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Original Research

## Integration of Gadaa Values into Ethiopia's Mainstream Political System: Potentials and Challenges

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### Abstract

*National development and peace are expensive in Ethiopia. The nation's long-standing political concerns have gotten more complex, complicating governance and efficacy. This study shows how Gadaa values of social identity, authority, and resource governance may solve the nation's problems. It argues that using Gadaa values helps contextualize values and aid meaningful problem-solving. Applying Gadaa values showed respect for individuality, just authority, and equal resource allocation. The institution guided all Oromo actions and endeavors, upholding rule of law. According to the report, introducing principles into mainstream politics would help end wars and build states. It also shows the challenges of applying Gadaa values in relation to the former state's identity policy, force, resource management, and incompatibility with indigenous institutions. Researchers used qualitative methods. Data was collected via oral traditions and texts. The study shows that Gadaa ideas can be integrated into national governance. These values include socialization, accommodation, leadership training, power transfer, impeachment, and resource-sharing organizations. The research suggests including indigenous institutions in the nation's new political framework to solve critical issues, encourage development, and promote democratization.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Recently, Ethiopia has been horribly experiencing ethnically framed conflict and contests over power, and that has negatively affected peace and development. The breadth and depth of its politics have now greatly

increased, which has indirectly complicated the opportunities, chances, and efficiency of governance (Zelalem, 2017). The situation demands healing and genuine governance in terms of ethnic relations and the sharing of

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power and resources. Thus, the need for strategies for the sustainability of peace, development, and balanced utilization of resources is beyond question.

Strong, well-organized, and integrated social, economic, and political structures are ingrained in the cultures of indigenous peoples. It is the outcome of prolonged, recurrent experiments conducted by people in their ongoing fight for survival. Beginning in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, indigenous governments got attention in reaction to the existing socio-economic and political crises. Studies reflect that indigenous knowledge is important in the mainstream political system, particularly in state building, in several ways. First, as it is an accumulated experience, it is important to be helpful in finding the best solution to crises by providing effective ways of dealing with the issues. Secondly, the indigenous knowledge system creates culturally and socially acceptable practices. As a result, there has been a general tendency to recognize the virtues of indigenous knowledge and good beginnings to nurture and promote the use of indigenous things for sustainable development globally. A number of countries have begun to employ their indigenous knowledge and practices to solve specific problems. This included the application of indigenous skills and practices to settle ethnic-based conflict, resource use, and problems related to power transfer. Such endeavours enabled societies not only to reach a national consensus but also to create a peaceful political environment, a fair share of resources, and peaceful power transfers. The cases of South Africa, Nepal, and other successful peacemaking processes can be mentioned as models. The practical

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application of indigenous knowledge in governance certainly helped to manage crises and laid the foundation for state-building in Africa and elsewhere. Archbishop Desmond Tutu utilized the principles of Ubuntu during his leadership in South Africa. By utilizing the five stages of the peacemaking process found among Ubuntu societies, including acknowledgment of guilt, showing remorse and repenting, asking for and giving forgiveness, and paying compensation as a preface to reconciliation, the peacemaking process was successful. Such principles that promote accommodation and recognition can be taken as a lesson for peace and reconciliation efforts, building human relationships, and state-building elsewhere. In many societies throughout Africa, the idea of Ubuntu is found in diverse forms.

In the case of Ethiopia, among the relevant institutions potentially applicable is the Oromo Gadaa System. Social science research on the history and culture of the Oromo shows that the Gadaa System of Governance proved balanced relations among the members of the society with neighboring societies and beyond (Lemu, 1971; Gada, 1988). Among others, the system shaped social identity, peaceful power transfer, and resource sharing. There is an equivalent concept to Ubuntu known as dhala namaa, meaning human. It refers to the essence of what it means to be human. This guided the entire aspect of human relations with one another and the realization of nagaa (peace) and finna (development) in Oromo political culture (Baxter, 1978; Asmerom, 2000). There was an earnest belief that nagaa and finna could be realized only by the harmonious relations between Waaqayyo-

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humans and nature. Gadaa is a system that functions towards the ultimate achievement of nagaan (peace) (Asafa, 1993). It implies health conditions in the natural and social order. Therefore, this paper attempts to show the potential of Gadaa values in entertaining the accommodation of identities, power, and resource sharing and its feasibility in solving these crises and laying down a sustainable foundation for democratic state-building.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Relevant data and methods have been employed to complete this work. Once a researcher has identified the study problem properly, it is imperative to gather pertinent data using appropriate methods. The following sources and research techniques were used in this study to identify the difficulties Gadaa Revival has encountered since 1974.

This study benefited from oral evidence, secondary literature, travellers' accounts, and some archival documents. The available written document was carefully reviewed, state policy was evaluated, efforts to revive Gadaa values were evaluated, and Oromo elders and academics were interviewed as part of the data collecting methods. The narratives of travelers offer information on the pre-conquest Oromo governance structure, the functioning of the Gadaa system, and the socio-political stability, tranquility, and health of the Oromo people under the Gadaa government. Studies conducted by political scientists, anthropologists, historians, and others are also used to determine the main causes and contributing elements of the Gadaa system's stoppage or distortion. The findings of these studies are helpful in justifying the

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rationale behind the urge for the revival of the Gadaa system and the challenges it used to encounter.

Understanding the history of official sanctions on indigenous institutions can be facilitated by examining archives, especially those pertaining to governmental proclamations and activities. In addition, through interviewing Oromo elders, I was able to gather information about the Oromo people's experiences living under repression and how they utilized to maintain Gadaa knowledge. Elder interviews are useful for learning about the historical relationships between the state and society, the ways in which the Oromo people's culture and history have been corrupted, and the challenges they have faced in preserving their customs and traditions. Oral sources are useful to trace the socio-political and cultural dynamics in Ethiopia and their effects on the Gadaa system. The evaluation of the procedures involved in the Gadaa system's resuscitation since 1991 offers information on the reasons for and difficulties with this endeavor. Finally, the data obtained were analyzed to produce this manuscript, focusing on the process of revitalization of the Gadaa system and the forces that worked to maintain the system in quarantine.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Potentials of applying the Gadaa values**

Applying Gadaa values for identity coexistence, equitable power, and resource distribution in contemporary government is worthwhile. For a long time, the systems enabled the Oromo to accommodate people,

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govern resources, and exercise a safe transfer of power (Mohammed, 1990; Asmarom, 2000). These strategies also helped the Oromo establish a sustainable and strong society. Among these were moggaasaa (adoption), baallii dabarsuu (power share and transfer), aadaa-seeraa (rule by law), and qixxee (resource share and governance) (Lemu, 1994). The following section makes an effort to identify and examine the institutions that the Oromo use to tolerate differences, share and peacefully transfer authority, and govern resources for a common good, as well as the opportunities and difficulties associated with doing so.

### **Gadaa values peace and accommodation of diversities**

The Gadaa values are compatible with the principles of the sanctity of human rights if applied in the modern system of governance, particularly in peacemaking and accommodating diversity. For the Oromo, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, and social status, all human beings are considered dhala namaa. Jabessa adds that "the Oromo considered the already-born child as a human being; all human beings have humanitarian dignity; a child of a nation is just like one's own; and the problem of the wife is the problem of the husband; any cattle has dignity" (Dirribi, 2011; Jabesa, 1973). Like the concept of Ubuntu, the Gadaa system urges every Oromo to be hospitable, friendly, caring, and compassionate to other people. The idea upholds that the harm or benefit of other human beings affects people in similar ways, as human beings are interwoven through social, economic, and political

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relationships. The idea's core is upholding social harmony and coherence while mending past wrongs in order to preserve law and order in society. The Oromo culture strongly supports peacemaking via inclusiveness, reciprocity, and a feeling of shared destiny among peoples. It provides a value system for giving and receiving forgiveness. Such a system promotes the establishment of a system of reconciliation that eventually helps the state build peace and heals these traumatized communities. Legal respect is accorded to both human and canine rights among the Oromo people. For example, according to Asmarom (2000), "Seerri muummee seer-saree" is stated in the Borana.

The Oromo used to exercise such values and accommodate the non-Oromo through a mechanism called guddifachaa and moggaasaa, which is naming, "sharing" identity through the adoption of a group of people into a clan and the nation, collective adoption of non-Oromo (Mohammed 1990; Mekuria, 2011). The first form, guddifachaa, implies fostering a child as their own offspring and is the adoption of individuals by families. The adopted individual was accorded all the privileges that offspring may have and brought up with the sense of responsibility that he or she must shoulder as an adult. The Mogaasaa type of inclusion is conducted through the adoption of whole groups by Oromo clans. Moggaasaa (lit: "naming") signifies Oromsuu, that is, Oromization. According to Mekuria, Moggaasaa was practiced to absorb smaller neighboring clans and ethnic groups that sought Oromo protection against threats from other groups (Mekuria, 2011). In the process, the entire

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adopted group is given the name of their foster descent group, which will establish their inclusion in the genealogy of the descent group that adopts them and the Oromo nation in general. In some cases, they were also allowed to keep their original ethnic names and become sub-branches of the host descent group (Negaso, 2001). In some cases, ethnic groups who sought Oromo "protection" against life-threatening resource scarcity were included in the Oromo society. Such groups were granted social and legal rights with an egalitarian ethos rather than subordinate relations.

### **Gadaa values for management of power**

A reflection of valuing human beings in the Gadaa system rests upon how power has been managed. The building blocks of modern democratic principles were widely exercised in the Oromo political culture. Among others, *olaantummaa uummataa* (sovereignty of the people), *olaantummaa heera* (supremacy of the constitution), *qoodinsa angoo* (share and division of power), *buqqisuu* (impeachment), *bulchiinsa saba bal'aa*, *mirga garee xiqqaa* (minority rights in majority rule), *baallii dabarsuu* (peaceful transfer of power), etc. (Lemu, 1971).

The fundamental Gadaa value with regard to power is the principle of sovereignty of the people, which puts the people above everything and vests all the sovereign power in the hands of the people. People's power was expressed through their representatives, elected in accordance with direct democratic participation. In this context, the sovereign has the power to decide on all economic, political, social, cultural, legal, and other matters that

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have the highest importance to individuals and the group in general. Such sovereign power was exercised directly by the nation. The system is used to guarantee the principle of sovereignty for the people. In the system, the law stands above all men. According to Diribi Demisse, "The Oromo are governed by the law made by the people" (Diribi, 2011).

Asmarom continues, "One of the most intriguing things about the Oromo heritage is that laws are viewed as the result of human thought rather than as a gift from God or our brave forefathers. Asmarom (2000). Therefore, the people hold the sovereign power, and in the Oromo Gadaa system, which is akin to the current constitution, the people are also regarded as sovereign. Furthermore, the basis of Oromo's Gadaa administrative rules is the belief that the constitution above all other human beings (Diribi, 2011). In this case, Gadaa leaders were subjected to the same punishment as all other individuals if they violated laws (Asmarom, 2000). One form of punishment was *buqqisuu* (impeachment) (Diribi, 2011; interview). The impeachment of the incumbent Gadaa leaders occurred when they could not fulfil their duty in favour of the people who elected them. The idea of rule by law also promoted equality under the law (Zelalem, 2015).

One system by which the Gadaa system controlled and limited the power of the Gadaa officials was through share and division of power. Power was shared among the three wings of government (legislature, executive, and judiciary) and exercised for a limited period. The division of power among the largest government organs and across

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generations had great value in ensuring the separation and division of powers and creating an egalitarian society (Dinsa, 1975). The Gadaa System accepts the opinions of minorities through its General Assembly Meetings, in contrast to contemporary democracies where minority rights are not given a voice. For example, one opponent can halt the most drastic actions with just one word, qabadhe (stop discussion). In this sense, rather than requiring consent, the Gadaa System may rely on voluntary consent. Power was also managed through a periodic peaceful transfer of power known as baallii dabarsuu. Power was transferred from the Gadaa class to the incoming class every eight years, with serious evaluation after four years of rule (Dereje, 2005).

### **Gadaa values for resource governance and development**

Competition for scarce resources was inevitable, and the Oromo devised a solution for resource governance and development. For centuries, the system controlled their whole range of interactions with the surrounding environment and with each other. This includes aspects related to allocation, utilization, conservation, and preservation. The system demonstrated resource sharing in a calm and balanced manner. According to academics, the Oromo people's ability to preserve social and natural harmony through their environmental awareness is the only reason for their fertile land (Mekuria, 2011). From the point of view of access to resources, the notion of qixxee, an egalitarian form of access to resources and decision-making on property, laid down a communal responsibility

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for resource use, ownership, and protection (Tesema, 2006).

The qabiyyee system laid down rules for people's relations with land and the land utilisation category. One of the influential rules of the qabiyyee was the elder-junior relation on possession and the land use system. According to the qabiyyee (holding) system, resources, specifically land, belonged to society, except the private holding (dhoqqee), which was mainly utilized for cultivation and grazing by a family (Tesema, 1984). Hence, in social value dhoqqee was ultimately an individual's qe'ee (residence) with all its social and economic rights. Communal land included the resources of the ecosystem, for which there were no private decisions or rights (interview). In this case, the adopted non-Oromo individuals or groups have the right to use land (interview).

### **Challenges of applying the Gadaa values**

Challenges to the real integration of Gadaa values in Ethiopia's mainstream politics come from both external and internal factors. External entails the wider opposition to the indigenous institutions from neo-liberals (Agrawal, 1995). They claim indigenous governance is inherently defective and incompatible with democratic values and fundamental human rights principles (Ntsebeza, 2005). The neo-liberal argument holds that indigenous governance does not support gender equality. The other criticism that comes from opponents of the traditional institution is that the decision-making process is time-consuming and, hence, not efficient and cost-effective. In the same vein, the attempt to adopt the Gadaa values has been

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challenged by a long-established hegemonic and homogenization system. This relates to the past treatment of the Oromo people and their culture in Ethiopia as a whole.

It is rooted in both historical legacies and state interests. The goal of the assimilation policy's oppressive system was to create a one, cohesive Ethiopia. Diversity was seen as a sin and a significant barrier to Ethiopia's development. The marginalization of indigenous institutions was facilitated by the state's imposition of the ruling class's social and political culture in administrative and educational policies (Bonnie, 1997). Along with the imperial enterprise of homogenization since 1900, the distortion, denial, and distortion of the Gadaa system damaged the indigenous knowledge of maintaining peace and sharing resources and power (Mohammed, 2002). The imperial state, for instance, prohibited any gathering by the name of gadaa in fear of the solidarity of the people for self-determination (Asafa, 2012). There was contempt for the Gadaa system and the Oromo culture in general without understanding its nature (Gemetchu, 1993). As a result, the fundamental hegemonic legacy presents difficulties for mainstream politics in quickly identifying and implementing its ideals.

Criticism also comes from its scope of applicability. There is a wrong view that the system cannot be applicable in large communities. Nevertheless, the application of Gadaa values seems like a workable idea in light of ethnic federalism in Ethiopia. It promotes the accommodation of diversity, power, and resource sharing. The other challenge stems from a general

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misunderstanding of the Gadaa system's gender-related features. Women are key players in decision-making at all levels, in addition to playing a crucial role in their sociopolitical institution known as Siinqee.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Gadaa values, which support stronger preservation of democracy and human rights, can be utilized in Ethiopia's mainstream political system. For instance, the following major Gadaa values could be considered: Firstly, Gadaa values for humanity (dhala namaa), respect for identity, inclusiveness, or accommodation, such as Guddifachaa and moggaasaa, that are consistent with general human and political rights concepts. Second, Gadaa values for managing power include sharing and delegation of responsibility, the eight-year single-term office of leaders, the pre-testing of candidates for office, the impeachment of leaders, and other principles. Thirdly, Gadaa values resource governance, including a fair distribution of resources. Such indigenous ideas can strengthen democracy and good administration. This, in turn, can enhance good governance and democracy, which cannot be relegated. Therefore, incorporating Gadaa values in contemporary governance is crucial for peace and an inclusive, full-fledged democracy. For this reason, it is essential to resist the widespread misconception that indigenous peoples' beliefs are obstacles to democracy and progress.

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## DECLARATION

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings are available within the article materials.

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