



## THE GRAND VALUES IN THE GADA SYSTEM: THE GUJI-OROMO GADA SYSTEM IN FOCUS

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### ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the major values that the Gada system embodies and the practices through which the values are manifested. Based on the Gada system of the Guji-Oromo, the paper shows the profound values that the Gada institution provides. The paper presents that these values underlie and shape the governance, the interpersonal, intergroup and intergenerational relationships, human-environment interactions, and human-supernatural power affiliations among the Guji-Oromo. More specifically, the paper discusses that values embedded in the Gada system promote egalitarianism, holistic peace and peacefulness, hard work and productivity, knowledge and wisdom, communality and humanity and social integrity. Data discussed in the paper was obtained through ethnographic fieldwork among the Guji-Oromo in 2018.

**Keywords:** Gada system, Values, Practices, Guji-Oromo, Ethiopia.

### INTRODUCTION

Gada is a system of social organization and leadership that the Oromo society has practiced since time immemorial. Tesema (2016:85) expressed it as, “an invaluable ancient civilization that the Oromo offered to the world as an intangible cultural heritage”. Similarly, Legesse (2000:31) argues that Gada is “a system of generational classes *luba* that succeeded each other every eight years in assuming political, military, judicial, legislative, and ritual responsibilities.” The Oromo, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, has exercised this system as a core and fundamental institution to lead its social and cultural values across long centuries of time (Asefa, 2012; Tagawa, 2017). According to Legesse (1973) and Hinnant (1978), the Oromo society has practiced the Gada system as a profound age-set *luba* and generation-set *ballii* organization through which they sustain their relationship with each other, with their natural environment and the supernatural power. Therefore, Gada is the widely accepted and obeyed cultural system of the Oromo society through which they formulate the norms, values and customary practices on which their everyday social and cultural lives are based. In other words, the Gada system rules norms of intra and intergenerational relationship, gender relationship, intra and inter family relationship, power

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relations among social, age and gender categories as well as the norms and values of Oromo relations to nature and supernatural power (Van de Loo 1991; Tadesse 2002). In the Gada system, the Oromo organize themselves into age-set and generation-set (Tagawa 2017). Among the Guji and the Borana, the two Oromo branches where the Gada systems is relatively intact and elaborate, a son is initiated into the first age-grade and generation-set only after his father has completed a cycle of forty years (Tesema 2018; Van de Loo 1991). For example, among the Guji people, a son joins a dabballe age-grade when his father reaches raaba age-grade and is initiated into qarree age-grade when his father enters the doorii or gadaa agegrade. After every eight years, a son and his father move one age-grade forward. These agegrades are dabballe, qarree xixiqa, qarree gurgudda, kuusaa, raaba, doorii, gaada, baatuu, yuubaa, yuuba gada, jaarsa and jaarsa qululu. The generation-set in the Guji-Oromo Gada system encompasses five groups; namely, Robale, Halchisa, Harmuufa, and Dhalanna. These are categories of generations (parties) who assume the leadership power (the Gada power) one after the other every eight years. After entering the raaba age-grade, a Guji person is automatically become a member of one of the generational groups (parties). Among the Borana, the agegrades from the junior to the senior are dabballe, gammee didiqa, gammee gugurddaa, kuusa, raaba, gaadaa, yuuba and gaadamojji. The generation-set among the Borana include Birmaji, Horata, Michile, Dulo and Robale. Among the Guji and Borana Oromos, the passage from one age-grade to another age-grade and from one generation-set to another generation-set is accompanied by elaborate rites of passage that reflect the culturally imposed roles and responsibilities of the initiated groups. In such a system, the Gada embodies values and practices that help the Oromo society to organize and sustain their social, political and religious lives. The studies made on the Gada system so far shows that the system represents the century old tradition of civilization and democracy that the Oromo society has exercised. The prominent studies on the Gada system (Legesse 1973; Hinnant 1977; Van de Loo 1991) state that the system is fundamentally democratic and has significant roles in democratization process among the Oromo. Other studies (Tesema, 2016; Endalkachew 2018; Asefa 2012; Tadesse 2019) discuss that the Gada is an egalitarian socio-political and cultural system of governance not only among the Oromo but also in the other Cushitic peoples, like the Sidama, the Konso and the Gedeo. The more recent studies on the Gada system (see Abdurahman, 2019; Endalkachew, 2018; Asebe and Tdaesse, 2018) show that there is an emerging interest to capture the relevance of the Gada institution for enrichment and indigenization of social organizations, sustainability of order and peaceful relationships for formation of stable society. Particularly, Efa (2018) presents that the Gada system has mechanisms for resource management, peace restoration and social integration that are worth in the modern system of governance. This study argues that such remarkable values need a research attention. With their focus on values and practices in the Gada

system, Efa (2018) and Abdurahman (2019) discuss that the Gada institution contains values for environmental protection, social and economic wellbeing, peace building and political solidarity. According to Efa (2018) and Abdurahman (2019), these values are relevant for holistic societal development. Although the emergence of interest in study of the potential and practical relevance of the Gada system for the societal wellbeing is promising, much more has to be done to produce detailed knowledge on what the Gada system can contribute to the all-rounded social development in Ethiopia and beyond. The growing interest to make use of the profound values that the Gada system provides for enriching the democratization process, building peace and stability, developing youth capability and fruitful socialization of children should be supported by research-based knowledge. This paper aims at contributing to such development through analysing the major values that the Gada system embodies and the practices through which the values are manifested. Based on the Gada system of the Guji-Oromo, the paper shows the profound values that the Gada institution provides. It also discusses the relevance of these values for promoting equality, productivity, knowledgeable, peacefulness, helpfulness and resilience within the Oromo and between Oromo and the other nationalities.

## **SOCIAL CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY**

The Guji people are one of the ethnic branches<sup>2</sup> of the Oromo society in Ethiopia. Hinnant (1977) and Van de Loo (1991) discuss that the Guji people live in lowland and semi-highland areas in the southern part of the country; speak Oromo language and are considered to be people in which the ancestral Oromo traditions are still intact. The people predominantly live in rural areas and depend on mixed livelihood activities: agriculture and animal husbandry. As observed by Hinnant (1977) and Tadesse (2013), majority of the Guji people lived in a rural lowland area in scattered settlements. They also take temporarily settlements in the areas where water and pasture were accessible for their cattle and often move from place to place to places where those resources are sufficiently available. As Hinnant stated, male members of a household including boys above six years old, herd cattle along with their fathers and grandfathers who spent most of their times with cattle in cattle herding places. They stay days and nights with cattle and keep them in places where water and pasture were available; protect them from beasts and cattle raiders. They also milk cows and use the milk as household daily meals. As indicated in Hinnant (1978), fetching fire woods from bush and water from distant river are errands that men were responsible for as it was believed to be unsafe for women to go to bush and distant rivers to fetch fire woods and water respectively. Besides herding cattle, they cultivate food crops such maize, teff, cabbage and beans in small scales. The Guji-Oromo are known for their intact and elaborate Gada system that symbolizes the depth and width of the Oromo Gada system. The Guji Gada System was intensively studied by Hinnant (1977) that presents that the Abba Gada along with his ya'a (council) moves about the Guji land

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performs a number of jila ( Gada Ceremonies) at sacred cultural sites locally known as Arda Jila ( Ceremonial Places).

This intricate and elaborate system makes the Guji to be a cradle of Oromo indigenous culture where the Gada system along with features has remained intact. It is because of this reality that I selected the Gada system of the Guji-Oromo for this study.

The empirical data in this paper were drawn from ethnographic fieldwork carried out among Guji people for ten months on two phases: from July to December, 2017 and from May to August, 2018. The fieldwork was done in three areas namely Me'e Bokko (the sacred site of power transfer), Gadab Dibbe Dhugoo (the sacred site of rite of passage) and Adola Wayyu (the sacred site of blessing). The ethnographic fieldwork activities included participant observation and multiple narrative interviews through which memories of adults (parents and grandparents) were elicited and recorded.

**Participant Observation:** I conducted the participant observation in several cultural events. I participated in *Jila* (rituals and ceremonies), *Falaa* (prayer events to supernatural power) and *Buna Dhuga* (neighbourhood coffee drinking events). I took part in these events, and observed the cultural practices embedded in the process of the events, the places where these events took place, participants in the practices and the way people connect the practices to the natural elements in the places. I particularly participated in the ceremony of power transfer at Me'e Bookko and observed how the members of the Gada council make laws related to all creatures and affirm values related to humans, nature and the supernatural power. I also participated in the big rite of passage (Lagubaasa) and elicited data about the values and practices that Gada system provides through the ritual at this place. In both contexts of my participant observation, I listened to narratives and expressions of the participants as well as observed their collective and individual practices.

**In-depth Interview:** Following the participant observations, I made in-depth interviews with selected culture bearers who participated in the research as sources of data about values and practices in the Gada system of Guji –Oromo. I selected the participants from the members of the Raba, the Dori, the Gada, the Batu, and the Yuba grades. Using purposive sampling technique, I selected three participants from each grade. Accordingly, fifteen persons were selected as participants in the in-depth interviews. It is with the aim of generating rich data from people in the different social and generational structure that I selected participants from the different age-grades. After I secured familiarity with selected participants, I sat among them and worked with them over long time and listened to their narratives about the values and practices related to the Gada system. I used audio recording and field note to document the narratives and related contexts.

## GRAND VALUES IN THE GUJI-OROMO GADA SYSTEM

The Guji –Oromo live in strong conformity with the values and norms imposed by Gada system. As I learnt through my extended ethnographic fieldwork that involved repeated participant observation and in-depth interviews, the Gada system makes the social and political structure of the Guji people and defines values that underlie their everyday lives. These values are activated and reinforced at particular places and times of the Gada ceremonies. These places are considered to be sacred and are believed to be connected to the natural and supernatural manifestations. Accordingly, the Guji own four major sacred places where they exercise the different Gada ceremonies. They call these places as Me`e Bokko, Gadab Dibbe Dhugo, Adola Darartu and Kuto Waddeessa. They often assert that these particular places represent their collective values, pride, beauty and power as integral parts of their indigenous ways of life. Each place is respected and reserved for a particular ceremonial and ritualistic performance of the Gada system. For example, Me`e Bokko is a place for the ceremony of power transferring (ballii Kennaa), Gadab Dibbe dhugo is a place for the rite of passage (lagubaasaa), Adola Darartu is a place for the ceremony of name giving (maqbaasa) and Kuto Waddeessa a place for the ceremony of blessing (eebbisaa). They are places covered by green grasses and plants as well as dense forest of indigenous trees. As they are considered to be sacred, everything there is protected by the laws that the Gada council makes every eight years. An informant explained this as follows:

Me`ee Bokkoo, Gadab Dibbe Dhugo, Adola Darartu and Kuto Waddeessa are sacred places. They are places our ancestors and we respect and protect. We never cut trees, kill animals and plough land in these places. They have been kept green and honoured since the time of our forefathers. Our grand grandparents transferred these places to our parents; our parents transferred them to us. They are in our hands today. We are caring for and protecting them. However, we do not know whether we can transfer them to our grandchildren.

What is clear from the quotation above is that these places have been the epicenters of the value reinforcement that the Gada system embodies. In other words, all forms of values that the Gada system contains are advocated and strengthened in these places in different times although children of the Guji people are less familiar with these values as stressed by the informant. As stated by Awoniyi (2015) and Kanu (NY), the concept “values” refer to the attitude, beliefs, behaviors and standards that regulate all aspects of everyday lives among a society. Accordingly, it stands for the collective attitude, beliefs, behaviors and standards that the Guji-Oromo cherish and accept and

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that underlies the everyday life practices. The qualitative data discussed in the pages below shows that such values of the society are promoted and reinforced through practices and performances in the Gada System. These values and practices make a comprehensive arrangement that sustains the Oromo holistic ways of life and world outlook.

The fundamental values that the Guji-Oromo Gada system embodies are discussed below.

#### **Egalitarianism as a Cherished Value**

In the Gada system of the Guji-Oromo, egalitarianism is a concept that stands for multifaceted relationship based on respect and equality among groups or individuals. It refers to sense of respect and parity among individuals, between people of different generations and gender as well as among people of different political and economic status. It is one of the fundamental values reinforced by the Gada system and sustained among the Guji-Oromo. First, the Gada institution is an egalitarian system of governance by itself. It involves a smooth transition of power from one generational-set to the other generation-set every eight years. In the Gada system, leaders are nurtured beginning from childhood and assume power in which they serve for single term of 8 years during which they are accountable for their actions. The ya'a (Gada Council) has the tradition called Buqisu (literally means displacing) through which it recalls the Abba Gada in cases of failure to discharge his leadership duties. Secondly, there is an egalitarian relationship

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among the generational-set as well as among members of the age-set. Thirdly, there is a sense of respect and sameness among the members of the Gada council. No members consider himself more knowledgeable and capable than the others. Words of Jilo Mani'o who is 65 years old man and current Abba Gada, illustrates this reality as follows.

All people are equal. We (members of the Gada council) respect each other. There is no poor, there is no rich. There is no junior or senior. There is no wise; there is no foolish. We all see each other as equals. When we deliberate on issues, we respect ideas of each other. No one speaks until the other finishes. We carefully listen to each other and carefully make our points. Of course we have different roles but we do not have different power.

This statement supports my observation through which I learnt the interpersonal relationship among members of the Gada Council. I learnt that the relationship among the members is based on mutual respect and sense of parity. The members sit in a round and present their ideas turn by turn. They carefully listen to each other and speak to one other turn by turn. In their conversation, they follow the norm that one does not speak before the other finishes. Although there are role divisions among the members, there is no status-based hierarchical relationship among them. Such egalitarian relationship is observable not only among the members of the Gada council but also among individuals within the society. In other words, this value extends to the society and regulates the relationship among individuals and between the Guji Oromo and other ethnic groups. Accordingly, individuals among the Guji people have sense of respect and equality with each other. Statements of Girja (59 years old man) reflect such value.

According to Guji culture, individuals respect each other. Adults respect children and children respect adults. Men respect women and women respect men. Adults listen to children and children listen to adults. Husbands listen to their wives and wives listen to their husbands. We learn from each other and carry out our social roles.

The sense of respect and equality underlies the relationship among adults but also between adults and children as well as men and women. This is an evidence for the existence of intergenerational and inter-gender egalitarianism among the Guji people. It is also clear that such values of interpersonal, intergenerational and inter-gender relationships are contained in and reinforced by the Gada system. What is notable from this reality is that egalitarianism as a profound value and social principle of the Oromo functions not only among individuals within a generation but also between persons in different generations. It is also a value that underpins the relationship between human beings and natural environments as well as human beings and the supernatural power. Accordingly, the Gada system enforces laws that guide the connection between human beings and natural environments (animals, plants, sacred rivers and mountains).

Voice of Waqoo (54 years old man) shows this reality as follows.

In the Gada system, we have laws for domestic animals, wild animals, trees, plants, rivers and mountains. These things live with us and we also live with them. They cannot live without human beings and human beings cannot live without them. We equally support and benefit each other.

What is clear from these statements is how the Gada system shape the relationship between elements of natural environment and human beings based on the principles of equality, mutual respect and support. These principles are observable and sensible in the ritual places of the Gada

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system. It is in the ritual places that Guji elderly reflect their sense of equality with and respect for animals, plants, trees, rivers and mountains. These sacred places draw all members of the Guji-Oromo together and serve them as a situation for expression of respect for natural environment.

Therefore, egalitarianism is one of the core values embedded in the Gada system. It represents the value that the Guji people pay for parity with and respect for each other and with elements of natural environment. It is a value that reinforces mutual cooperation and understanding not only among human beings but also between human beings and elements of natural environment.

### Holistic Peace and Peacefulness

The Oromo concept of peace is rooted in the Gada system which itself is considered to be a foundation of peace and embodiment of peace building values. The Gada system reinforces peace and peacefulness as holistic process that involves cooperation among human beings, between human beings and natural environment as well as between human beings and super natural power. Similarly, in the context of the Guji-Oromo Gada system, the concept of holistic peace and peacefulness refers to peace with oneself, peace with family, peace with neighbours, peace with community, peace with natural environment and peace with supernatural power. Jilo (47 years old man) explains this concept as follows.

According to our Gada system, peace is everything and a person should be peaceful with everything and everyone. A person should be in peace with him/her self. A person should be in peace with his/her family members. A person should be in peace with people in his/her neighbourhood. A person should be in peace with animals, plants, and landscapes in his/her environment. A person should be in peace with God. That is a complete peace.

The Gada system promotes that a person needs to have internal peace that can help him/her be in peace with external environments. The true peace and peacefulness prevails when a person or group of persons are in peace with their social and natural environment and such status of peace and peacefulness can help individuals and their communities remain in peace with the supernatural power. Such holistic peace and peacefulness is activated and reinforced through the periodic rituals and performances that the senior members in the Gada system perform at the sacred places known



as the Arda Jila. It is at these places that laws (seera and lalaba) are made by the members of the Gada council (Yaa'a) to appropriate and regulate harmonious relationship among family members, among people in a neighbourhood, among the Guji people, among the Guji people and other ethnic groups as well as between the members of the Guji people and their natural environment. Similarly, prayers and animal scarification (falaa) are made in the places to sustain peace with the supernatural power. Trees, plants, animals, rivers and mountains in the places are considered to sacred and mediators through which human beings communicate to their supernatural power.

The other widely known concept that the Gada system introduces and reproduces as a means to sustain peace and peacefulness among the Guji-Oromo is *wayyu* which is to mean honorable. In the periodic Gada rituals, the members of Gada councils declare that family members, persons in a neighborhood, domestic and wild animals as well as trees, rivers and mountains are honorable (*wayyu*), therefore, should be respected, cared for and kept in harmony. Gagalo (46 years old man) confirms this tradition as follows.

According to our Gada tradition, children are wayyu, women are wayyu, elderly persons are wayyu, Abba Gada is wayyu, qalluu is wayyu, trees are wayyu, domestic and wild lives are wayyu, rivers are wayyu and mountains are wayyu. They deserve respect, positive treatment and harmonious relationship. It is when everyone acts according to this law that peace will prevails on our land.

This tradition of perceiving the social and natural environment as honorable helps members of the Guji people respect each other and remain harmonious with each other and with things in their natural environment. Put in other words, the Guji people believe that, through honoring each other and their natural environment, they build and sustain peace among their society. They also consider that their peace with natural environment help them to remain peaceful with the super natural power. They accept that it is when they treat trees, wild animals, rivers, mountains and honor everything in their social and natural surroundings that they maintain an inclusive peace and become peaceful across places and times. The Guji people reinforce such holistic peace and peacefulness through their rituals and performances at the sacred places (Arda Jila) where the Gada ceremonies take place. Therefore, the Gada system keeps such social and moral orders functioning properly through which it builds peace and peacefulness. According Asebe and Tadesse (2018), by overseeing the functioning of the traditional rules and regulations and channeling them down to the grassroots level, the Gada maintains peaceful interactions between humans and nonhumans, between adults and children, between men and women, and between the Guji-Oromo and their neighbors.

**Social Integration as a Unique Value**

The other grand value that the Gada system institutes and that has remained unique to the Oromo society is the tradition of social integration. Through the laws and standards of norm that it makes and remakes every eight years, the Gada system promotes and sustains this value across times within the Oromo society. Accordingly, the Oromo society has practised social integration for the last couple of centuries. There are two forms of social integration commonly exercised among all branches of the Oromo. They are known as *Gudifacha* and *Moggaasaa*. *Gudifachaa* is a practice of adopting an Oromo or a non-Oromo person usually at the young age by an Oromo family. In this case, the adopted person has equal rights and privileges with biological children. It was one means of resolving childlessness and strengthening social integration between families and clans.

On the other hand, *Moggaasaa* is a system through which a non-Oromo group is adopted and has equal rights and privileges with Oromo clan members. Such group shares the entire negative and positive encounters of the community like participating in wars that the Oromo community fights and getting equal share from the spoils. Adopted individual or groups through the *guddifacha* and the *moggaasaa* institutions receive Oromo identity by dropping the biological identity. According to Luca (55 years old man), both practices are deep rooted in the social and cultural lives of the Guji-Oromo people.

We (the Guji-Oromo) have the tradition through which we accommodate people who are not members of our family or members of our clan. We adopt children and make them member of our family. We also adopt a clan or a group of people from other ethnic groups and make them members of our clan. Both are our profound culture and descended from our ancestors. Using this culture, we make others our relatives and members our society.

The two means of social integration are embedded in the Gada system and are taken as profound values among the Oromo in general and the Guji people in particular. By promoting this value, the Gada system reinforces the tradition of inclusiveness and accommodativeness. Put in other words, this value encourages the Guji-Oromo love to contain people from the other ethnic groups and give them Oromo identity. The adopted individual and groups identify themselves as members the family and clan to which they are adopted and have the rights and responsibilities that the family and clan members have.

The Gada system categorizes all members of the Guji into twelve legitimate generational grades that succeed each other every eight years assuming progressive roles and social responsibilities. The generational grades are known as Daballe, Qarree Xiqqa, Qarree Gudda, Kuusa, Doorii, Gadaa, Batu, Yuba, Yuba Gadaa, Jarsaa, and Jarsaa Qululu. In the system, social role is a central organizing principle through which the generational grades are grouped into two categories as seniors (gurgudda) and juniors (xixiqqa). Members of the first five grades (Dabballe, Qarre Xiqqa, Qarre Gudda, and Kusa) are categorized as the generation of juniors and the second eight grades (Raba, Dori, Gada, Batu, Yuba, Yuba Gadaa, Jarsaa, and Jarsaa Qululu) are conceptualized as the generation of seniors. The relationship between the generation of seniors and juniors is based on the value of intergenerational interdependence in which the seniors teach, guide and shape the juniors and the juniors listen to, learn from and support the seniors. Based on this value, adults perceive children as their followers and children perceive adults as their tutors. Words of Ayano (56 years old man) illustrate tradition as follows.

According to our Gada system, the relationship between adults and children is based on the value of interdependence and collaboration. Children are as important as adults. Adults teach children on how to lead a family and become productive. Children learn from adults and support them. Adults have knowledge and experience but children are energetic and fast.

This tradition of intergenerational interdependence is reinforced once in eight years period through one of the major Gada rituals known as Lagubaasaa (literally means a ritual of purification). *Laguubasa* is a rite of passage in which kusa generation passes to Raba generation. It is a ritual of purifying the Kusa generation before they enter the adulthood stage that demands social purity and integrity. Performances in this ritual reflect that the young generation has the duty to protect the society from any aggression while the adult generation advises the young generation and lead the society. The young generation has energy to defend the society from an enemy while the adult generation has the knowledge and wisdom to lead the society. Such principle of intergenerational interdependence signifies the complementary relationships between “physical energy” and “wisdom”. In other words, it shows that it is the combination of energy and wisdom that can ensure completeness of human survival.

### **Hard-work and Productiveness**

Hard work and being productive through hard work is sustained and maintained among the Guji-Oromo through the Gada practices. Hard work and productiveness is promoted through the rituals and performances of the Gada system; as a result, hard work is the integral part of the values and

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norms that guide the everyday lives of the society. Elema (47 years old man) states this reality as follows.

In our culture, hard work and productiveness are given deep value. Accordingly, we advise our children to become hard workers and productive. Hard workers and productive persons are respected among our society. A person is expected to work hard and produce surplus food crops and own big number of cattle. He who owns many children is also blessed. Such a person is considered to be prosperous man.

As it is possible to note from the statements of this participant, productiveness through hard work means to have surplus crop production, large number of cattle and many children. The Guji people consider that such productiveness is the result of continuous toiling accompanied by blessing from the supernatural power. Such value is promoted through the Gada structure, rituals and performances.

### Wisdom and Knowledge

In the Gada tradition, wisdom and practical knowledge which is based on observation and experience is highly treasured. It is believed that wisdom and practical knowledge is most relevant in the re-enactment of the society and the promotion of their well-being. In expressing the value of wisdom and knowledge, Jilo (58 years old man) states, “Knowledge is power and wisdom is sword. A knowledgeable and wise person can solve any problem and is always a winner”. Another participant; namely, Roba (45 years old man) says, “A person with poor knowledge and wisdom is dead. We teach our children to grow knowledgeable and wise. Through our Gada practices, we show the value of knowledge and wisdom”. According to these participants, the Gada system promotes respect for persons with practical knowledge and wisdom. Such sense of respect for wise and knowledgeable persons helps to make members of the society strive for knowledge and wisdom.

In this manner, there is deep and legitimate respect for head of a family, village elderly person, community leaders, leader in the Gada system and the qalla as persons in such social positions are considered to knowledgeable and wise. In other words, the way the society gives respect to persons in the mentioned positions is regarded as evidence for valuing knowledge and wisdom.

Words of Udessa (64 years old man) explain this tradition.

Elderly persons are knowledgeable; thus, lead and advise others. They have knowledge from their lived experience. They have the wisdom to give blessings

and make prayers. They have wisdom to speak and convince. They have wisdom to resolve disputes and settle conflicts. They have wisdom to teach and shape children.

According to this explanation, the elderly persons have repository of communal wisdom; therefore, they lead and guide the society. The respect given to such persons is based on the value given to wisdom and knowledge. This value has impact on the young members of the society to look forward to become knowledgeable and wise through following elderly persons which in turn ensures intergenerational coherence and social stability among the society. Such values for wisdom and knowledge are expressed through arts and oral tradition that plays central roles in the development of social and personal characters. Accordingly, the wisdom of speech is seen not only as oral performances but also means of shaping human conduct and a person's character. It is also a perfect value in creating harmonious relationship among individuals and between generations.

### **Commonality and Humanity**

In the Gada system, family and community are considered to be sources of identity for a person or a group of persons. Accordingly, individuals express their identity in terms of their family and community. In other words, a person is known and identified in, by and through the family to which he was born and the community in which he was born. In the Gada system, communalism is promoted as basis for involvement in a social life, commitment to the common good of the community, dedication to mutual obligations, caring for each others, interdependence, and inclusive solidarity. This tradition is clear from the statements of Elemon(43 years old man).

The root of a person is his/her family and community. Being a Guji person is known through tracing once origin to his/her family and community.

According to our culture, someone is identified by his family and community.

This is to mean family and communities are homes for someone. Individuals in a community care for each other and share with each other

Accordingly, within a community, there is a sense of “one's brother's keeper” or caring for each other's wellbeing. In such tradition, being partisan is not tolerated. It is widely accepted that a person can only be truly safe in a community. In this manner, the Gada system promotes the tradition through which the Guji-Oromo welcome and give accommodation to visitors (kessumma). Based on this value, families and communities among the Oromo easily incorporate visitors and give them a place to stay. On the bases of humanity as considerate value, the Guji people give love, respect and care to all human beings without any form of discrimination. Embodying this value, the Gada system promotes respectfulness, fairness, fraternity and individuals' interdependence. Morma (54 years old man) articulates this tradition as, “According

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to our Gada system, a person from anywhere is respectful, has a dignity, as well as deserves love and care.” This reflects how the Gada system reinforces a sense of good human relationship not only between persons of the same community but also those from different communities. Accordingly, among the Guji-Oromo, a person from outside of the society or a visitor is respected, loved and cared during his stay among the society. Such humanistic relationship recognizes person’s worth as human beings. This relationship creates a context in which visitors express their ideas freely and live with the community without any challenge. In such relationship, conversations that may cause misgivings to a visitor are avoided. This shows how the Gada system embodies values that recognize the dignity and integrity of all human beings.

### PRACTICES THAT REFLECT THE VALUES

In this paper, the concept practice refers to the social and cultural actions and performances connected to the Gada system and represent values embedded in it. Values and practices are akin to each other and are rooted in the Gada system as social and cultural institution that marks identity and structure of the society. These values and practices make a comprehensive arrangement that sustains the Oromo holistic ways of life and world outlook.

There are four major jila (ceremonies) in one Gada period (eight years) in which the practices are activated and accomplished. These are the Jila of Baalli Kenna (ceremony for power transferring), Jila of Lagubaasaa (ceremony of cleansing/ rite of passage), Jila of waddessa Murata (ceremony of cutting elder’s stick) and Jila of Jaarra Utaalcha (ceremony of passing mid-time).

These jilas take place in sacred places named as Me’ee Bokko, Gadab Dibbe Dhugo, Adola Daraartu and Kutto Waddessa. These places are *described* by Hinnant (1977) and Van de Loo (1991) as particular sites where men get together and perform blessing and sacrificial rituals to reinforce the norms and values of the Gada institution. In this paper, I am not going to discuss these ceremonies in detail but introduce the major practices so as to show how they contain values. In general, there are three forms of practices that these ceremonies contain. These are assemblies, rituals, and performances (songs and sayings). It is for the sake of discussion in this paper that I made such classification otherwise the three forms are interwoven.

The ceremonies are done through assemblies of men, women and youth who come together at the stated sacred places from all over the Guji-Oromo land. The participants are all in the Guji traditional wears (costumes) and perform their roles in accordance with their ages, age generational grades and gender. Practices that participants in the assemblies carry out differ from a ceremony to a ceremony except the major ones that I am going to give emphasis in the paper. In the Jila of Balli Kenna, there are twofold central practices. The first is the transfer of power from the outgoing

Gada generation to the incoming one. The second is announcement of laws that the incoming Gada leadership follows during its period of governance. The Ya'a (the councils of the incoming and outgoing Gada) along with the elderly persons in the Batu and Yuba generation assemble under a sacred tree at Me'ee Bokko and announce laws for every human and none-human creature. These laws establish the value of egalitarian relationship among individuals and groups as well as between human beings and elements of natural environment. Here is where the value of egalitarianism is reinforced.

The other central practice takes place in the ceremony of the Jila of Lagubaasa which is a rite of passage in which kusa generation passes to Raba generation. It is a ritual of purifying the Kusa generation before they enter the adulthood stage that demands social purity and integrity. Lagubasa is symbolic practice that creates the divide between the two generations (the generation of children and adults). This rite of passage allows a Guji person to pass from the junior cultural position to the senior one and involves cleansing, purifying, empowering as well as educating the kusa members who are in the transition (liminal status) through reprimanding, testing, reunion, doting, and training. These cultural activities are expressed through symbolic acts such as trial attack, killing of animals, exchanging of tobacco, advisory speech, drinking of *hexo*, rebuking and blessing. The transition and integration processes in this ritual are marked by four symbolic practices. First, the group in the process of transition put down their spears and hold a decorated stick known as *bokku*. This stick symbolizes membership in the adult generation and authority that members of this generation exercise. Second, the group in the process of transition strike fire which represents that the group has entered to the legitimate husband- hood and fatherhood status. It is also a symbol for legitimization of independence and possession of one`s own family which may include house, wife, children, and property. Third, the group in the process of transition eats food with members of adult generation and this practice represents the social integration of the group with the members in the adult generation. The Gada generation, mainly, the Hayyu (the advisors of Abba Gada), serve as councilors and leaders of the group in the process of transition. These practices represent the value of interdependent intergenerational relationship through which the seniors provide the juniors with knowledge and wisdom and the juniors provide support and protection for the seniors and the entire society.

The other categories of practice are rituals that involve slaughtering of animals and prayer to the supernatural power. The rituals (*falachu*) are led by persons in the senior cultural positions and encompass marking on the back of an animal (*arirachu*), slaughtering the animal ( *qalluu*), sprinkling the blood of the animal to the four directions ( *dhibasu*), reciting prayers ( *kadhacu*) and performing folksongs ( *qexalu*). Apart from the Gada ceremonies, such rituals are performed when a certain disorder happens. Disorders such as war, epidemic diseases, and absence of rain,

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absence of productivity and fertility and massive death of cattle are believed to be resolved through the falachu ritual. The Guji think that such disorders are caused by supernatural power as punishment and the rituals are performed as a means of beginning for forgiveness. This practice manifests the values of holistic peacefulness, commonality, humanity and respectfulness.

The third category of the practice is performance of *Qexala* (celebration songs) and *Jecha* (ritual sayings) that include prayers and blessings expressions. Participants in the Gada ceremonies perform the Qexala song and the ritual sayings in different styles and any celebration can't be complete without these performances. In performance of Qexala, only people who are in the senior cultural positions (members of Raba and above grades) can participate. However, women and children can attend the ceremony from outside. The children and wives of the men participating in the ceremony can perform their own songs which are different from Qexala. The following is a short text of a Qexala song. The song is performed as a dialog between a leader and the mass.

Leader: Iyyaa hoo, qallu of biifa

Mass: Iyyaa hoo, qallu of biifa

Leader: Iyaa hoo, beeki aadaa keetiimm

Mass: Iyyaa hoo, qallu of biifa

Leader: Iyaa hoo, beeki gadaa biifaamm Mass:

Iyyaa hoo, qallu of biifa

Leader: Iyyaa hoo, beeki eeddee keetimm

Mass: Iyyaa hoo, qallu of biifa

Leader: Iyyaa hoo, beeki aadaa keetimm

The performance of sayings at the Arda Jila involve reciting verses of blessings and prayers so as to reinforce the values of harmonious relationship among individuals and between human beings and the supernatural power. The blessing verses are meant for strengthening interpersonal relationship while the prayer verses aim at appropriating the interaction between human beings and the supernatural power. I observed and noted when the yuba along with the Abba Gada slaughtered a bull and prayed to Waqaa (God) and Lafa (Earth) at Gada Dibbe Dhugo. They prayed by saying, "God of the sky, God of the earth hear us, forgive us and save us. Save our children; save our cattle; save our people; save our land." The listeners reply by saying, "God shall hear you." When the leader repeated the same narrative, the listeners replied in the same way.

The elderly persons of the Guji people also give blessings by saying "Let the cattle be abundant. Let the women be fertile. Let the children be obedient. Let the sky and the earth become generous. Let the trees, the men, the women, the children, the cattle and the land be peaceful. Let evil eyes



be blinded. Let evils hands broken. Let evils minds destroyed”. The listeners reply by saying, “Let it be”.

The prayer appeals to the relationship between the human being and the God who is the supernatural power while the blessing actions refer to interpersonal relationship. Blessings can be performed in rituals mainly at end of rituals, meetings, and similar occasions. For blessing, in addition to the verses, the elders need to hold honey-bear in their hands. They spit the honeybear towards people and say verses of blessing. They say:

Be abundant like sand  
Have large cattle and children  
Be powerful and handworker  
Be respectful to elders and Guji culture  
Be peaceful and healthy  
Catch with all good things  
As you have satisfied others get satisfaction from others

These performance mark the breadth and depth of the Gada ceremonies and reflect the profound values embedded in the Gada systems and leadership. They reflect depth of the values of peace and peacefulness, knowledge and wisdom, hardwork and productivity as well as community and humanity. In such a way, these cultural practices serve as artistic way of promoting and communicating the grand values in the Gada system.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Gada system contains and promotes profound values that characterize the social, cultural and religious lives of the Oromo society. These values underly and shape the governance, the interpersonal, intergroup and intergenerational relationships, human-environment interactions, and human-supernatural power affiliations. The values help the Oromo society to organize themselves, to sustain their social and cultural stability, to remain productive and build their knowledge and wisdom through continuous efforts. Accordingly, these values are cements that keep the society stable, inclusive, accomadative, productive and peaceful.

From the discussion in this paper, two-fold realities about the Gada system are clear. The first is that it embodies intricate values that are highly relevant for sustainability of the society connecting its cultural values to its contemporary lives. These values can serve as basis for soldarity among generations, individuals and communities without any form of discrimination. The values also make harmonious relationship among human beings, natural environment and

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supernatural power. The second is that the Gada system, although it is a local cultural practice, contains values that have universal meanings. The values embedded in the system appeal to all human beings regardless of cultural boundaries, economic statuses and geographical settings. Therefore, beyond its being a traditional democracy, the Gada system contains values that are relevant for social, political and economic development and stability of any society in general and the Oromo society in particular in the contemporary world where the dynamics between the local and global realities is growing from time to time.

Values rooted in the Gada system promote a strong interconnection between culture and nature. On the basis of these values, the society uses and sustains its natural resources and environment. This in turn shows how cultural values and practices shape the way members of society connect themselves to each other and to natural phenomena in their environment. Therefore, the Gada system should be given attention as indigenous institution that has a strong relevance for the social, political and economic development at the local and global development contexts. There should be a mechanism through which children and young people get acquainted with the Gada system and the values it contains. These values could be integrated in school subjects so that children learn it, combine it with their school knowledge and grow connected to the Gada system. This can help children build their learning and school knowledge on the profound values of their society and grow productive, competent and pragmatic citizens.

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