



The Oromo Gadaa System: Why Considered Democratic?

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Abstract

During their long history, the Oromo have developed their own socio-cultural and political system known as gadaa. Gadaa system has been considered as a uniquely indigenous democratic and just system than other forms of governance in the Horn of Africa. A number of scholars who have studied the gadaa system positioned it as an African democracy that could inform constitutional thinkers (see for example, Asmarom, 2000; Levine, 1974; Bassi, 2005; Zelalem 2017). Gadaa has guided the social, political, economic and religious life of the Oromo for centuries, and also their philosophy, art, history and methods of time reckoning (Gadaa Melbaa, 1988). All-important Oromo social values and traditions are embedded in the gadaa system. In this keynote speech, I was given a responsibility to explain why the Oromo Gadaa system is considered a democratic and just system and its contribution to Peace and Nation Building in Africa's Quest for Renaissance.

Gadaa System and Its Contribution to Peace and Nation Building in Africa's Quest for Renaissance

There are lots of reasons why the Oromo Gadaa system is considered as democratic and just system. I will mention some of the distinguishing features of the gadaa system that make it democratic as follows.

1. **Equality of human beings (wal-qittummaa):** In the gadaa system, all human beings are considered equal. There is no hierarchy or monarchy; master-slave relations in the system. All humans deserve to be treated with almost equal respect without regards to human differences such as age, gender, status or political affiliations. Even the captives of a war were not enslaved in gadaa tradition; they were rather integrated into the Oromo society through gudiffacha (adoption) and mogassa (naturalization) institutions or sent back to their groups through *woddo* system (compensation payment).

2. Peaceful transition of political power every eight years:

In the gadaa system, political power is held by democratically 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 voluntary manner, with full passion and blessing ceremony, and without any friction. Those who left the office would serve as advisors to the new gadaa grade. There are clear periodic elections and peacefully power transition as in modern democracies. Thus, in the Oromo gadaa tradition there was no coup d'état and dictatorship that may aspire to stay in power beyond time limits.

3. Gadaa is participatory democracy with distribution of power across generation and down to community.

In the gadaa tradition, in principle, nobody is excluded from participation in the political system. 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 Oromo 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 (Hinnant, 1977). The roles/activities vary depending on the age and gadaa grade status of individuals or groups, ranging from livestock herding, participation in organized war parties, to administration of the country and counseling. Thus, one major contribution of Oromo democracy is the way power is shared by generations. Far from being a government of the elders, gadaa system ensures that rights are distributed fairly among fathers, sons and grandsons. No generation that is mature enough to be able to bear the rights and duties of citizenship is prevented from taking part in political life (Asmarom, 1973, 2000; Gadaa Melba, 1988; Zelalem 2017). Besides this, political leadership is equally divided among the five gadaa parties/gogessaa and the successive gadaa age-grades. There is no inter-party (horizontal) and/or intergenerational (vertical) competition over power.

4. Rule of law and secularism

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 Oromo group that meet once every eight years. 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 at all levels. In the gadaa system, 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. Besides this, in Oromo gadaa system religion and gadaa administration are separate, indicating the secular nature of the gadaa democracy.

5. Peace building and social integration functions of gadaa

Gadaa incorporated pivotal institutions/values 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 Oromo gadaa system.

The humanitarian institutions of the gadaa system include: *guddifacha* (adoption) and *moggaasa* (naturalization). These are wonderful integrative mechanisms that the Oromo practice to accommodate other Oromo or non-Oromo groups. 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 Oromo people as well as with others, particularly neighboring peoples, are resolved pursuant to the negotiation rules of the gadaa system. In this regard, *araara* (conflict reconciliation) and *gumaa* (reparation) are important gadaa institutions. Moreover, the gadaa system has parallel institutions of *siiqqee/siinqqee* and *ateete* institutions through which the rights of Oromo women are respected. *Siiqqee* 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 *siiqqee*) to play a decisive role in conflict resolution and restoring peace. *Siiqqee* and *ateete* institutions are vehicles for addressing gender inequality issues and for advancing the empowerment of women (Kuwee, 1997).

6. A period of testing

This is one of the most important features of the Oromo gadaa system. Testing time in Oromo democracy is an extended period of time (usually between two and three gadaa-grade period) during which the future gadaa leaders and councilors must pass through a rigorous training about the laws and the customs, and 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 gadaa system while it may not be so in Western democracies (Asmarom, 2000). The Oromo gadaa system made a testing period a requirement to avoid the dangers of having/electing inexperienced and untested individuals, who may cause damages to the society and to the system, to hold the top position.

7. The check and balance organs of gadaa system.

The Oromo gadaa system is organized into five *gogessa* (parties) with one of these functioning as a 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. Every Oromo 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 alternative parties are *qadadduu* (opposition) to each other, while adjacent parties are *wolaannaa* (allies) to each other. If there is a delay and/or unwillingness in power transition, alternate parties will force their counterparts to leave office. 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 generation lines (Asmarom, 1973, 2000; Hinnant, 1977; Jamjem and Dhadacha, 2011).

8. The legislative, executive and judicial branches of Oromo gadaa System

The gadaa system has a legislative 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 Oromo groups that meet once every eight years. The assembly reviews the laws and if necessary amends them. Those rules and customs deemed unfit in light of the social, political, economic, and environmental 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 laws made by the general assembly are the supreme laws and would be implemented by executive and judicial branches throughout the country. The general assembly has also the duty to evaluate the men in power (in the fourth year term of office) and to resolve conflicts that could not be resolved at lower levels of the judicial organization. It also has the power to depose (*buqqisuu*) leaders, even the *abba gadaa*, from his office if found and proven of violating rules and regulations. This is very similar with the modern democracies notion of impeachment or vote of no confidence. Any elected representative is accountable for any failure in the official duties. General assembly is therefore the supreme institution that manifests the principle of popular sovereignty in traditional Oromo 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. Major decisions are made by consensus, not by majority/minority votes as in the western democracy.

In this keynote speech, I have tried to show why the Oromo gadaa is considered as a democratic system. The democratic features of the gadaa system are clearly reflected in the periodic 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.

It is a well known fact that democratic governance is an important prerequisite for peace and nation building. In this sense, the Oromo gadaa system contains all major elements of democratic governance such as a peaceful transfer of political power, equitable distribution of power, rule of law, accountability and transparency, secularism, democratic institutions...etc, and thus could contribute to peace and nation building quest in Ethiopia in particular and Africa in general.

However, even though the Oromo gadaa system had such wonderful democratic features that could contribute to peace and nation building in Africa's quest for renaissance, it is not seriously considered for this purpose, while most African counties are mired with tyranny and corruption.

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, gadaa was developed under a completely different circumstance and therefore cannot be transplanted wholesale into a modern social organization. However, the basic philosophy underlying the system and the democratic elements of gadaa mentioned in this speech, can be adapted to advance democracy in Africa, Ethiopia included. These elements if properly institutionalized have the capacity to ensure popular participation. Our main and urgent task, as researchers, therefore should be to come up with mechanisms (academic studies) that explain and guide us to how these democratic elements of the Oromo gadaa system could be adopted or integrated into the modern political system to contribute to peace and nation building in Africa's quest for renaissance.

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