The Oromoo Gadaa System: Why Considered Democratic?

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Abstract

Gadaa is an indigenous and democratic system of governance which has been used by the Oromoo people, developed from knowledge gained by community experience over centuries. It regulates political, economic, social and religious activities of the community and serves as a mechanism for enforcing moral conduct, building social cohesion and expressing forms of community culture. Gadaa has been considered as a democratic and just system than other forms of governance in the region. This paper attempts to explain why gadaa is considered a democratic and just system based on review of literature and my own experiences as participant of the system. The democratic elements of the Oromoo gadaa system are clearly reflected in the periodical elections that are held every eight years with a clear term limit; peaceful transfer of political power; equitable distribution of power across generations and down to the community; rule of law and accountability; separation of politics from religion; social integration and peace building roles; a period of testing and the presence of check and balance system.

Keywords - Gadaa Democracy; Gadaa Governance; Gadaa System; Indigenous Knowledge; Oromoo

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Axereeraa

Gadaan sirna bulchiinsa dimokraatawaa Oromoo ganamaa kan uummatichi muuxannoo hawaasummaa jaarraa hedduu irratti hundaa'uun kalaqedha. Sirni kuni sochiilee siyaasa, diinagdee, hawaasummaa fi amantaa uummatichaa kan to'atu yoo ta'u, safuu kabachiisuuf, tokkummaa hawaasaa ijaaruuf akkasumas aadaalee hawaasaa mul'isuuf gargaara. Gadaan sirnoota bulchiinsa biroo naannoo jiran caalaa dimokraatawaafi haqa qabeessa tahuun beekama. Kaayyoon waraqaan kanaa sakatta'a barruuwwaniifi muuxanno hirmaannaa sirnichaarratti ani qabu irratti hundaa'uun, maaliif sirni gadaa dimocraatawaafi haqa irratti kan hundaa'e akka jedhamu ibsuudha. Sirni gadaa Oromoo dimokraatawaa ta'uu ifatti kan mul'isan keessaa: filannoo ganna saddetiin gaggeeffamuuf yeroo aangoo murtaa'e qabaachuu; aangoo nagaafi fedhiin walharkaa fuudhuu; qoqqoodinsa aangoo madaalawaa umriifi sadarkaalee hunda hirmaachisufi hawaasatti gadi bu'u qabaachuu; olaantummaa seeraafi ittigaafatamummaa qabaachuu; siyaasaafi amantaa waliin makuu dhabuu; tokkummaa hawaasummaa ijaaruufi nagaa kabachiisuurratti gahee inni qabu; yeroo qophiifi sirna to'annaa aangoo qabaachuu isaati.

Jechoota Ijoo: Dimokraasii Gadaa; Bulchiinsa Gadaa; Sirna Gadaa; Beekumsa Ganamaa; Oromoo

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1. Introduction

Gadaa system is essentially a home-grown (indigenous) democratic socio-political organization of the Oromoo people, the largest identity group among the Cushitic-speaking peoples who have inhabited Northeastern Africa in general and modern Ethiopia and Kenya in particular as long as recorded history indicates. Historically, gadaa has been considered as a democratic and just system than other forms of governance in the region. A number of scholars who have studied Oromoo gadaa system positioned gadaa as an African democracy that could inform constitutional thinkers. Asmarom (2000:262), one of the scholars who have meticulously studied the gadaa system, described this uniquely democratic system of the Oromoo people as:

> One of those remarkable creations of the human mind that evolved into a full-fledged system of government. It contains genuinely African solution for some of the problems that democracies everywhere have had to face.

The Nineteenth Century British diplomat, (Plowden, 1868:64), observed that "of all the republican systems, the gadaa system is the most advanced." American sociologist, social theorist, historian, educator and writer Levine (1974:131-2) stated that "Gadaa system represents one of the most complex systems of social organization ever devised by the human imagination." Professor of geography and anthropology Carter (1967: 158-9), had the opinion that gadaa is "an extra ordinary system of government." For Asafa (2012: 1), gadaa represents "the totality of Oromoo civilization." These are just some of the impressions and/or opinions of different scholars on the democratic nature of the Oromoo gadaa system.

The critical question that should follow is then, why gadaa is considered a democratic governance system? This short paper is an attempt to answer this question based on review of literature and my own experiences as participant of the system. Since the gadaa system is a very complex and brood subject to comprehend fully, the paper is limited to only addressing the stated question. However, to properly address this question, it is important to understand how the traditional Oromoo society has been organized.

The Oromoo polity has been organized as three principal institutions: a) generational organization (gadaa), b) the religious institution (qallu), which is tied to dual organization, or the moiety and c) the general assembly (gumi), the highest law making body Asmarom (2000: 97). A full understanding of the gadaa system requires the comprehension of these interrelated and interacting institutions. Picking one aspect of the system for separate treatment may lead to erroneous conclusion. Gadaa system as an institution stands for systematically interrelated ideas that refer to various concepts ranging from ritual performances, law-making and adjudication, conflict resolution to political leadership.

2. Gadaa (Generational Organization)

Gadaa is a traditional system of governance used by the Oromoo people for many centuries[a]. It includes various distinguishing features that make it a democratic institution.

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[a] There is no clear information on how old the gadaa system is. Some put it to over 3000 years, while others argue that it is at least more than 500 years old.

a) An Egalitarian System with Peaceful Transfer of Political Power

Asmarom (1973: 8) defined gadaa system as "a system of generation classes (luba) that succeed each other every eight years in assuming political, military, economic, legislative and ritual responsibilities." Gadaa is quite an egalitarian (qixxee/equal) system and leaders are elected democratically. It is just one aspect of the age old egalitarian complex system that was created by the Oromoo to manage their day-to-day life. In the gadaa system there is no hierarchy or monarchy; all humans deserve to be treated with almost equal respect without regard to human differences. Political power is shared equitably among the parties and across generations, (see below).

In gadaa system the male members of the society would join five gadaa parties (miseensa/gogeessa) and pass through a number of age-grades (about 7 – 13) in different Oromoo groups. In age-grade/generational-set recruitment into the system is based not on biological age as in the case of age-set system but on the maintenance of socially-defined generation between parents and children. Parents and children are five grades or 40 years apart from each other. Each age-grade lasts for a period of eight years (Hinnant, 1977; Asmarom, 1973). People move from one age-grade to the next as they advance in age. The first five age-grades with a total period of 40 years, mainly serve as schools for the young Oromoo people. It is the time when they obtain different trainings which qualify them for hunting, military obligation as well as community leadership. The sixth age–grade (41 – 48 years)[b] is called gadaa. This is the stage of political, social, military and ritual leadership. The head of gadaa would be elected democratically form among the gadaa age-grade. He has title of abbaa gadaa. For eight year he would serve as a leader and spokesman of the assembly. There are other gadaa officials: the Abba Dula is the commander of the army. The Abba Sera is in charge of the traditional Oromoo laws[c] . These and other officials work closely together for one gadaa period (8 years) and when their term of office ends, they will hand over the power to next gadaa grade and party, which will elect new officials for the next eight years. So, in the gadaa system political power is held by elected officials, and there is peaceful transfer of power from one gadaa-grade to other every eight years. Such power transfer is conducted in a volitional manner, with full passion and without friction. Those who left the office would serve as advisors to the new gadaa grade (Hinnant, 1977; Asmarom1973, 2000; Bassi, 2005).

b) Gadaa is Participatory Democracy with Distribution of Power across Generation and down to Community

The gadaa system divides the stage of life, from childhood to old age into series of formal steps. There are 7 to 13, such steps among different Oromoo groups. Transition ceremonies mark the passage from one stage to the next. Within each stage activities and social roles (rights and responsibilities) are formally defined, both in terms of what is permitted and what is forbidden. The activities vary depending on the age and gadaa status of individuals or groups, ranging from livestock herding, participation in organized war parties, to administration of the country and to counseling. Regarding the way power is distributed in the gadaa system, Asmarom (2000:24) commented that:

> One major contribution of Oromo democracy is the way power is shared by the generations…. Far from being a government of the elders, the system (gada) ensures that rights are distributed fairly among fathers, sons and grandsons: no generation

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[b] This is true for those who are born right on appropriate time.

[c] The names Abbaa Duulaa and Abbaa Seera positions vary from one Oromoo group to another.

that is mature enough to be able to bear the rights and duties of citizenship is prevented from taking part in political life.

Besides this, leadership is equally divided among the five gadaa parties and the successive gadaa age-grades. There is no inter-party (horizontal) and/or intergenerational (vertical) competition over power. Exposing the deficiency of Western liberal democracies in distribution of power across generations, Asmarom (2000: 24) stated that, "Western liberal democracies failed quite miserably to achieve any semblance of inter-generational equity. The youth movements and the movements of the elderly that swept across the United States and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s were attempts to correct the generational injustices that were, and still are, present in Western political systems."

c) Peace Building and Social Cohesion/Integration

Gadaa incorporated pivotal institutions that created a strong link between successive generations and gives to the members of the community a sense of identity and continuity; functions as a mechanism of conflict resolution, as reparation and protection of women's rights, as a system of social cohesion and integration, for peaceful co-existence with other identity groups and it embraced nagaa (peace), which is central in Oromoo gadaa system (Shongolo and Schlee, 1955; Kuwee, 1997)

The Oromoo are well known for their military tradition, but that does not spill over the peaceful way of life. Random violence is not common with the Oromoo. It takes the gadaa system longer time to calculate before it goes to war. War was considered as a last resort behind which a question of substance and self-defense exists (Israel, 2009: 21). As a result, internal peace and stability among the Oromoo as well as with other has been a hallmark of the gadaa system. It has institutional mechanisms to integrate the non-Oromoo into the system. Those who integrate are guaranteed equal rights regardless of their ethnic and religious background.

The humanitarian institutions of the gadaa system include guddifachaa[d] (adoption) and moggaasa[e] (naturalization). These are wonderful integrative mechanisms that the Oromoo practice to accommodate other non-Oromoo peoples. The gadaa system is thus an all-inclusive, accommodating system that constantly and unfailingly attempts to ensure inclusion and integration. In addition, the practitioners of the gadaa system ensure that the differences and disagreements which arise among the Oromoo people as well as with others, particularly neighboring peoples, are resolved pursuant to the negotiation rules of the gadaa system. In this regard, araara[f] (conflict reconciliation) and gumaa[g] (reparation) are important gadaa institutions. Moreover, the gadaa system has parallel (to gadaa) siiqe/siinqe[h] and ateete[i]

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[d] Guddifachaa is the practice of adopting Oromoo or non-Oromoo male or female individuals, usually at a younger age, by a family. In this case the adopted sons and daughters would have equal rights and privileges with the biological sons and daughters.
[e] Moggaasa is the adoption of relatively large group of people usually by an Oromoo lineage or clan to be integrated to their community. Here also the adopted group will have equal rights and privileges with adoptive Oromoo lineage or clan.
[f] Araaara is reconciliation that involves various traditional institutions like council of elders (Jaarsaa Biyia and Hayyu) and gadaa officials.
[g] Gumaa is blood price, ritual of reparation and purification after homicide.
[h] Siiqqee/Siinqee is literary a symbolic ritual stick used by married women. It promotes gender equality and protects women from discrimination and violence. The gadaa system also allows women (through their siiqe) to play a decisive role in conflict resolution and restoring peace. Siiqqee is a vehicle for addressing gender inequality and advance the empowerment of women.

institutions through which the rights of Oromoo woman are respected by checks-and-balance system (Mohammed, 1994; Asmarom, 1973, 2000; Kuwee, 1997).

d) A Period of Testing

This is one of the most important features of the gadaa system from which the Western liberal democracies could draw a lesson, according to Asmerom (2000: 248). Testing time in Oromoo democracy is an extended period of time (usually for three gadaa-grade period)[j] during which the would be gadaa leaders and councilors must pass through a rigorous training about the laws and the customs and the wisdom of leading a society before they take the position of authority in gadaa, (particularly the Abba gadaa position). A period of testing is a requirement in Oromoo gadaa system while it may not be so in Western democracies. Asmarom (2000:248) has the following to say about this issue:

> Perhaps one of the most interesting ideas in Oromo democracy is the notion of the period of testing. It is true that in the West the elected leader does often hold a variety of elective or appointive offices before he or she makes it to the top as president or prime minister, and that his or her track record is reviewed by academics, the press, and parliament when elections are in progress. In parliamentary democracies, the prime ministers are also members of parliament and, as such they may have had ample legislative experience…. However, none of these experiences are required as a precondition for the top positions of elective leadership. It is therefore, quite possible for an inexperienced and untested individual may hold the top position.

The Oromoo gadaa system made a testing period a requirement to avoid the dangers of having inexperienced and untested individuals, who may cause damages to the society and to the system, to hold the top position.

3. Qaalluu and Moiety Institutions as Check and Balance Organs

Qaalluu is the other institution that manifests the religious/ritual aspects of the gadaa system. The word refers to the ritual leader as well as the religious institution. Qaalluu, as a head of Oromoo religion (waqqeffannaa), performs all electoral and ritual ceremonies. He legitimized Abba gadaas with oath taking and blessing ceremony; supports the legitimate base of gadaa system and the transfer of power; and resolves conflicts between Abba gadaas, if any (Hinnant, 1978: 234). However, the qaalluu and qaalluu institution do not interfere in the activities of gadaa. Religion and gadaa administration are separate, indicating the secular nature of the gadaa democracy. In addition to this, the two qaallus of Booranaa as religious heads of each moiety (Sabbo and Gonna), serve to maintain a check and balance role between them. It is the prototypical basis for balanced opposition and power-sharing (Asmarom, 2000: 136). The original qaalluu is believed to be sent down from heaven and served as medium between man and God (Waaqa). The institution of qaalluu is inherited and held for life as opposed to that of the political office.

Moiety is a kinship structure that divides the different Oromoo groups into two halves (e.g. Sabboo and Goonaa in Booranaa; Kontomaa and Daarimuu in Gujii; Sikkoo and Mandoo, in

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[i] Ateetee is a ritual ceremony exclusively practiced by women in the belief that it makes them fertile. It is also a cultural representation among the Oromoo women to counter male dominations and to enforce religious sanctions against related abuses.

[j] This period of three gadaa grades (i.e., Kussa, Rabba and Dorri) is a continual period of public scrutiny. At any time during this period the council or a member could be dismissed if he fails to measure up to the responsibility that the office requires.

Arsii, and etc). The moieties structure cut across the different clans and lineages of each group. Under the kinship structure, gadaa system is organized into five miseensa/gogeessa (parties) with one of these functioning as the ruling party, consisting of Abba gadaa, officials and assembly. Each party assumes power, one after the other, every eight years, taking 40 years to complete the cycle. The names of these parties differ from one Oromoo group to another. In Gujii Oromoo, for example, the five parties are: Halchiisa, Dhalana, Harmuufa, Roobale and Muudana/Burmajii; in Booranaa Oromoo they are: Moggisa, Sabaaqa, Libaasa, Mardiida and Fullaasa. Every Oromoo is born into one of these predetermined parties, whose father is already a member. One of the main functions of these parties is to maintain the check and balance system between and among the parties. As a rule alternate parties are qadadduu (allies) to each other, while adjacent parties are walaannaa (oppositions) to each other. The check and balance system is important to facilitate the smooth transfer of power from one party to another and to insure equitable division of power across the generational lines (Asmarom, 1973, 2000; Hinnant, 1977; Jemjem and Dhadacha, 2011).

4. The National Assembly (Gumii)

The gadaa system has a legislative body/branch, often called general assembly (gumii) or assembly of the multitude. It is a combination of all the local assemblies and councils of the given Oromoo group[k] that meet once every eight years, and mostly for a week or two. In principle, every person can attend the gadaa general assembly. Differences in terms of age, gender, status or political affiliation may not bar a person from taking part in the assembly. It is mandatory for all living Abba gadaas (ex-presidents who have served for eight-years), incumbent gadaa council and clan elders to convene to the assembly. The assembly reviews its laws and if necessary amends them. Those rules and customs deemed unfit in light of the social, political economic, environmental and spiritual realities of the people would be amended and new laws are issued and promulgated. The system is self-adjusting and upgrading (recreating) itself with social changes. The law made by the general assembly is the supreme law and would be implemented by executive and judicial branches.

The general assembly has also the duty to evaluate the men in power (in their fourth year term of office) and to resolve conflicts that could not be resolved at lower levels of the judicial organization. It has the power to depose elected leaders, even the abbaa gadaa from his office, if accused and proven of violating rules and regulations. Any elected representative is accountable for any failure in the official duties. No one is above the law. All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. Thus, under the gadaa system the power of administering the affairs of the nation and the power of enacting laws belong to the people. Every male member of the society who is of age and of gadaa-grade has full right to elect and to be elected. All people have the right to air their views in any public gathering without any fear (Gadaa Melba, 1988:11). The general assembly is therefore the supreme institution that manifests the principle of popular sovereignty in traditional Oromoo polity. It is a good example that shows power is in the hands of the multitude. The direct participation of the people in the assembly's proceedings in unfettered manner shows clearly that the people directly involved in their governance and this could be the best example of direct democracy under gadaa governance.

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[k] It is known that the Oromoo used to have a common gadaa assembly ground (Wolaabu) before they were differentiated into various groups and localities.

5. Conclusion

The place of Africa in the history of democracy is often overlooked. The conceptualization of the postcolonial state in Africa is highly influenced by the present predicaments (i.e., civil wars, famine, corruption and others) of the continent (Zelalem, 2017). Hence, regard for its indigenous egalitarian institutions and its continuous development has little or no space in academic discussion. However, Benjamin Isakhan (n.d.:5) warns that considering the Western democracy as the only way for the rest of the world misses the broader human story of the struggle for and achievement of democracy. In line with this, recently some scholars underline that the gadaa system of governance is genuinely African and provides a potential solution for some of political challenges African states faces today (See for example, Asmarom, 1973; 2000; Asefa, 2012; Holecomb, 1997).

The democratic features of the Oromoo gadaa system are clearly reflected in the periodical elections that are held every eight years with a clear term limit; peaceful transfer of political power; equitable distribution of power across generations and down to the community; rule of law and accountability; separation of politics from religion/secularism; social integration and peace building roles; a period of testing and presence of check and balance systems. The gadaa system has functioned as an effective method of participatory democracy for at least the past five centuries in Ethiopia. Therefore, The Oromoo gadaa system could certainly be considered a democracy, if "democracy" is strictly taken in its classical meaning of "government of the people, by people, for the people" in A. Lincoln's terms. Even though the Oromoo gadaa system had such wonderful features that could be used among them and across the country, the Ethiopian governments have no vision to accommodate it or even to learn from gadaa participatory democracy while mired in tyranny and corruption. Nonetheless, UNESCO has recently recognized gadaa system as intangible world cultural heritage.

As I have tried to show in this short paper, gadaa obviously stands as a potential source of democratic governance. This is not to say that gadaa will serve as a literal blueprint. Of course, gada developed under a completely different circumstance and therefore cannot be transplanted wholesale into a modern social organization (Gemetchu, 2005). However, the basic philosophy underlying the system and the democratic elements of gadaa, mentioned in this paper, can be adapted to advantage democracy in Oromia in particular and Ethiopia in general. These elements if properly institutionalized have the capacity to ensure popular participation. Nonetheless, how these democratic elements of gadaa could be adopted or integrated into the modern political system requires further studies.

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Gada National Assembly at Me'ee Bokko, Guji- Zone, February, 2016. (Picture by the author)

Law making at Me'ee Bokko, Guji-Zone, February, 2016 (Picture by the author)