

# The Gadaa System and Some of Its Institutions among the Booranaa: A Historical Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*The Oromo people are governed by the historic Gadaa system as their political culture. Traditionally, the Oromo believed in a supreme deity, Waaqa/Waaqayoo (God) but eventually most of them were converted to Christianity and Islam without necessarily giving up Waaqeffannaa cultural and ritual practices since it is similar to both as a monotheistic religion. Nevertheless, the Booranaa Oromo have strongly maintained the cultural heritage of the original Gadaa intact. Based on the secondary literature and my fieldwork among the Booranaa, this paper attempts to address the Gadaa system and some of its traditional institutions which are operational among the Booranaa Oromo. It mainly focuses on mechanisms of conflict resolution or management used by the Booranaa to serve the society. It will also highlight that the traditional mechanisms of settling disputes and/or preventing it among the Booranaa in the context of the Gadaa system are much more closer to the hearts and minds of the people and are more helpful than the modern system of governance, particularly for maintaining sustainable peace, tranquility and prosperity.*

**Keywords:** *Booranaa, Gadaa, Democracy, Institutions, Conflict management, Waaqeffannaa, Siinqee, Jaarsaa*

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## **Introduction**

As the role of indigenous systems of governance is becoming so vital in democratization globally, it is necessary to depict the role that *Gadaa* institutions play in good governance and peaceful coexistence. While it is very difficult to describe all *Gadaa* institutions in a short paper as this one, a clear discussion of some major institutions has more advantages to introduce the values of the institutions for endorsement and institutionalization.

It is in this light that this paper briefly explores the roles of some of the *Gadaa* institutions among the Booranaa Oromo. Hitherto several scholars have studied the *Gadaa* system and have advanced useful conclusion that the system is essentially democratic and proposed the possible contribution of the system to the democratization process (Asmerom Legesse 1973: 20-22, Baissa Lemu 1971: 15-30, Dinsa Lepisaa Abba Jobir 1975: 1-20). The paper will focus on and identify some *Gadaa* institutions and trace their values in the socio-economic and political coexistence in Booranaa in their interaction within and with non-Boorana people.

Before describing these institutions and their values, it is important to avoid confusion with the name 'proto-Booranaa' that also refers to the Maccaa and Tuulama Oromo groups. In this narrative, the name Booranaa refers to the Oromo group of southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. The Booranaa inhabit the Oromia Regional State in the southern part on the Ethio-Kenyan frontier. They are mostly the traditional religion followers known as *Waaqeffanna*, a belief in one supernatural power *Waaqa/Waaqayoo* (God). They are part of the larger Oromo national group, which constitutes about 40% of Ethiopia's population. "For the Oromo *Waaqa*, the single almighty is the creator of the universe. It is only *Waaqa* who gives life and creates human beings." (Tesema Ta'a 2012: 91). "*Waaqa* is God of the Boorana [Oromo]. Allah is the God of the Muslims. There is only one God. He speaks different languages. He wants to communicate with people.... The names of God have been given by the people..." in their own language (Aguilr 2005: 63).

The Booranaa, one of the major Oromo branches are predominantly pastoralists who live on both sides of the Ethiopian and Kenyan geo-political divide. Historically, they belong to one of the two main confederacies, the other one being the Bareentuu. According to Triulzi the time when the Booranaa and the Bareentuu had evolved into full-fledged confederacies was not exactly known but scholars suggest that it might have taken place between the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries if not earlier (Triulzi 1996: 253).

Studies show that the *Gadaa* System operated effectively for centuries among most of the Oromo until it was suppressed by Menilek's conquest in the last

quarter of the nineteenth century. Following the imperial conquest and boundary delimitation between Ethiopian and British-Kenyan jurisdictions in 1907 the Boorana were placed in two imperial territories. This resulted in the categorization of the same stock of people into separate citizenships. Preoccupied by Gadaa's decentralized governance, the conquerors also dismissed the *Gadaa* as a politically irrelevant system of rituals (Baissa Lemu 1971: 47). Despite its being outlawed and suppression by the imperial conquest, the Boorana were able to retain some of the Gadaa institutions and practice it until the present. This study puts emphasis on the institutions governing peace, resource and social integrity. Particularly, the institutions of conflict prevention and resolution, resource management, and social integration are valued as a constitution and fundamental for a society to exist (Asmerom Legesse 1973: 73). Because of the nature of the *Gadaa* system, the socio-economic and political institutions are highly intertwined and the discussion of one institution might reflect the essence of the other.

The study depends on the information obtained from interviews, written sources and field experience in the study area. The presence of a unique method of time computation and the transferring of history and culture through *argaa-dhageetti* (seeing and hearing) enabled the Boorana to retain records of events in the chronology of time. This quality makes oral history among the Oromo in general and the Boorana in particular a dependable source that provided the society to trace its past.

The Confederacies were mainly composed of pastoralist peoples that settled in the areas where they can get enough water and pasture for themselves and their livestock moving freely to places with suitable ecological zones during the rainy and the dry seasons respectively.

Here, it is important to clear one of the confusions about the Boorana and Bareentuu confederacies. It has been understood in the various literature that they had been the names of two individuals claimed to be brothers who organized and led the Oromo Movement in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The names of the confederacies seem to have emanated from their contemporary geographical position of their relative location of settlements. Accordingly, the Boorana (“Borootti-aana” meaning towards the west) confederacy found west of the Gannaalee River while the Bareentuu (“Bariitti-aana” meaning towards the east) confederacy found east of the same river (Alemayehu Haile et.al. 2006: 105; Gemechu Megersa 1994: 149-150; Tesema Ta’a 2006: 1040; Ginbar Nagara, 2010: 6). In fact, a Boorana Oromo elder, Debissa Arero (Informant: Debissa Arero 2013) who has recently written a monograph for publication strongly argues that the Bareentuu originally belonged to the elderly Oromo group, the Boorana before they eventually grew into a big confederacy. He further commented that the Boorana were the first born who

handled their social relationships and activities based on the principles of primogeniture among all Oromo which is still practiced widely. Most of the literatures at our disposal unequivocally indicate that the Booranaa were senior and the Bareentuu were the junior. In this connection it is significant to note Asmerom Legesse's statement about the Oromo social structure. He said, "Moieties in Oromo social structure are non-territorial entities that are *completely intertwined and interspersed*. Two moieties cannot drift apart and be localized in two different regions without fundamentally changing their character and interacting, balanced, adversarial, or dialectical entities. That remains true whether the moieties are exogamous or not." (emphasis in the original) (Asmerom Legesse 1973: 20-30).

As we have already indicated above, during the colonial era when the Ethio-British governments agreed upon the demarcation of the Ethio-Kenyan boundary line in 1907, the Booranaa, the same stock of people, were divided into two and were placed under the Ethiopian and British-Kenyan jurisdictions. According to the 2007 census taken by the Central Statistical Office of Ethiopia, the population size of the Booranaa zone was 996,467 with more or less equal numbers of male and female.

### **The Traditional Institutions**

*Gadaa* as a system of governance embodies several institutions which manifest themselves in an overall socio-economic and political culture. *Gadaa* has been an egalitarian and democratic socio-political and cultural system of governance, which has also been practiced among all Oromo branches and other Cushitic peoples, like the Sidama, the Konso and the Gedeo (Haberland, 1963: 771-772; Lewis 1966, 39-41; Mekuria Bulcha 2011: 7071, 7460). The Oromo *Gadaa*, however, has been a complex system, which governed almost every aspect of all Oromo life, wisdom and philosophy in general and that of the Booranaa in particular which has several significant advantages. According to Asmarom Legesse the Oromo *Gadaa* is "a system of gada classes (*luba*) that succeeded each other every eight years in assuming political, military, judicial, legislative, and ritual responsibilities." (Asmarom Legesse 2000: 31). Nevertheless, the *Gadaa* system is far beyond this definition. The system comprises the socio-political, economic, and cultural lives of the society with its diverse institutions.

### **Main Features of the *Gadaa* System**

*Gadaa* is an invaluable ancient civilization that the Oromo offered to the world as an intangible cultural heritage. The concept *Gadaa* could refer to the whole system, the eight-year period of government or the class in power. In this piece of writing, it refers to the whole system of governance that entails social, economic, political and religious life of the society. It is a complex system in which the Oromo were divided into age groups and enjoyed rights and disposed duties and responsibilities. Duties and responsibilities in military, political, legal and cultural affairs were placed on individuals of each *Gadaa* group from childhood to adulthood known as *miseensa* or *parties*. Each *miseensa* had specific roles and functions to perform in five stages of eight years (Baissa Lemu 1971: 48). Although the *Gadaa* class in power held the administrative position, the responsibilities to run social, religious and economic aspects of the society rested upon different sections of the society. For instance, when the elected *Gadaa* leaders administered justice, maintained law and order, the local councils followed *Gadaa* laws and practices in the same way at grass root level. This nature of the *Gadaa* system provided the Oromo with the mechanism for participation in public affairs or self-government. The system was based on the rule of law (*seera-tumaa caffee*) and institutional checks and balances that supported the removal of unfit or corrupt officials even before their term expired (Asmarom Legesse 1973: 68).

In the *Gadaa* System the Oromo were able to participate in self-rule, elect their leaders and change them every eight years, recall (*buqqisu*) those who fail to discharge responsibilities, make laws through their representatives, settle disputes according to the law and others (Baissa Lemu, 1971: 50). The *Gadaa* system of governance is also rich in institutions for resource management, peace restoration and social integration that are worth in the modern system of governance. These traditional institutions have been functional among the Oromo groups who have retained their indigenous system of governance. Among the Booranaa of southern Ethiopia these traditional institutions essentially have significant functions among the community. They have been administering themselves according to the indigenous institutions of the *Gadaa* System. (Informant: Liben Jaldess 2013).

As a system of government it is based on elections, with democratic procedures, of a new leadership after every eight years with smooth transition of power known as *Baalii walirra fuudhuu* in *afaan* Oromo, meaning handing over the symbol of power. The system does not accept the leadership of one person as is often done in monarchical institutions. Up-to-date the *Gadaa* culture has more or less remained intact among the Booranaa (also among the Gujii) as a traditional system capable of providing leadership, spiritual guidance, structural organization and division of

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

### **Institutions of Resource Allocation and Governance**

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

*The entry of Boorana Guutuu into Dirre and Liiban was after a renowned prophet (raag) named Mooro Uchuma had minted or hammered out ...the custom and laws, aada, seera, required to regulate the use of water sources, pasture lands, cattle, horses, mules, donkeys, small stock, wild animals, people and all the goods used in homes. These laws and customs provided the requisite social and political order, which enabled them to move in and to live with each other in peace (Gufu Oba 1996: 118).*

The *Gadaa* system has devised elaborate rules for environment and resource utilization. Agenda of resource and environment have been the central issues of discussion and decision at the general assembly of *Gumii Gaayoo*. *Gadaa* centers such as Dalloo in Liban, Gayoo and others were also centers of water wells known as *eela*. Issues concerning people's relationship with land and their environment were dealt with at el Dallo in Liban where laws governing land and water use were revised every eight years. Issues related to economic problems of some individuals within the lineage, and how to solve such specific problems and the overall resource management were often agenda of discussion and decision at *Gumii Gayoo*. The *Gumii* devised rules for resource utilization, which is known as *Seera Gumii*. No one is allowed to cut certain species of trees and there are *Gadaa* rules, which generally protect forests and the use of water resources. For utilization of resources and interrelations instance, *Abbaa eela* (the father of water wells) is responsible for digging water wells and managing the utilization of water. He was supported in this responsibility by the *Gadaa* assemblies of clans. The law forbids any Booranaa from selling water to another Booranaa and the consequence was

very serious usually banishing from Booranaa land (Boku Tache 2000: 41-42). The peaceful life among clans was central in the maintenance of *nagaa*-Booranaa. Strictly speaking, the extent to which the Booranaa clans obeyed the laws and customs of Booranaa, cooperated in socio economic and religious life and live together had to be evaluated. The relations of the Boorana clans were evaluated by the extent to which they used resources together, assisted each other, exchanged ceremonial supplies and performed rituals together ( Dereje Hinew 2005: 94).

Among the Booranaa, there is another institution which is economically significant for the community to rehabilitate the socially and economically affected ones. This institution, which is a legacy of Booranaa Gadaa/customs, is called *Buusaa Gonofaa*. The word *Buusaa* refers to contribution while *Gonofaa* means to cover nakedness of something. The term, therefore, signifies contribution to support the needy. It was largely a restocking process. Accordingly, the Booranaa contribute (usually heads of cattle) and help those who are affected by war and natural catastrophes (Informant: Liben Jaldessa 2013).

*Nagaa* Booranaa also included the peaceful coexistence with the neighboring Oromo and non-Oromo people. The laws for external relations of Booranaa permitted all the neighbors to live with Booranaa in accordance with the *aadaa* and *seera* Booranaa and gave all privileges of an individual Booranaa (Informant Borbor Bulee 2013).

Perhaps the most important and ancient institution of the Oromo in general and that of the Booranaa in particular is the *Qaalluu* institution. The belief system, *Waaqeeffanna* among the Oromo is officiated by high ranking “priest” known as the *Qaalluu* for male and *Qaallitti* for female. Both the *Qaalluu* and *Qaallitti* are sometimes referred to as the guardians of the laws of *Waaqa* on earth. The *Qaalluu* institution is the preserver and protector of the Oromo culture. It also provides them with spiritual guidance in their day to day life. The traditional ritual hall of the *Qaalluu/Qaallitti* is known as *Galma* and the ritual activity of the *Qaalluu/Qaallitti* is called *dalaga*. The *Muudaa* and the *Jila* are also important concepts associated with the *Qaalluu* institution (Informant: Debissa Arero 2013).

### **Institutions of Conflict Prevention and Resolution**

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

on the simplicity or complexity of the matters. If a person is killed accidentally not deliberately by another person they decide compensation of 22-25 heads of cattle for the parents/family of the deceased. In the case of robbery they force those who committed it to give back the property with a fine of five heads of cattle for each cattle raided (Informant: Liben Jaldessa 2013).

The Booranaa Council of Elders/ *jaarsaa* called the *Hayyu* together with the *Gadaa* officials play a very important role in settling inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic disputes and conflicts over resources or otherwise. Among the Boorana *Jaarsa biyyaa* (country's elders) are not elected like the *Abbaa Gadaas* while their role is to support the latter. For instance, in the case of an individual murder the Booranaa elders/*jaarsa* and the *Gadaa* leaders get together and discuss the matter in detail under the shade of a big *odaa* (sycamore tree) and settle it through payment of heads of cattle to the family of the victim which they call *gumaa baasuu* (paying blood money). Concerning group conflict between the two ethnic entities the Council of Oromo elders and *Gadaa* officials get together with the elders, chiefs or *Gadaa* leaders of the non-Oromo groups in an open field (usually under a big tree) agreed upon by both parties and deliberate on the case for days and decide on compensation which was usually paid in cattle to the victimized group (Informant: Borbor Bulee 2013).

According to the Booranaa traditions the *gadaa* officials are elected once every eight years at the General Assembly of the *Gumii Gaayyoo*. Almost in all cases the elections of the *Abbaa Gadaa* also called the *Abbaa Bokkuu* and his auxiliaries were done usually unanimously or through the majority vote in a democratic manner. Though the election of the *gadaa* leaders was accomplished every eight years the *Gumii Gaayyoo* is held every four years in order to check the performances of the elected officials as well as to discuss and settle outstanding issues of the community. The total number of the *gadaa* officials is eleven. These include five *Adulaas* to which the *Abbaa Gadaa/Abbaa Bokkuu* is a member and six *Hayyus*. There are also several assistants of the *gadaa* officials known as *Jaldhaba* operating at every village. The election criteria and the procedures of the *gadaa* system is not the same with modern election system of governance in the country which is done every five years and where the officials continue holding on to power by winning elections or otherwise. Here, one may observe a sense of tolerance and co-existence between the traditional institutions of the Booranaa and modern system of governance (*Gada Melba* 1988: 20-65).

Among the Booranaa, unlike the *gadaa* officials, elders (*jaarsa*, or *jaarsa biyyaa*-country's elders) are not elected. Usually it is the talent or the traditional knowledge a person possesses that makes him/her a respected elder among the community. The Booranaa elders play very important roles of adjudicating cases,

reconciling parties in conflict and advising the youth. Among the Booranaa there is a popular saying: *Jaarsi biyyaa ka mataa arrii qofaa miti kan garaa arrii malee*. This literally means, “An elder is not only someone with a grey hair, but also the one with a grey matter in his heart.” The saying connotes that a young person who is knowledgeable with an upright thinking capacity with merit could be regarded as *jaarsa* - an elder. According to our oral informant, Saar Jirmoo,

*The term Jaarsa connotes three notions. The first is age. He is someone who has grey hair or somebody with the age of 40 and above. Secondly, it represents a title to mean someone who is experienced, knowledgeable, or socially influential regardless of age. A young man who is good at adjudicating cases, who has knowledge of the Booranaa customary/ Gadaa laws and is able to interpret and apply them in dispute settlement can be called Jaarsa.* (Informant: Saar Jirmo).

The Booranaa take every conflict, be it of individuals or groups among their own ethnic entity or between the Booranaa and other ethnic groups to traditional authorities. Land, water and cattle theft were the major causes of conflicts concerning both inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts. Accordingly, the Booranaa traditional mechanism is much more effective in conflict resolution and settling disputes than modern government institutions (Mohammed Hasen 1990: 65-85).

The Booranaa elders play significant roles in their Community. They settle disputes, regulate marriages and execute rules and regulations in resource allocation and utilization like grazing land, water wells (*eelaa*) and others. Whenever things go wrong in their community, elders take appropriate corrective measures. Though they do not enact new laws or give general principles and amend Booranaa laws, which are the mandates of the *Gadaa* Assembly (*Gumii Gaayyoo*), they deal with individual cases using customary laws in solving them. All the Booranaa clans, sub-clans, most of the elders and influential people participate in the *Gumii* (Assembly). Issues which concern all the Booranaa are not decided by *jaarsa biyyaa* because such issues are deliberated by the *Gumii* (Assembly) and *gadaa* leaders. In the *Gumii* (Assembly) most of the *jaarsa biyyaa* and influential people take part (Informant: Debissa Arero 2013).

### **Institution of Social Integration (Adoption Practices)**

The other important institutions of the *Gadaa* system which have been remarkable in the history of the Oromo society at large and the Booranaa in particular are

*Guddifachaa* and *Moggaassaa*. The former has been the practice of adopting Oromo or non-Oromo male or female individuals usually at a young age by a given family. In this case, the adopted sons or daughters would have equal rights and privileges with the biological sons or daughters. Such practice still exists among the Oromo widely (Mohammed Hasen 2015: 156). The latter is the adoption of relatively large group of people usually by an Oromo clan or clans to be integrated to their community. Here also, the adopted group will have equal rights and privileges with Oromo clan members and will share 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. Mohammed Hassen remarks that, "It was the possession of the *gada* system that enabled the Oromo not only to prevail but also, through the practice of adoption, easily turn the enemy into an ally and war partner." (ibid 2015: 156).

*Guddifachaa* and *moggaasaa* are traditional adoption institutions though the concepts are different, interdependent and used for different purposes in the society. Both are practiced based on *Gadaa* laws. *Guddifachaa* is the process of taking another family's child and making him/her a member of the family with all privileges, and responsibilities. It was one means of resolving childlessness and social integrity between families and clans. The main reason for *guddifachaa* is to enable childless couples to have children and heirs (Haberland 1963: 771-772). This is largely practiced by other Oromo groups. For instance, in his study among the Tulamaa Oromo, Desalegn has indicated that the adopters, the would be father and the would be mother, hold *kallachaa* and *caaccuu* during the *guddifachaa* ritual. As a result, the *guddifachaa* child is referred to as, "'ilmo Kallacha' or 'Caacuu' " to mean that the child is born legally to the family (Dessalegn Negari, 2006: 42).

A special social form of *guddifachaa* practice that gives new name to individuals and clan to integrate to the society is known as *Moggaasaa*. Historically, the incorporation or assimilation of other ethnic groups under the *guddifachaa* through *moggaasaa* is unique and significant cultural feature in Oromo society (Mohammed Hasen 1990: 65-85). The ceremony was undertaken by *Abbaa Gadaa* on behalf of his clan at *Gadaa* centers. Adopted individual or groups through the *moggaasaa* (collective adoption) institution received Oromo identity by dropping the biological identity (Mohammed Hasen 1990: 65-85). In the ceremony of adoption, the groups to be adopted used to take "unbreakable" Oath in front of *Abbaa Gadaa*. The ceremony also involved tying of strips of hide (taken from a sacrificial bull) around the wrist of the adopted individuals or groups. After the ceremony it is said that the adopted groups were called '*ilma gosa*', sons of a clan (Triulzi 1996: 253-25). Through the new genealogy, the new

members now become part of the Oromo people counting their ancestors several generations' back to the ethnic Oromo (Mohammed Hasen 1990: 23).

Such tradition to enable childless couples and to have children and heirs was widely practiced by the Booranaa. In practice, the Booranaa undertook two types of adoption, which are referred to as *ergifata* and *ilmo tuutii*. *Ergifata* ratified a loan of a child to be returned to the real parents after he/she has grown up. *Ilmo tuutii* referred to the real adoption and social integration of adopted child to the family of adopters. The result of this practice is the welfare and linkage of the adopted child with the generation. It is, therefore, significant to note that both of these Oromo institutions helped the society to live in peace, harmony and tranquility with others (Informant: Borbor Bulee 2013).

### **Women and the Gadaa System**

The role of women in the *Gadaa* political power has created controversies among scholars. Some argue that women were completely excluded from the *Gadaa* system while others strongly indicate that the women held a significant position particularly by referring to their institutions of *Ateetee* and *Siinqee also spelt as Siqqee*. For instance, Qabbanee Waqayyo indicated that the influence and positions of women in a democracy is a matter of the structure of the society but not a matter of physiology (Qabbanee Waqayyo 1991:6). Kuwee Kumsa [45] on the other hand, employed historical study approach, focused on the *Siinqee* institution among the Oromo in general. Consequently, she did not deny the interlocking units between woman and man who comprise the entire society that attempt to understand the one without the other or female without male is incomplete and distorted (Kuwee Kumsa 1991: 113).

One area of controversy was the omission of women from holding political power being an *abbaa bokkuu* or *Abbaa Gadaa*. The other point of exclusion was from attaining all *Gadaa* grades and age sets like males. It is often said that women do not participate in proclaiming *Gadaa* laws nor in deciding cases. They are also not allowed to attend the *Gumii* (gadaa Assembly). But regardless of such claims, some credible sources indicate that some women among the Booranaa had attained some *Gadaa* generations and age sets. Moreover, women can discuss important issues with their husbands and the husbands consult with their wives to contribute their opinions. That way Booranaa women have indirect participation in decision making. Although women were not encouraged to compete for political power among the Booranaa, there were instances that women kept, the *Bokkuu* (scepter) the symbol of power. This usually happened when the husband dies before completing his term of office. According to De Salviac whenever a chairman (the

*Abbaa Gadaa*) of an Oromo assembly dies while exercising his functions, the *bokkuu* passes to his wife and she keeps the *bokkuu* and proclaims the laws. The chairman is inviolable in his person; so long as he is in office, national or family vengeance cannot touch him (M. De Salviac, 2008: 216). However, this does not indicate women did participate for candidacy of *Abba Bokkuu* like men. But they have a special role and respect in the *Gadaa* system which governed the entire society that safeguarded the values cherished by men and women, though they rarely participated in the decision making process. It is, however, significant to underscore that Oromo women are determined to defend and reinstate the values represented in the *Gadaa* equally with men (Ginbar Nagara 2010: 44).

Nevertheless, women among the Booranaa and other Oromo branches are highly respected and they do have their own respectful institutions among which the *Ateetee* and *Siinqee* institutions are prominent. *Ateetee* is a ritual ceremony exclusively practiced by women in the belief that it makes them fecund, happy, wealthy and prosperous. It is one of the dominant ritual ceremonies to celebrate births and to support women with no children by praying to *Waaqa* (God) to give them children. It is a cultural representation among the Booranaa women as well as in the Oromo society at large to counter male dominations and to enforce religious sanctions against related abuses. *Siinqee* on the other hand, is a ritual stick that only married women carry during various social, ritual, spiritual and political purposes. The honor of *siinqee* starts on the wedding day when the stick is given to the bride on the very day of marriage and stays with her throughout the rest of her life. *Siinqee* is closely associated with the world of women and symbolizes women's rights over material and spiritual power. A woman carrying this insignia always signifies that she has to be respected and anybody who touches *siinqee* and *haadha siinqee* (possessor of *siinqee*) would be punished according to Booranaa/Oromo customary law. More specifically, when there are inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts or wars break out the women carrying *siinqee* intervene among the warring parties; fighting would stop immediately and reconciliation will follow. Most importantly it is a symbol of women's power which prevents bloodshed and maintains the Oromo *nagaa* (peace). It has, therefore, a peace making role which empowers women. The Booranaa women make *Buna qalaa* (ceremony of roasting coffee beans) and take sheep which is a symbol of peace and rotate it around a village so as to bring harmony and reconciliation between hostile people. *Siinqee* is also a weapon by which women fought for their rights. *Seera Gadaa* (*Gadaa* law), which is proclaimed based on Oromo customs and traditions, is accepted and practiced by the Booranaa and it provides them and the society honor and respect. As an institution, *Siinqee* therefore, "functioned hand in hand

with the *Gadaa* system as one of its built-in mechanisms of checks and balances.” ( Kuwee Kumsa 1991:P 113-114).

*Ateetee* is an institution by which women posed and exercised some enormous spiritual and moral supremacy over the men. It is a ritual ceremony that women used to exercise exclusively as a way of strengthening their solidarity and also use it as a tool to counter male domination. In the traditional Oromo society, the *Ateetee* ritual shows that men are functionally dependent on women in many ways. “It is a vivid indication of the place women had in the religious and cultural philosophy of the people.” (W. Hussein Jeylan 2005: 110-112). *Ateetee* is also female deity or divinity which women worship in the belief that it makes them fecund, happy, wealthy and prosperous.

In the Booranaa community, women participate neither in proclaiming laws nor in deciding cases. They are also not allowed to attend the *Gumii* (Assembly). Nevertheless, they can discuss issues with their husbands. The husband consults his wife and she contributes her opinion. In this manner she has an indirect participation in decision making. However, apparently due to the pressures of the modern governance system, at present there is a tendency among the Booranaa to amend such customary laws in order to enable women to participate in the *Gumii* (Assembly) directly ( Informant: Debissa Arero 2015). Owing to the complexities and comprehensiveness of the Oromo *Gadaa* system we could not address all the institutions of the system. Therefore, we would like to indicate that there are several other *Gadaa* institutions of the Oromo in general and those of the Booranaa in particular which need to be studied further.

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

### **Conclusion**

The democratic credentials of the Booranaa traditional institutions can be checked at several levels. First and foremost they are products of the Booranaa society and rooted in the Oromo society – i.e. not imposed by any one from anywhere. To put

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

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

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

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

4. Their conflict resolution mechanisms are more durable and thus create more harmony and tranquillity in the society.
5. As the local people are involved in most of the deliberations by their own free will, they are more participatory and effective.

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### **List of Informants**

- Borbor Bulee, over 80 years of age.
- Debbissa Arero, over 80 years of age.
- Liben Jaldessa, former Abbaa Gadaa, over 70 years of age.
- Saar Jirmo, 75 years of age.
- Soraa Jaarso, over 80 years of age.