, the mission is meant to reclaim the dislocated and distorted culture and to negotiate space for equity, recognition, and dignity.

Following the post-1991 Ethiopian politics, scholarly works have focused on the survival and revival of the *Gadaa* system. The following are a few examples, among others. Bekele (2021) discusses the philosophical appraisal of the *Gadaa* system, while Yisak (2021) focuses on the role of the *Gadaa* system in peacebuilding, and Moti (2020) compares Western democracy with that of the *Gadaa*. Debela (2020) on his part, presents the role of the *Siiqqee* Institution in the *Gadaa* System. On the other hand, Tesema (2016) discusses the basic institutions in the *Gadaa* system among the Borana. Megersa and Dejene (2015) present the surviving *Gadaa* court in Jimma, while Dejene (2014) shows how the Waliso Liban *Gadaa* survived and revived. Zelalem (2012) and Lemmu (1994) focus on the democratic features and *Gadaa* values, respectively. However, none of these works have addressed the issue of *Gadaa* symbols and terminologies in the new political context. Thus, this article fills the existing research gap.

Our intention here is not to discuss symbolism and provide a definition of what a symbol is per se. The article does not cover the internal structure of the *Gadaa* system or its interaction with the government system. Rather, it focuses on how *Gadaa* symbols have been accommodated by the state and non-state political symbols among the Oromo in the context of the post-1991 Ethiopian political environment. Nor does the article discuss

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<sup>5</sup>The modern Ethiopian state was formed by Menelik II's (r. 1889-1913) war of aggression during the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some people consider the incorporation as internal colonisation and have complained about the policy of assimilation of the newly incorporated peoples into the dominant Amhara culture, language, and religion (Mekuria, 1996; Markakis, 1991). Despite strong resistance, the country was ruled by Italy from 1936 to 1941.

political parties, their interactions, or their popular legitimacy among the Oromo. The following section focuses on a scholarly discussion of the links between politics and symbols.

## 2. Review of Related Literature: Symbols and Politics

The interconnection between symbols and politics is unquestionable and has been the subject of different scholarly studies. Cobb and Elder (1973) acknowledged some of the early insights on this subject, such as Lasswell (1965), Arnold (1962), Merelman (1966), and Edelman (1964, 1971). According to Cobb and Elder (1973), political symbolism has different levels. At a systemic level, it helps us to understand the processes of political mobilization and legitimacy. At the sub-national level, it provides an understanding of social cohesion. At the individual level, it refers to the modes of political behaviour. For these authors, a universe of symbols is common to all political systems, and the use of these symbols is also linked to issues of legitimacy. These authors argue that:

...while the primordial basis of legitimacy lies in the effective allocation of material resources, the satisfaction that accrue are reinforced through symbols that become themselves a basis of legitimacy and provide substitute sources of gratification and satisfaction. There are at least two possible bases of legitimacy. One is primarily symbolic; that is, allegiance is based primarily on affective sentiments toward salient political symbols. The other source of legitimacy is based on a functional or utilitarian criterion of material costs and benefits (pp. 307-308).

The relationship between symbolic and material benefits is also important. Political processes are aimed at meeting the material needs of the political community and providing symbolic assurance to the general public. However, symbolic meaning has never ensured the effective distribution of material resources. In the meantime, symbol-laden acts have the role of building public confidence and consent that help to maintain social order. Building consent and public confidence, in turn, enables the ruling elites to pursue their benefits from the political system disproportionately (Cobb & Elder, 1973).

Merry (2006) identifies two basic concepts related to the idea of translation and the purposes of symbols: indigenisation and vernacularisation which show the applications of ideas down to the local. The term 'indigenisation' refers to framing and presenting new ideas in relation to the existing cultural norms, values, practices, local symbols, and languages. Core ideas are framed or given meanings to mobilise potential supporters and demobilise opponents. Similarly, according to Czarniawska and Bernward (1996), the simplest way to objectify the selected ideas is to transform them into linguistic artefacts through repeated use in unchanged form, as in labels, metaphors, platitudes, and so on. Local labeling is especially important when it comes to incorporating new ideas into existing institutions. Parel (1969), who states that political symbols are linked to political action, has this to say:

Now the dynamics of political action involve not only reason and calculation, but also emotion and imagination. They demand not only appropriate techniques but also meanings. They aim not only at utility but also, to a varying degree, at producing the feeling of ethical satisfaction. In other words, in political action, something more than rational, technical, and utilitarian factors is involved, namely emotion, imagination, and values. And political symbols emphasize the role of the latter set of factors (p. 512).

According to Posner (1998), governments always tend to control symbols for their potential incentives and dangers. Klatch (1988) discusses political symbols and symbolic action in this regard. If someone speaks of a flag, it is about symbols, and if he dies for the flag, it is a symbolic action. From these premises, she concludes that "the potency of symbols rests not simply in their ability to represent, but in their ability to instigate action" (p, 138). The author also discusses the two approaches to the analysis of political symbols: the tradition of meanings and the tradition of masters. The first refers to how symbols play a role in integrating

society and building social cohesion. This approach considers symbols as emblems of group life, in line with Durkheim's view of symbols as sanctified manifestations of group harmony, of *communitas*, amidst the profane world of individual action, and Geertz's idea of symbols as a cognitive roadmap, a blueprint for organizing the complex reality of social life.

The second approach, "symbols as masters," refers to the use of political symbols in manipulation. The approach emphasises the purposes for which symbols serve as an instrument of maintaining power or as screens for psychic release. In both cases, symbols are instruments for manipulation. Contrary to the first approach, symbols are considered to be means of suppression or domination that further divide societies. The first version of this tradition is more Marxian in nature, in which symbols are interpreted in the context of class struggle. Through different mechanisms that entail either justification or mystification of class interests, symbols appear as part of the ideological superstructure.

Symbols have the potential to co-opt critical thought and promote a one-dimensional view of social reality. Symbols as screens approach, on the other hand, are an expression of the psychological workings of the mind or its expressions of irrational thought. One of the versions of this approach links the view of symbols as weapons with the view of symbols as screens. According to Klatch (1988), this view is very much related to the work of Lasswell (1927) and Edelman (1964), who interpreted political symbols as both ways by which elites preserve and progress their interests and as a form of expression for the public to release anxiety. These authors argue that elites actively manipulate symbols to gain acceptance for their policies and actions. Long ago, Edelman (1964) discussed the question of "who gets what, why, how, when, and where" by manipulating public opinion and meanings.

Yet, according to Klatch (1988), the bifurcated approach to the study of political symbols – the "tradition of meanings" and the "tradition of masters" – does not do justice to its analysis. The first omits conflict and power in the analysis of political symbols, while the second tradition undermines how symbols incite action in resistance to domination.

To reap the full richness of political symbolism, it is imperative neither to overlook the ability of symbols to orient and unify individuals nor to overlook the ways symbols are used to justify the actions of a privileged group. We must move beyond this framework in which symbols are interpreted as either integrative or manipulative, recognising that symbols act as both meanings and masters (p. 146).

Klatch (1988) further argues that:

If the 'meanings tradition' fails to see power and manipulation, the 'masters' tradition' treats people solely as dupes helplessly exploited by dominating elites. Individuals are portrayed as totally passive, with no will of their own. By focusing only on manipulation and symbolic disguise, we fail to see how symbols instigate action in resistance to domination (p. 148).

These approaches are relevant to the issue under discussion to see which symbols and meanings are incorporated into state political symbols, how they are co-opted, and why. The cohesive role of the symbols, as well as their manipulability, is pertinent. *Gadaa* symbols are made part of state political symbols to win popular acceptance and legitimacy. Non-state actors also use the same symbols, sometimes to withstand the actions of the ruling party.

### 3. Methods and Materials

Personal communications with *Gadaa* leaders and government officials, personal observations, and the consultation of official documents were used to gather the data for this article. The authors visited *Gadaa* ritual sites and interviewed *Gadaa* leaders and elders in various parts of Oromia, including the Guji and Borana (the two major Oromo groups in southern Ethiopia), where the system is relatively active and functioning. The

authors also participated in the *Gadaa* general assemblies of the Guji in 2009 and 2017 and of the Borana in 2012, which are held once every eight years. In addition, they have also repeatedly attended the annual thanksgiving ritual, the *irreechaa*, hosted by the Tulama *Gadaa* at Bishoftu (40 km east of Addis Ababa). In this regard, the use and implications of some of the *Gadaa* symbols were observed.

Recently, between January and April 2019, extensive data collection was conducted across Oromia. The authors visited Borana and interviewed four Gabra *Gadaa* leaders and elders, as well as two key informants and elites who have published on the *Gadaa* system. In addition, four *Gadaa* centres of the Matcha Oromo, namely: Bisil Osolee (centre for Matcha *Gadaa*), Waliso *Gadaa* (centre for the Waliso Liban Oromo), Odaa Hullee of the Jimma, and Odaa Dooggii of the Iluu and Bunnoo Oromo, were visited, and seven *Gadaa* officials were interviewed at these centres. Furthermore, two partially retired *Gadaa* leaders of the Tulama were interviewed. To further enrich the data, two senior experts from the Oromo Culture Centre and Oromia Culture and Tourism Office were interviewed. Three university instructors from the field of social sciences who wrote directly or indirectly about the *Gadaa* system were also interviewed. And in this regard, a total of, twenty key informants were interviewed. All interviews were conducted in *Afaan Oromoo*. These key informants were selected purposively. Since this paper focuses on the way state and non-state actors use some basic *Gadaa* symbols, we thoroughly consulted relevant documents such as the ONRS Constitution and proclamations as well as other non-state documents, including the logos of political parties. The data were transcribed, thematically categorised, and analysed. Concerning ethical consideration, we secured ethical clearance from the concerned bodies to conduct the research. We also secured informed consent from all participants and there is no personal name used in this paper.

## 4. Result

### 4.1. The *Gadaa* System: An Overview

The *Gadaa* is an age-old socio-political system that divides all male members of the Oromo into five *Gadaa* parties called *gogeessaa* or *miseensa Gadaa shanan*, ‘the five *gadaa* parties’ that were commenced by the great founding fathers<sup>6</sup>. The *Gadaa* parties are hereditary, in which successive generations in the same paternal line are in the same *gogeessaa Gadaa*. Thus, the founding fathers' *gogeessaa* and that of their successive sons are the same. The term ‘*luba*’ refers to each generation of the same *gogeessaa*. Thus, *Gadaa* has similar inter-generational *gogeessaa* (*Gadaa* parties) but different *luba* for the successive generations (Dejene, 2007).

The *gogeessaa* comes to power in an orderly rotation for an eight-year term in office. There is no competition for power among the five *gogeessaa*. Likewise, the system does not allow vying for power among the successive generations (different *luba*) of the same *gogeessaa*. The generations of the sons assume power forty years after the *Gadaa* period of their fathers’ generations.

In the *Gadaa* system, leaders, called *Abootii Gadaa* (literally, *Gadaa* fathers), come to power through elections. The power structure, the name of the office, the procedure and timing of elections, and the number of officials vary across the vast Oromo areas. However, it is very common that the reigning *Gadaa* party has the ultimate ritual and political precedence in leading its constituency for eight years. One of the remarkable political activities during a given *Gadaa* time is the enactment and amendment of laws. The *Gadaa* general assembly is the highest decision-making or legislative body (see Mohammad, 1994, p.11). This general assembly is held once every eight years. The assembly is inclusive, and any interested person has the right to

<sup>6</sup> The Borana oral history indicates that *Gadaa* was restructured into five *gogeessaa* in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The first leaders for each successive *gogeessaa* were: Gadayyoo Galgaloo, Yaayyaa Fullallee, Jaarsoo Baabboo, Daawwaa Borbor, and Diida Namduri. The Borana regard them as the founding fathers of the current *gogeessaa Gadaa*.

attend and air their views on the occasion. Laws are the result of lengthy debates between leaders and the general public. The general assembly is held under the shade of a tree, most preferably the *Odaa* tree (sycamore tree). *Odaa* is also commonly used as a symbol of the *Gadaa* system.

*Gadaa* entails several other material and non-material symbols that reflect the Oromo worldview, basic structures, and principles. Its banner, which has black, red, and white colours, is called '*baqqala faajjii* or *faajjii*.<sup>7</sup>' The *Gadaa* leaders often wear *ruufa*<sup>8</sup>, 'turban' and *kallacha*<sup>9</sup> on their heads and foreheads, respectively. They also hold a ritual stick called '*horooro*.'

However, according to some historical sources, the gradual weakening and eventual decline of the *Gadaa* system was largely attributed to the suppression of the Oromo culture after their incorporation into the modern Ethiopian state. The formation of the modern Ethiopian state coincided with the time of the European scramble for Africa, which turned the newly incorporated areas into subjects and landless tenants. This event also suppressed the culture and languages of the incorporated territories (Kidane, 1997). For instance, despite some internal changes, the introduction of new political and legal rules and the replacement of the legal and political leadership of the *Gadaa* system by the local agents of the central state led to the weakening of the system among the Oromo in the south and elsewhere (Hinnant, 1977, p. 217). The *Gadaa* system was formally banned in some parts of Oromia (Dejene, 2007).

However, *Gadaa* continued to operate among the Oromo in different forms. In some cases, it has continued to function, albeit without its former political powers and activities but with many of its ritual and social symbols and values in place (Baxter, 1994, p.183; Legesse, 2000, p.30). That means, although *Gadaa* involves every aspect of the life of the Oromo, it has been demeaned to ritual aspects in many corners of Oromia. In other parts, the system has survived to serve a number of socio-cultural and political activities. Beyond its political and military roles, the *Gadaa* system serves as a channel of communication between the Creator and humans through blessings and prayers. For example, Van de Loo (1991, p. 25) states that *Gadaa* among the Guji was and still is not only the political system, rather, it involves blessing, sacred power, and the exchange of knowledge within the context of the vast Oromo cultural areas. Baxter (1994, p. 116) notes that even though the majority of the Oromo adopted Christianity and Islam, the daily religious behavior of most of the people is embedded in the traditional religious practices that are part of the *Gadaa* system. According to the informants, the *Gadaa* officials could reconstruct the ruptured relations between *Waaqa*, 'God' and humans through prayers and blessings. They could also resolve disputes and restore peace through mediation.

Despite its suppression and eventual decline, the *Gadaa* system has served as a unifying element in the emergent Oromo nationalism since the 1960s. The Oromo ethno-nationalist movements selected some basic symbols of the system and have used them since then. Following the 1991 Ethiopian political transformation, the ONRS has incorporated some of the basic *Gadaa* symbols and terminologies into its constitution and political symbols.

#### 4.2 The Use of *Gadaa* Terminologies and Symbols in Political Discourses

In the face of the vast geographical dispersion, regional groupings, affiliations, and religious diversification of the Oromo, *Gadaa* has remained the single most unifying force at the disposal of the Oromo nationalists since the 1960s. Baxter (1994, P.182) states: "...*Gada* and *oda* (sycamore) are dominant symbols as well as dominant words" in reconstructing Oromo's shared feelings. It has appeared as a root feature of the Oromo culture, and a very strong shared symbol of the people. The Matcha-Tulama Association, named after the two major Oromo groups, Matcha and Tulama, was the first well-organised pan-Oromo self-help association

<sup>7</sup> The Borana use the term *baqqala faajjii*, whereas other Oromo areas like the Matcha call it *faajjii*.

<sup>8</sup> *Ruufa* is a ceremonial turban that is darkly patterned either with thin red lines or with plain dark, and regularly worn by the *abbaa Gadaa*, *qaalluu*, or other ritual leaders. The ritual leaders often wind *ruufa* round their heads.

<sup>9</sup> *Kallacha* is a phallic *Gadaa* symbol that is usually worn by a male person on his forehead.

that staged resistance against the central state's policy of assimilation and ethnic suppression. The association was formed to express Oromo's discontent with the feudal regime over such issues as economic exploitation, cultural and political dominance, and military subjugation (Mekuria, 1996; Vaughan, 2003; Ronning, 2005, p. 280). This organization's logo was (is) the *Odaa* tree, which represents freedom and self-government (Mohammed, 1998). According to informants, the adoption of the logo was a clear indication of the intention to use *Gadaa* symbols to create a sense of common Oromo national identity. The founders of the association stressed the various commonalities such as shared language, culture, the *Gadaa* system, historical experiences, and political ideals that the Oromo have in creating their national consciousness.

Nevertheless, the Matcha-Tulama Association was accused of engaging in anti-national unity and anti-government activities and was banned. Yet, the association gave way to the formation of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in January 1974 (Mekuria, 1996; Mohammed, 1998, p. 213). The OLF was established with a boldly stated goal of self-determination, including up to secession and the formation of the Republic of Oromia. Since its inception, the OLF has used *Gadaa* symbols to further its mission of representing and uniting the Oromo nation. Empirical evidence shows that *Odaa*, in particular, has been used as a motif in the OLF's flag and logo (see also Baxter, 1994, p.182).

***Gadaa terminologies and symbols as constitutional rhetoric since 1991.*** Since the collapse of the Ethiopian socialist regime (*Derg*) in 1991, the official promotion of the *Gadaa* system has been brought to the fore through the adoption of various key and vividly observable *Gadaa* symbols and terminologies in the newly established ONRS. The use of the *Gadaa* symbols is part of the constitutional rhetoric and institutional setup. Article 46 (1) of the 2001 Revised Constitution of the ONRS reads that the “Legislative power in the Oromia Regional State is vested in ‘*Caffee Oromia*.’<sup>10</sup> The *Caffee* shall be the supreme organ of the Regional State and shall be responsible to the electorate of the Regional State.”

The word ‘*caffee*’ is an emblematic *Gadaa* term that captures the feelings of the Oromo. In the *Gadaa* system, the term represents ‘general assembly’. Traditionally, *Gadaa* general assemblies with the highest decision-making power are held in the *caffee*<sup>11</sup>, literally, ‘meadow’, and under the *Odaa* tree. *Caffee*, where water and pasture are abundant, is preferred for an assembly (Mohammed, 1994). Although *caffee* is an ideal place for such an assembly, not all general assemblies are held in the meadows<sup>12</sup>.

Referring to the Borana, Legesse (2006) describes this assembly as the ‘assembly of the multitude’<sup>13</sup> that sits as a law-making body and is entitled to revise the existing laws and proclaim new ones. He has also shown the commonalities of the many assemblies of this kind across Oromia, and indicated that all the great Oromo assemblies are held at different places, but have similar characteristics and serve similar purposes.

As the constitution of the ONRS shows, since 1991, the term ‘*caffee*’ has appeared as a political terminology at the regional state level. In the constitution, the term refers to the legislative body of the ONRS, which is vested with the highest authority. This body draws its nomenclature from the traditional *Gadaa* assembly, *caffee*. Certainly, the term was not part of the vocabulary of any state institution before the 1991 formation of the ONRS.

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<sup>10</sup> Council of Oromia

<sup>11</sup> Alternative terms like *gumii*, *Odaa*, *bokkuu*, and *yaa'ii* are also used to denote the assemblies or *Gadaa* centers in different Oromo localities.

<sup>12</sup> The two Oromo custodian groups, the Borana and the Guji, gather their *gumii* not under the *Odaa* tree. The Guji general assembly, which is known as the *Gumii Me'ee Bokkoo*, is held under the *Me'ee* tree (scientific name not found). The Borana *Gumii Gayoo* is held at Gayoo under a *dhaddacha* (acacia) tree, called *Dhaddacha Gumii*.

<sup>13</sup> The Borana call this assembly, *Gumii Gaayoo*.



***Translating Gadaa regalia into the flag of the regional state.*** The black, red, and white colours in this order are commonly used as *Gadaa*'s banner among the Oromo. The ONRS adopted the colours of its flag from this *Gadaa* banner. Article 3 of the 2001 Constitution of the ONRS reads,

The flag and the emblem of the Oromia Regional State shall symbolise and reflect the identity, sovereignty, unity, national pride, patriotism, history and the economic union. The region's flag shall have the colours red at the top, white in the middle and black at the bottom with *oda* [*Odaa*<sup>14</sup>] in the middle.

According to the informants who were *Gadaa* officials, historically, the order of the colours of the *baqqala faajjii* or *faajjii* of the *Gadaa* is black, red, and white from top to bottom. For the Oromo, black symbolises *Waaqa*. This colour signifies purity but not clarity, for no one has the full knowledge of *Waaqa*. The red colour stands for blood, fire, and living things, whereas the white colour symbolises light and a bright future. Some informants explained this issue in terms of a life-course through which a person has to pass. Accordingly, black represents early childhood, when nobody knows what the child's fate will be. The red is the time when he or she is hot and energetic. The last colour stands for an old age, a time when the personality as well as the fate of the person are no longer secrets.

The three colours are fully adopted by the ONRS, except for the ordering and the meanings attached to them. That means the regional state has only accommodated them in a partial fashion. The flag proclamation of the ONRS asserts that the red stands for "patriotism, struggle, sacrifices, and victory; the white for prosperity, peace, and hope; and the black colour represents principle, beauty, and purity" (Megeleta Oromia No. 9/1996).

***Translating Odaa into state political symbol.*** The *Odaa*, one of the important symbols in the *Gadaa* system, is commonly used by the state and other political and non-political organizations. In addition to the foregoing quotation, the regional state's constitution also reads, "The emblem of the regional state shall have the symbol of *oda* [*Odaa*], wheat, and factory gear within itself." Why *Odaa*? *Odaa* is an ideal tree where *Gadaa* general assemblies are held, whereas in practice, assemblies can be held under other trees as well.

In addition to its symbolic value of representing *Gadaa* hall, *Odaa* also refers to some of the prominent *Gadaa* centres in the history of the Oromo, like *Odaa Nabee*, *Odaa Bultum*, *Odaa Bisil Osolee*, and *Odaa Roba* (see Mohammed, 1994). Data from the informants showed that *Odaa* is often used to symbolise the *Gadaa* system and its entire philosophical base and democratic values. It is taken as a material symbol of certain basic principles of the system, like the concepts of protection, non-discrimination, and inclusiveness, ultimate power of the people, the supremacy of the law, prayer, peace, transparency, and accountability.

In the *Gadaa* system, power is assumed for a limited time period and transferred to the next *gogeessaa* through the prescribed procedures. The authorities are mandated to hold power or office only through elections. These assemblies, held every eight years, as well as other smaller assemblies such as ritual libations and clan-based gatherings, are inclusive and held under the *Odaa* tree. They are inclusive in the sense that no one is denied access to the assemblies, and anyone interested has the right to bring issues to the attention of the assemblies. The *Gadaa* general assembly gives an unconditional right to the participants to evaluate the performance of the *Gadaa* officials, both past and present.

In the Borana case, the elders and *Gadaa* leaders have attested that the general assembly is organised amid the *Gadaa* period. The event allows them to assess the achievements and performances of the last four years of the recently 'retired' *Gadaa* class and the first four years of the active *Gadaa* class. Ideally, the assembly has the authority to remove active *Gadaa* leaders from their positions; it can also strip them of the social and political roles that the leaders have retained even after being retired from active *Gadaa* status. According to the informants, this traditional practice is called *buqqisuu*, 'to uproot.'

<sup>14</sup> Informants commented that the *Odaa* that appears on the national flag of the regional state does not take a natural form. Under normal circumstances, the *Odaa* tree does not branch at its trunk like the one that appears on this flag.

The event reveals that the supreme power rests in the hands of the multitude, while the supremacy of the law and the accountability of the *Gadaa* leaders are entrusted with the people. *Odaa*, as a symbol of the *Gadaa* system, contains all these basic *Gadaa* values and principles that deserve special attention.

When describing the symbolic value of the *Odaa* tree, Mohammed (1994, p. 14) says that its shade is an "office of the government" and a "meeting ground" where laws are enacted, decisions are made, justice is assured, peace is maintained, and democratic discussion is conducted. In this regard, the shade provided by the tree represents the protection the system offers to the community. Just as someone seeks shelter under a tree to protect oneself from the heat of the sun, one expects protection from injustice and attack from enemies under *Gadaa*. *Gadaa* offers structural and political protection, while *Odaa* is an objectified representation of that protection. According to one of the informants, who is a researcher, the evergreen *Odaa* tree provides permanent shade, which is often taken as a symbol of sustainability. It is also regarded as a symbol of unity. The single trunk of the tree is the symbol of the common history of the system and of the Oromo. In support of this view, Baxter (1994) states that *Odaa* is one of the symbols used by the Oromo to represent the shared feelings of their identity.

*Odaa* is also the most respected and sacred tree and the centre of traditional Oromo religion (Mohammed, 1994). Baxter (1994, p.182) states in a similar vein that *Odaa* trees "are held in veneration both in themselves and because of the prayers and blessings which they generate." It is seen as a symbol of peace from which prayers and blessings are generated to restore the ruptured relations between *Waaqa*, the 'Creator,' and humans (see Mohammed, 1994). Prayers and blessings serve as a channel through which *Waaqa*, on whom the human world depends for its wellbeing, subsistence, peace, and fertility, communicates with humans on the ground (Dejene, 2007). Peace is restored, and disputes are also resolved through debate and discussion under the *Odaa* tree. The rituals that are performed under the shade of the *Odaa* tree reinforce the philosophy of the *Gadaa* system.

Leaders draw their powers from their mandate to perform important rituals that are believed to be the sources of fertility, peace, and prosperity (Baxter, 1994). Political leaders are also ritual leaders and moral people (Legesse, 1973; Van De Loo, 1991; Baxter, 1994). The power of the leaders is rejuvenated through these ritual performances.

Practical observation and the state documents revealed that the *Odaa*, which is loaded with several meanings and values, has been serving as a motif on the flag of the ONRS. It has also been architecturally promoted and translated into the ONRS Convention Hall. A modern and complex hall of the state called *Galma Abbaa Gadaa*, 'Gadaa leaders' Hall', was constructed in Adama City (100 kilometres east of Addis Ababa). The hall took the architectural form of an *Odaa* and has five wings to symbolise the five *gogeessaa* (*Gadaa* parties) discussed above. The material symbol, *Odaa*, the name *Gadaa*, and the *gogeessaa* structure of the system were used to design and name the modern Convention Hall of the ONRS. The substitution of the *Odaa* tree with buildings as a meeting place for *Gadaa* gatherings is part of the post-1991 Ethiopian political development, which guarantees every nation, nationality, and people the right to speak, write, and develop its own language; to express, develop, and promote its own culture, and to preserve its history.

According to informants from Tulama *Gadaa*, where the Convention Hall is situated, on the inauguration ceremony of the hall, the prominent *Gadaa* leaders and elders, along with the famous Oromo singer, Ali Birra<sup>15</sup>, were among the many invited. Birra is noted especially for his path-finding and inspiring songs related to the *Gadaa* system. One of his songs has an inquiring stanza that says: *karaan manni Abbaa Gadaa eessaa, dhaqeen galma isaa jajjabeessa*, "where is the domicile of *Gadaa's* leader? I have to go to maintain his hall." This song has been so popular since the early days of the emergence of Oromo nationalism.

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<sup>15</sup> Ali Mohammed Musa, commonly known as Ali Birra (29 September 1950 – 6 November 2022) passed away while we were working on this article. In 2010, Jimma University bestowed an honorary doctorate degree on him for being an iconic Oromo musician and composer who dedicated his life to promote Oromo music and arts.

It has been sung in praise of the *Gadaa* system and has reflected the strong Oromo demand for recognition of the Oromo culture. He asked this profound Oromo question: Where is the way to Abba Gadaa's Hall? When Ali Birra asked for the whereabouts of the hall of Abba *Gadaa*, he was utterly expressing the Oromo's dissatisfaction with the then existing system. The government of ONRS seemed to have responded to this grand Oromo question when it constructed the Convention Hall. However, as some of our informants reported, it remains unclear if the *Gadaa* Hall Ali was looking for was indeed this one or not.

According to an expert from the Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau, partly in response to this concern, the ONRS also introduced a design for *Abbaa Gadaa* Halls to be constructed at different *Gadaa* ritual sites a decade earlier. The design took the shape of the *Odaa* tree, while a *kallacha*, phallic *Gadaa* symbol, appears on the roof of the design.

The most important aspect of the convention hall's construction, aside from its physical presence, is its implications in responding to Oromo cultural suppressions and grievances. Currently, the Oromo do not have a common *Gadaa* leadership or a common *Abba Gadaa*. Since July 2014, however, *Gadaa* leaders from the survived, revived, and newly reinitiated centers have formed a council of Oromia *Gadaa* leaders with the goal of establishing a single *Gadaa* leadership. Through certain symbolic representations, the regional government claims that the *Galma Abba Gadaa* is a common *Gadaa* Hall for the Oromo. Referring to such a situation, Posner (1998) explained that governments always tend to control basic symbols because they are value-laden and entail emotions that influence the political actions of the attendants.

Some of the informants strongly argued in favor of substituting *Odaa* with *Gadaa* Hall. For instance, an informant from the Oromo Culture Centre, said, "*Namni tokko tokko ammas akkuma durii Gadaan bosona keessa naanna'ee muka jalatti akka hojii hojjatu barbaada. Odaa yoo jedhamu ammas muka yaadaan barbaadutu mul'ata.*" "Some people still expect the *Gadaa* ceremonies to be performed under a tree in the forest. Whenever *Odaa* is mentioned, it is the tree that comes to their mind." Currently, however, it is common to see *Gadaa* leaders having offices in cities and towns across Oromia. This informant also inspires the gradual substitution of *Odaa* trees with modern *Gadaa* halls as meeting places.

In this regard, as most informants have pointed out, the basic question is not whether the state's Convention Hall was named after *Gadaa* or whether the ONRS used *Odaa* as its emblem, but whether it has accommodated the very philosophical and functional aspects of the *Gadaa* or whether it is a mere imitation of the symbolic meanings embedded in the system. While commenting on the symbolic use of the *Gadaa* system, one of the key informants, who served as an official in the council of Oromo *Gadaa* leaders, argued that the value of the system goes beyond its symbolic meanings and the past history of Oromo governance. Rather, it is important as an identity marker for the people, with strong socio-political implications for the Oromo, Ethiopia, and beyond. He further stated, '*Sirni Gadaa, kan sirni siyaasaa ammayyaa ammallee bira hingenyeefi rakkoolee siyaasaa kan hiikuu danda'uudha*' "The *Gadaa* system is a complex system that has existed long before modern political systems and has the capacity to address practical political problems." For practical reasons, he suggested that it is better to emphasize the essence of the *Gadaa* than the symbols and terminologies.

As we have already shown, the use of the symbols can be traced back to the early days of Oromo nationalist movements. The symbols have been used by different political parties, opposition and ruling ones. That is, the *Odaa* has served as the logo for the majority of Oromo political organizations. The Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) that ruled the ONRS for more than two and a half decades,<sup>16</sup> the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Oromo Federalist Movement (OFM), and the Oromo People's Congress (OPC) have *Odaa* on their flags and logos. The latter two joined together in January 2009 and formed the

<sup>16</sup> At the end of 2019, the OPDO, was dissolved, and with other political parties, it formed the Prosperity Party (PP), which was established in December of that year as a successor to the former ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front.

Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC). The OFC has fully adopted the colours of the *Gadaa* regalia in their original orders: black, red, and white.

Under the conditions where different political parties compete and claim that they dedicate themselves to the Oromo culture and cause, the *Gadaa* leaders are also vulnerable to being co-opted. In this regard, some of the informants argued in favour of the *Gadaa* leaders maintaining a neutral position. Regarding the position and the leadership roles of the *Gadaa* leaders and the expectations of the people, another informant who was a researcher said, “*Utuu abbootiin Gadaa siyaasaa garaa garaa irraa fagaatanii dansaa, maal jennaan abbaan Gadaa gosa hinqabu; abbaan Gadaa garee hinqabu... Inni kan dhugaati. Uumatni bara Waaqaa itti kenne akka ittiin uummata tajaajiluuf.*” “It would be preferable if the *Gadaa* leaders stayed away from political parties. This is because *Gadaa* leaders are not partisans and do not have a group to serve. They are there to serve the truth and the people who have entrusted them with the mandate to rule all without discrimination.” This implies that the *Gadaa* system can unite the Oromo and ensure peace and stability within the Oromo and with their neighbours through a political commitment to accommodate its basic principles, such as limited terms of office, peaceful power transfer, and inclusive political participation. That means the mere use of its symbols and terminologies has not guaranteed the basic rules and principles enshrined in the system. According to one of the senior *Gadaa* leaders, the Oromo people look for genuine solutions from the *Gadaa* as a way to peace and unity. When stating this issue, he said, “*uummanni Oromoo akka ijoollee haati gabaa dhaqxee wahiin galtuu nu eeggachaa jira.*” “The Oromo are expecting the *Gadaa* leaders to bring them solutions to the long-standing political deadlock, like children waiting for their mother who went to a market to come back with sweets.”

### 4.3 Non-political Organisations’ Use of *Gadaa* Symbols

*Gadaa* symbols and terms are not exclusively used by state institutions or political parties, but also by business firms and non-state civil organisations. Instances include: *Gadaa* Bus Company, *Gadaa* Bank, *Odaa* Share Company, and *Siinqee* Bank. Individuals also use *Gadaa* terminologies and symbols to name their business centers, hotels, and shops. On various social occasions, including religious and non-religious festivities, it is also common to see individuals and higher officials dressed in traditional costumes, such as the ritual turban (*ruufa*) and ritual sticks (*siinqee* and *horoaroo*). In general, according to our informants, the emphasis regarding the issue under discussion is on the symbolic aspects of the *Gadaa* rather than its actual practices. As one of our informants, a researcher himself, stated:

*We are in such a moment when we hear "Gadaa, Gadaa" from every mouth, whether they know what it means or not. If we take most corners of Oromia, including those without the proper functioning of the Gadaa for the last hundred years, the Gadaa is still well spoken of. However, what we currently have is not the desired kind of Gadaa system, but people are showing their desires for the restoration of a more practical Gadaa system. One reason for the less effectuation of the Gadaa restoration effort is that a system that was weakened over a long period of time cannot be restored instantly. Further, the restoration effort demands political will to enable the system to work.*

According to the informants, business firms and organizations also use *Gadaa* terms and symbols to signal that they belong to the Oromo. It seems the objectives are to make the names catchy and attractive for the Oromo customers rather than to promote any values integral to the *Gadaa* system. One may find nothing that makes a given organization a *Gadaa*, or the owners may know little or nothing about the *Gadaa*.

## 5 Discussion

The findings of this study show how different actors use, manipulate, and promote *Gadaa* terminologies and symbols for political and commercial purposes since the recent retraditionalisation process common elsewhere in the world and more noticeably in Sub-Saharan Africa. Following the collapse of the socialist regime in 1991, Ethiopia introduced an ethno-linguistic federal model. The new ruling elites in Oromia used basic *Gadaa* terminologies and symbols as a political action against the cultural domination and ethnic suppression that had prevailed in the country since the formation of modern Ethiopia. Thus, the study is relevant to Postcolonial Theory, which, according to Rukundwa and van Aarde (2007), demonstrates the effects of cultural domination in the past and the need for revitalisation and reclaiming the suppressed cultural practices to ensure cultural pride, equity, recognition, and dignity for the bearers of the culture.

However, Parel (1969) shows that political symbols are linked to political action, which is more about moral satisfaction, emotion, imagination, and values. The findings of this study also corroborate this view. The use of the basic terminologies and symbols (is) was intended to create a favorable public impression about the promotion of the culture rather than to use the basic principles and values of the system in modern state governance. Different political actors, state and non-state alike, have solicited popular legitimacy by using prominent *Gadaa* terminologies and symbols. In this regard, Posner (1998) argues that governments tend to control important symbols because of their potential incentives and dangers.

Further, the findings of this study show that post-1991 Ethiopian politics followed the post-Cold War retraditionalisation approach for political mobilisation and to secure state legitimacy. One of the possible bases of legitimacy is symbolic, and the second is functional (Cobb & Elder, 1973). This study shows that the Oromo political actors have worked to secure symbolic legitimacy by using basic cultural symbols. These symbols are used in state ideology and indoctrination to win popular legitimacy in favor of state policies and actions. However, this empirical evidence also shows that the political actors have promoted the symbols alone while disregarding the basic principles enshrined in the *Gadaa* system. The adoption of *Gadaa* symbols and terminologies is believed to be part of the Oromo's quest for recognition and respect for their culture and dignity. Nonetheless, the retrieval and use of *Gadaa* symbols and terminologies in the state political system has thus far had little to decisively address the longstanding quest of the Oromo for the implementation of the core values and practices of the system.

Thus, the findings show that retraditionalisation entails the invention, reconstruction, and redefinition of the past in service of the present and the time to come. Regardless of their original meanings, cultural symbols and their meanings are constructed and reconstructed to meet the intended political goals. In other words, the basic terminologies and symbols are not simply retrieved from the cultural stock; rather, they are renewed with quite different meanings, structures, and roles. Using old symbols, political actors have imagined and aspired for new political outcomes. The aspired political goals may differ significantly from the fundamental meanings ingrained in the old cultural symbols.

This study further shows that similar traditional symbols and terminologies are used instrumentally by different competing political actors, each claiming genuine representation of the bearers of the symbols. However, the symbols and traditions are manipulated to meet quite different and opposing political goals. Business organizations also use *Gadaa* symbols and terms to maximise their profits. We can then conclude that, in practice, the public impression it creates is more important than any meaningful material or political benefit the people derive from the use of the symbols. Cobb and Elder (1973) claim that symbolic significance has never guaranteed satisfaction in terms of emotions, material costs, or benefits. This study is an instance where culture is partly inherited, as well as constructed and chosen. In the process of retraditionalisation, traditions are often co-opted.

Finally, our findings show two opposing versions of the use of the *Gadaa* system and its potential to be accommodated into a modern political system since the 1991 change in the Ethiopian political landscape. About three decades ago, Baxter (1994, p.183) argued that what is important about *Gadaa* does not lie in its potential to revive and be used as a modern political system, but in its symbolic values in accommodating Oromo identity and in aspiring to their unity for the present and the future. The article clearly indicates that the post-1991 use of *Gadaa* terms and symbols in Oromia by different actors seems to consonant with Baxter's view of favoring the ritual and symbolic aspects of the *Gadaa* system.

However, our findings also show a contrary view to this conclusion. There is a strong belief that *Gadaa* is relevant not only to Oromo's current socio-political life, but also to national, continental, and global politics at large. The indigenous democratic values enshrined in the *Gadaa* system have already been recognised and the system was registered by UNESCO as one of the world's intangible cultural heritages. The registration implies its potential to contribute to humanity. The *Gadaa* system has the vigor and prospect to coordinate the nation's effort to form a strong socio-political base from which all forms of suppression from past and subsequent regimes can be redeemed. The system could still be Oromo's unexplored pit from which the people's self-image, pride, and social structures could be further explored, utilized, and intertwined with the day-to-day lives of every Oromo generation.

Finally, despite the enormous contributions of this article to the understanding of how *Gadaa* symbols and terminologies have been used in politics and business, we do not claim that the findings are comprehensive in terms of the depth and breadth of the overall *Gadaa* symbols and terminologies. As a result, we recommend more in-depth research on the issues.

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