

Full Length Research Paper

# An investigation of participatory governance embedded in gadaa system: Manbadha general assembly of the Arsii Oromo in focus

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This study revealed participatory governance rooted in Gadaa system by focusing on manbadha general assembly of the Arsii Oromo. The concept 'manbadha' (literally meaning wide house) is used by the Arsii Oromo to mean Gadaa general assembly. To this effect, interview, focus group discussion (FGD) and observation were used to procure data. The finding of this research revealed that Gadaa system is participatory when analyzed from the perspective of roles of age grades, decentralization approach, gender issues and openness for the mass. Based on this fact, it is logical enough to conclude that the way age grades and political parties are designed, the means by which people are involved in the process of governance and opposing views are all integrated, and also validate the fact that Gadaa system of the Arsii Oromo is participatory. Therefore, current polity of the country shall utilize Gadaa system of the Oromo to boost the democratization process of the country and enhance peoples' engagement in decision making.

**Key words:** Gadaa, Manbadha, Arsii, participatory, governance.

## INTRODUCTION

Asmerom (1973) defined *Gadaa* system as a system of classes (*luba*) that succeed each other every eight years in assuming military, economic, political and ritual responsibilities. According to *Gadaa* political philosophy and principle, elected individuals can serve only for a specific term eight years of *Gadaa* period and be substituted by newly elected officials. In the *Gadaa* system, one cannot be reelected as leader outside the

prescribed period of service.

Baxter (1996) defines *Gadaa* as "the ancient, enduring and complex system of age-grading that has also served as the basis of unique democratic political system." Asmerom (1973) also puts *Gadaa* as one of the most astonishing and instructive turns the progress of human society has taken. He labels *Gadaa* as the most intricate systems of social organizations ever created by the

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human mind.”

The customary laws promulgated at *Gumi Gayo* are binding, implemented and enforced at all levels of Borana territory. Additional laws required to be promulgated and old laws required to be amended are discussed and amended at the *Gumi Gayo* assembly held every eight years (Asmerom, 1973; Lemmu, 1994; Shongolo, 1994; Bassi, 2005; Tadesse, 2013).

From the earlier mentioned ideas one can deduce the fact that Gadaa system is participatory from the perspective of decision making, implementation of laws and involvement of all segments of the society in the affairs of the community. Therefore, this research was aimed at investigating participatory nature of Gadaa system by taking *Manbadha* general assembly of the Arsii Oromo as an example.

Africans have been criticized of not having democratic cultures. More specifically, Daniel (2002), Dejene (2009) and Jeylan (2009) have argued that Gadaa is not fully participatory by pointing out issues of gender. On the other hand, Asmerom (1973), Bassi (2005), Shongolo (1994), Lemmu (1994), Tadesse (2012) and Baxter (1996) have touched the topic especially by focusing on the general overview of Borana General Assembly, Gumii Gaayoo. On the same move, Dinsa (1975) in his work on “The Gadaa System of Government and Seera Caffee Oromo,” emphasized on highlighting the general notion of Oromo general assembly by shedding a light on its basic elements. On the other hand, Abbas (2014), Daniel (2002), Mamo (2006, 2008), Huseen (2000) and Hamdesso (2000) have conducted researches which have contributed substantially to our understanding of Arsii Oromo society and culture. However, their research did not focus on *manbadha* general assembly. Therefore, Arsii Oromo Gadaa in general and its Gadaa general assembly in particular did not come to the field of scholarly discussion. Therefore, the current research is believed to uncover the democratic natures of Gadaa system by placing it in its own and unique context. Additionally, it challenges the erroneous ideas locating roots of democracy into Westerners.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### General assembly of the Oromo: An overview

In much of what has been written about Africa, the common image is that people governed by primitive customs and practices, in which only feudal roles of elders, kings, chiefs, sultans, and emirs have been acknowledged by western observers. Little is ever shown of indigenous African democratic systems, under which there is distribution of authority and responsibility across various strata of society. Warriors are subordinated to deliberative assemblies and customary laws are revised periodically by a national convention. Elected leaders are

limited to a single eight-year terms of office and subjected to public review in the middle of their term (Asmerom, 2000). With regard to Oromo general assembly, there are some important scholarly works like Legesse (1973) book, Dinsa (1975) thesis, Dereje (2012) article, Lemmu (1994) article, Bassi (2005) book and Tadesse (2013) article are the major ones.

The *Gadaa* institutions at both national and local levels provided the Oromo with the mechanism for participating in public affairs or self-government. Officials were elected for fixed periods and functioned according to the law. The system was based on the rule of law and was opposed to despotic and authoritarian rule. The law also provided for removal of unfit or corrupt officials even before their term expired. The system was based on elaborate institutional checks and balances to safeguard the liberty of the people (Asmerom, 1973).

Laws are made in the general interest and with the consent of the society. Once every eight years, the assembly of *Gumii Gaayoo* of the Borana, *Me'ee Bokkoo* of Guji and the *Caffee of Macca* and *Tuulamaa* Oromo are convened. These assemblies are higher political bodies that stand above all other institutions. All the members of the Gadaa class as representatives of the society actively participate in these institutions (Asmerom, 2000).

Decisions are not passed by majority that can impose its will on the minority. Discussions must go on until a consensus is reached by all members, so the Borana seriously take the right of everyone to participate. The signal that a consensus is about to be reached is sent by the ‘father of laws’, who presides over the meetings, when he is ready to formulate a decision that might be acceptable to most of the participants. Debate continues until consensus is reached (Tadesse, 2012; Asmerom, 1973).

Based on the experience and tradition of *Gadaa*, legislative assembly (*chafe*), the executive and judiciary bodies can be created for institutionalizing political power. The legislative assembly will be the supreme law making body; the executive, composed of periodically elected officials, will be responsible for administration and formulation of policy; and an independent judiciary will interpret the law. The military will defend the nation in accordance with the constitution subject to civilian supreme command (Lemmu, 1994).

Borana social and economic life is regulated by a wide range of different types of meeting, each implemented according to specific procedures and with reference to highly articulated sets of law (*seera*) and norms (*aadaa*). The most engaging gathering are the *Kora Gosaa* (assembly of the clan) which is organized annually by each clan and the *Gumii Gaayoo*, the general assembly organized every eight years by the *Yaa'aa Arbooraa*. Decisions are formally made by general consensus during meetings and assemblies, with the retired *Gadaa* officers acting as component facilitators. In fact, they

retain political authority even they have completed their service in the *yaa'aa* (Bassi, 2005).

It was at the *Caffee* assembly that old laws were revised and new legislations were introduced by the *Gadaa* council every eight years. Asmerom has given a more basic definition of the general assembly in terms of its range of activities and its relations to other Oromo institutions. As he stated:

The national assembly, (*Gumi* or *Chafe*) is made up of all the assemblies and councils of the Oromo who meet in the middle of the *Gadaa* period once every eight years to review the laws to make new laws, to evaluate the men in power and to resolve major conflicts that could not be resolved at lower levels of their judicial organization (Asmerom, 2000).

*Gumii Gaayoo* is by far the most inclusive event in Borana political life. The Borana think of it as the assembly with the highest degree of political authority. To impress this idea upon strangers Borana say, "it is interesting to learn that this body, which holds the ultimate authority, is neither the *Gadaa* assembly nor the *Qaalluu* councils. It is rather, the assembled representatives of the entire society in conjunction with any individual who has the initiative to come to the ceremonial grounds. It is made up of many councilors, assemblies drawn from different sections of the *Gadaa* institution as well as ordinary citizens who have the ability to express their thoughts on matters of national concern and interest to travel to the site where the assembly is held.

During its sessions, the *Gumii* proclaims new laws, amends the old ones, and evaluates the *Abbaa Gadaa* (father of *Gadaa*). As it is also the supreme judicial body, the *Gumii* resolves disputes referred to it which could not be resolved at lower levels. No other Borana authority can reverse decisions made by *Gumii Gaayoo* (Asmerom, 1973; Bassi, 2005; Shongolo, 1994). According to the earlier mentioned assertions, old laws are revised and new legislations are commenced by the *Gadaa* assembly once every eight years. In line with this, there are legislative, executive and judicial components creating a division of power and checks and balances within the governance arrangement in the *Gadaa* system.

From the earlier mentioned idea, it is possible to understand that grass root democracy is a people/community driven participation in elections, governance and decision making. Grass root democracy can be seen as a tendency towards designing political processes where as much decision making authority is practically shifted to the lowest level of organization. Among the Borana, the governing power is vested in the assemblies at various levels at the apex of which is *Gumii Gaayoo* (multitude of *Gaayyoo* 'meeting of the multitude'. *Gumii* refers to the assembly and *Gaayyoo* refers to the place where the assembly meets. As an assembly

formed from representatives of the major Borana clans, *Gumii Gaayoo* is a pan-Borana assembly. The assembly takes place every eight years, mid-point within one *Abba Gadaa* period (Shongolo, 1994).

The attention of the earlier mentioned stated works was discussing the overall image of *Gadaa* democracy focusing on the ground that *Gadaa* indigenous governance is participatory and anybody interested had access to decision making. Therefore, *Gadaa* system of the *Arsii Oromo* in general and *Manbadha* general assembly by focusing on its participatory nature which deserves attention for it is not visible in the scholarly discussion of Oromo *Gadaa*.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study utilized qualitative methodology owing to its exploratory nature that recognizes the importance of locating the research within a particular social, cultural, and historical context. Similarly, qualitative methodology was employed for it is valuable for examining complex social relationships or intricate patterns of group interaction.

This research primarily depended on first hand data. However, secondary sources like brochures, and data gathered on the title by culture and tourism office of the two districts were consulted to support the data gathered from the field. Secondary data sources like books, journals, research reports, theses and dissertations were also accessed.

Interview is among the most familiar and crucial strategies for collecting qualitative data. Accordingly, systematic interviewing was made with knowledgeable informants from community members to get relevant data. Thus, elders of the community and experts from culture and tourism office of the two districts were interviewed. This research was highly dependent on key informant interview with knowledgeable elders who were actively involved in the process of drafting, modifying/revising and enforcing *Gadaa* laws. Accordingly, data were gathered from the elderly men, elderly women and *Gadaa* leaders (three from each) to investigate local people's view of democratic governance. By this method, eighteen key informants from each district were consulted. Interviewees were asked to make them generate their ideas about their perception and interpretation on the topic of the study. Semi-structured interview was considerably used because it gave our participants time and opportunities to develop their answers.

Focus group discussion was used to enrich since people with different experiences are incorporated in the session. On the other hand, individual's attitudes and beliefs do not develop in a vacuum rather they emerge from group interactions. This method therefore enabled us to study participants in a relatively natural atmosphere. Participants were more relaxed than a one-to-one interview which enabled the researchers to get first hand data. So, this method allowed the researchers to learn more about group or community opinions and needs. This method facilitated a wide-ranging exchange of views. Accordingly, six focus group discussion sessions were arranged based on the principle of saturation point. Intentional decisions were made to achieve the best group composition in light of the research questions. The participants discussed the issue under discussion together in a way that they were framed by general questions (semi-structured interview guide) raised by the field workers. The group's composition and the group discussion were carefully planned which enabled participants to feel free to talk and give honest opinions. The contradictory ideas were moderated before they change their direction; the researchers treated both opposing ideas in the report.

To sort out what really happens in a natural setting it needs eye-witnesses and supporting evidence. Researchers have to identify the interrelationship of situation and participants. In view of that, *Manbadha* general assembly of the Arsii Oromo which took place before three years was observed. The process involved in *manbadha* general assembly was observed at that time. Additionally, the assemblies of various levels (which are actually derivatives of general assembly) are frequently arranged in the study area. Thus, *qixxee* (clan assembly) and *Kora Gosaa* which are recurrently organized were observed. These clan assemblies and *manbadha* general assembly have interwoven elements. On the other hand, *caffee jilaa* (ritual site of Arsii Oromo) is characterized by hosting a multiple ritual observances related with day-to-day activities of the community. Laws proclaimed at general assembly are implemented here. In general, the researchers have observed the role, the processes and procedures involved in general assembly by being informed about the date of the ritual in advance. The researchers took the position of participant as observers for participating in general assembly process is impossible. To do so, the study community and all necessary organs were primarily informed that they were going to be observed.

The important advantage of qualitative approach is the ability to probe into responses or observations as needed and obtain more detailed descriptions and explanations of experiences, behaviors, and beliefs. It is evident that qualitative data analysis ideally occurs simultaneously during data collection. Accordingly, data was transcribed immediately after fieldwork and themes were categorized into coherent categories. The data gained through various methods were analyzed qualitatively through descriptive and interpretative approach in presenting, analyzing and interpreting the data. The researchers attempted to present the information as offered by our informants. However, we have utilized etic perspective too to interpret the implications of symbols, actions and utterances involved in rituals.

## RESULTS

### *Manbadha* defined

*Manbadha* came from two *Afaan Oromo* words namely *mana* (literally meaning house) and *bal'aa* (wide). These independent words when used together have the meaning of Gadaa assembly on which laws are made, enriched, modified and omitted. It symbolizes wide house which accommodates all affairs of the community; thus, nothing is out of the concern of *Manbadha*.

*Manbadha* general assembly is organized once every eight year. The key purpose of this assembly is making, modifying and promulgating new laws, solving very serious conflicts (cases remaining unresolved at local levels, cases concealed because of economic and social status of the disputants and those unfairly decided because of impartiality of elders) and undertaking Gadaa power transfer ceremony.

However derivatives of *manbadha* assembly like *qixxee* and *mura gosaa* are arranged whenever any form of trouble occurs. For instance, when someone refuses to obey decision of elders in certain conflict cases, elders call gatherings at his kraal to castigate him. This enforcing mechanism is called *Manbadha irratti qabachuu* (*qixxee itti qabachuu*), which means calling

general assembly/gathering at his kraal to punish him. On that date, no one can help the deviant and he is responsible to provide food and drinks for all participants of gathering lonely. Anyone who help disobeying person and absent from that gathering might be punished with that deviant. After he is punished in this way, he provides bull and honey mead to ask forgiveness the whole community in general and that gathering in particular.

On the same move, laws that are made by *Manbadha* general assembly are of two types. These are *seera garaa* (laws made to protect human right) and *seera gaaraa* (laws made to protect the right of animate and inanimate beings other than human being). *Seera garaa* accommodates: *Gumaa*<sup>1</sup> (blood price), family laws, laws made to prohibit cheating, robbing and deceitfulness/fraudulence, incest, rape, relation with other ethnic/ neighboring groups, laws regulating pasture land and wells, self help associations and the like. *Seera gaaraa* on the other hand accentuates on guarantying the right and existence of other creatures for they have God given right to survive. It focuses on sustainable management of environment and meant to maintain ecological balance. Laws made to protect springs, to prohibit deforestation; unjust killing of animals and mistreating domestic animals are best examples. For example, bull and horses<sup>2</sup> should not be harmed even when they destroy cereals. Bull is believed to be symbol of fertility for cattle reproduction is impossible in its absence. Bull has no owner; it belongs to all the clan. If someone kills bull, he/she pay heifer for eight consecutive years because bull can mount and bring calf eight times in its life. Horses on the other hand are given special care because they play prominent role in defending society from enemy.

In general, unlike formal decrees which are sometimes vague and interpreted differently, very detailed and elaborated laws are made on *Manbadha* general assembly. For instance, hurting an individual with spear and wooden stick is treated by different decrees. The style of holding stick when beating the victim has a meaning when giving verdict.

### Procedures of *Manbadha* general assembly

The days of *Manbadha* general assembly is communicated to each individual in advance. The hosting clan prepare feast, construct temporary huts and oversee the convenience of guests (*yaa'a*). At least, one bull used to be slaughtered

<sup>1</sup> *Gumaa* includes but not limited to damaging of body parts like ear, eyes, skull, leg, hands, finger and homicide

<sup>2</sup> Horses are senior to all other livestock and greatly honored for the services they provide. They are given their own traditional rights including first priority at wells (Shongolo, 1994:45).

The one who bless	The multitude	The one who bless	The multitude
<i>Dhiltee dhinnaax(3)</i> Save us from your eyes	<i>Hobbayaa(x3)</i> be saved	<i>Mana qaqaatti nu bulchi</i> Let our houses live long	<i>nu bulchi</i> let it be
<i>Faatee Waaqni sii dhagayi</i> May God hear your pray	<i>dhagayi</i> be heard	<i>Waa baroo fi waa jaboo nu baasi</i> Save us from troubles	<i>nu baasi</i> let it be
<i>Lafti sii dhagayi</i> May earth hear your pray	<i>dhagayi</i> be heard	<i>bokkaa sii roobsi</i> Bring us rain	<i>roobsi</i> let it be
<i>Gadaan sii dhagayi</i> May Gadaa hear your pray	<i>dhagayi</i> be heard	<i>bokkuu sii mandiisisi</i> Let the bokkuu be well mannered	<i>mandiisisi</i> let it be
<i>Gadaamoojjiin sii dhagayi</i> May Gadaamoggi hear your pray	<i>dhagayi</i> be heard	<i>Gadaa nuu itichi</i> Let our Gadaa coagulate/be prosperous	<i>itichi</i> let it be
<i>Dhibbi sii dhagayi</i> May all thing hear your pray	<i>dhagayi</i> be heard	<i>Itituu nu dhugsiisi</i> Let waaq make us live pleasurable life	<i>dhugsiisi</i> let it be
<i>Dhibaayyuun<sup>3</sup> sii dhagayi</i> Let our prayer be heard	<i>dhagayi</i> let it be	<i>Waa barii waa gadii nu baasi</i> Save us from miserable life	<i>nu baasi</i> let it be
<i>Ka dhageette nagayaan si oolchi</i> Who heard keep you pass the day in peace	<i>oolchi</i> May it be	<i>Re'een sii toli</i> Let goats reproduce well	<i>toli</i> let it be
<i>Nagaan si bulchi</i> Who hear keep you pass the day in peace	<i>bulchi</i> may it be	<i>Qe'een sii toli</i> Let our family be healthy	<i>toli</i> let it be
<i>Gadaa si hulluussisi</i> May pass you through the Gadaa	<i>hulluussisi</i> may it be	<i>Waatiin haa toltu</i> Let calves be healthy	<i>haa toltu</i> let it be
<i>Gadaabitti si galchi</i> May you enter Gadab(fertile land)	<i>galchi</i> may it be	<i>Maatiin haa toltu</i> Let our families be peace and prosperous	<i>haa toltu</i> let it be
<i>Waraana qaqeessi</i> Let Waaqa keep us from war	<i>qaqeessi</i> let it be	<i>Kun toltuu(x3)</i> This is well	<i>haaqabattu(x3)</i> let it be pertained

always throughout the deliberation. The primary purpose of the assembly is building peace and evaluating Gadaa class in power.

At the very beginning of *Gadaa (manbadha)* general assembly is a ritualized and elongated blessing which is performed by five political parties turn by turn. In this

blessing, every aspect of the community including environmental, economic, political and social issues are addressed and the religious aspect of *Gadaa* system is given high emphasis.

After this prayer *qora miilaa* and *qora mataa* start to ask each other about the deliberation as follows:

**Qora mataa**  
Kootta  
Come

**Qora miilaa**  
dhufe  
I have come

<sup>3</sup> *Dhibaayyuun* (libation) is a religious ritual of scarification offered to *Waaqa* to thank for past success and pray for the future life.

*Maaliif baye?*  
Why are we here?

*Dubbiif bayeen dhuga*  
You are right, we are here for discussion

*Keennaa keessanuu*  
Yours and ours

*Ka dubbadhu more ka bulfadhu?*  
Can we discuss or postpone the issue?

*Akkaan bulaa,*  
May you live in right way

*Ee naa baye naa gaye hin dubbadha*  
Yes all things are ready to discuss

*Lakki ima dubbadhaa*  
No! we have to talk

*Dubbiif baye*  
We are here for discussion

*Dhugee nagaaan haa galu*  
May cattle come back from watering peacefully

*Kana na gaafachuun akka*  
This is appropriate question

*dubbachuufuu bulfachuufuu naa bayee naa gayee?*  
Are all things in place to discuss or proceed to our deliberation?

*lakki naa hin baanee naa hin geennee hin bulfadhaa*  
No! Some issues are missing

*maarree aanaa hin dubbadha jedhee si'ii hin bulfadha jettee, huurruu keessaa haa nuu dhufuu*  
Now we are not coming to consensus; so, let the participants intervene and comment on the issue

The two investigators (*qora miilaa* and *qora mataa*) argue with each other on each and every procedure so that every single idea is internalized by taking two different sides. Even, they oppose one another whether to start the deliberation or not. One of the *qoraa* (investigator) says it is impossible to proceed to the discussion for very important personnel are not available. As a result, he proposes to postpone the discussion to another time. This is not because the presence of the persons mentioned has a difference on the deliberation but to address the desire of every person for there might be individuals supporting this idea. The other *qoraa* (investigator) on his part convince his companion by attesting the reality that it is unthinkable to expect the participation of all the community members.

New crimes which are not occurred before needs new laws on spot. *Dur hin jirree dur hin jirreen fixan*<sup>4</sup> to mean new crimes are treated by new laws explains this condition. Such crimes are called *Hin mallee*,

*Barri kan roobaa nagaa haa ta'u*  
Let the year be years of rain and peace  
*Jilli keenna jila nagaa haa ta'u*  
Let our ritual be ritual of peace,  
*Kan wallale haa beeku*  
Let the ignorant be wise  
*Kan beeku haa bulu*  
Let he who knows live a long  
*Gargar ba'uu nu oolchi*  
Deliver us from disunity  
*Jinfiun<sup>5</sup> keenna Arsii hin tuqin*

*mandabartuu, suuqamtuu* to mean inappropriate, off-limits and hidden respectively. In fact such new crimes originating from new environmental, social, political and economic changes and dynamics are used as an input for the coming political parties to incorporate during their term of office. The assembly dedicates one full day for the proclamation of laws. Some very specific decrees can be promulgated at clan level depending on unique practical realities though they should not contradict with the grand statute made at assembly level.

After laws are promulgated, time is given for *Raagduu* (prophet) to forecast the major happenings (both good and bad fortunes) which are enlightened depending on natural occurrences observed in the environment. Depending on the divination, necessary preparations are undertaken to confront the troubles occurring in the form of drought, disastrous conflicts, epidemics and other catastrophes. Finally the assembly is concluded by elaborated blessing.

*Gadabit<sup>4</sup> si galchi*  
Make us fertile  
*Gadaa si hulluuqsisi*  
Transcend us years  
*Oromo biifaa ta'i*  
be the sacred Oromo  
*Biiftuu ganamaa ta'i*  
Be visible as morning sun  
*Muka waan' murre ta'i*  
Be a tree that no one can cut  
*Nama waan' tuqne ta'i*

<sup>4</sup> *Gadab* is a pasture land favorable for cattle rearing. The entire Arsi used to migrate to the area for pasture seasonally. In prayers, songs and rituals, the word symbolically represents fertility and abundance of life. It is said to be milks rain from teats of cows without being milked because of excess of meadow when they are taken to *Gadab*.

<sup>5</sup> *Jinfiuu* literally means butt

Let our spear do not hurt the Arsii  
*Arsiirratti arfiin keenna jinfuu haa ta'u*  
 Let our spear be blunt on Arsii

Be a man whom no one/nothing can hurt  
*Si kadhannee nuu dhagayi*  
 We so beseech you heed to our prayers

### The structure of Arsii Gadaa assembly

The common center of Arsii Gadaa was Odaa Roobaa which in turn has 20 sub-assemblies to decentralize the system to local community where majority of actual works are implemented. Accordingly, this *Gadaa* center accommodates three clans of Arsii Oromo namely Sikkoo, Mandoo and manna and three current administrative zones that are Arsii, west Arsii and Baalee.

The disintegration of Arsii Gadaa in to sub-clan came in to existence after the assembly of *Qixiibee* (*Dhaddacha Qixiibee*). The assembly of *Qixiibee* in fact was held around 1886 because it was the time when *Aanolee* atrocity took place. Before that there was one Gadaa law, common Abbaa Gadaa and common Gadaa center for the entire Arsii (Ayehu, 2014).

With regard to Gadaa assembly structure, at the top is *manbadha* (general assembly) followed by *yaa'ii* (sub-clan assembly) while the smallest unit is called *bayima* which is probably held at *warra* (village) level. This means, at the lowest level is *Bayima*. Then *yaa'ii* is at sub-clan level (Siikkoo and Mandoo) and at the top is *manbadha*, general assembly which is equivalent to parliament.

From the 20 sub-assemblies under Odaa Roobaa, 11 of them are found at *waabee gama* (beyond the Waabee river) (dominantly present Baalee zone) while 9 of them are found at *waabee gamana* (present Arsii, West Arsii and East shoa zones). In line with this, the following table summarizes Arsii Gadaa assembly structure which was adapted from brochures of Zuway Dugda culture and tourism office.

### The main social actors of *Manbadha* general assembly

The main social actors involved in *Manbadha* general assembly are the Gadaas, the *jallaaba* (persons elected by family groups to enforce decisions and who follow daily social life), *qora mataa*, *qora miilaa*, the *hayyuus* (experts) and above all, the community. Five qaalluus and 7 *hookkaas* (the organ responsible to remember all draft laws proposed from participants) also actively participate on the deliberation.

### The *Murticha* (Judge)

The *murticha* (judge) is at the center of both investigators physically to symbolize that he is there to balance the ideas raised from both investigators and the mass. The

judge is characterized by fluency and high analytical capability. The other quality of the *murticha* is mastery of customary laws and ability of reviewing and interpreting the existing laws in a particular situation by considering all necessary input from different perspectives. In fact, it might be difficult to give decision on some contradictory ideas on spot.

However, only few of these ideas are postponed to other time specially when necessary preconditions (which are yet very important to give decision) are not fulfilled. For instance, in case of giving judgment on conflict that is occurred between two individuals/parties, absence of one of them results in delay of decision for the feeling of both parties has to be heard. Most of the time, the *murticha* validate their argument by referring to the original laws which have been proclaimed at *Odaa Roobaa* to show that the decision is derived from their forefathers' customs and laws. The multitude can comment on the procedure followed by the *murticha* when they believe that some kind of information is missing or a given reality is misunderstood. At the center of all procedure is *dhugaa* (truth).

To show the emphasis of truth, the Arsii Oromo say "*Gadaan ka Arsiiti; Arsiin kan dhugaati; dhugaan kan Waaqaati*" (Gadaa is of Arsii; Arsii is the son of truth while truth is the son of *Waaqa* (God). In case of resolving conflicts, the *murticha* is accountable to investigate the litigation of each party by asking various questions to crosscheck the truthfulness of their points of argument before taking it for further process. The individuals who know the case directly or indirectly are encouraged to give their genuine observation.

### *Qora Miilaa-Mataa* (Investigators)

The word '*qora*' roughly means investigator while '*miila*' and '*mataa*' literally means leg and head respectively. Biologically, head is meaningless at the absence of leg and the vice versa is also true. Therefore, one can say that head and leg are complementary for they function together. They maintain the balance of human being and maintain smooth and balanced functioning of our body. The investigators too are elected in a way that they are opposite to each other.

They argue each other on all matters discussed there because they represent the community. Even they sit opposite to one another physically. Both investigators probe into every single topic so that each person is satisfied with the process of reaching on decisions. As a result, they keep the balance of the deliberation. The *murticha* (judge) cannot render verdict before the

investigators convince each other.

### The multitude

The participants can change the idea of the investigators by a process called *huuruu* (forwarding suggestions) and *guunguma* which refers to murmuring because of dissatisfaction. Any concerned individual has the right to bring forgotten realities to the attention of the investigators and *murticha* (judge). Any person has the right to intervene in to the process (after getting permission from the *murticha* (presidium) before the investigators agree with each other. *Gungumuu* (murmuring) comes when the issue under discussion leans towards conclusion and when *murticha* (judge) prepare himself to give the final declaration about the issues. The participants might challenge the *murticha* by referring particular issues to original Gadaa laws. The multitude can participate through *huuruu* mechanism to give whatever ideas about the issue. Once they have agreed and the *murticha* rumbles the *Halangee* (whip), decisions are irreversible. The procedure of interfering in to decision is as follows:

*Guungume*

I am murmuring

*Kan guungumee roobu Waaqaa guungume*

It is *Waaqa* who roar and bring rain

*Waan garaa na nyaatetu jiraafii guungume*

I am murmuring because I am not satisfied on one idea

*Dhugaa dabde wahiitu natti mul'ateefii guungume*

I am seeing truth bent

*Dhugaa sanatti deebitanii naa hubattuufii guungume*

I am asking you to reconsider the truth

*Walii galuun keessan dhugaa irratti haa ta'uufii guungume*

You shall agree on truth

*Hamaa fi masoon keessan walii hin galiiniifii guungume*

Let your enemy and antagonists disagree

*Gunngumellee irraa bu'ellee laalii dubbadhu*

I have finished my idea

### DISCUSSION

Asmerom (1973), Bassi (2005), Shongolo (1994), Lemmu (1994), Taddese (2012), Baxter (1996) and Dinsa (1975) are important scholarly works on the democratic natures of Gadaa system. These scholars have investigated the fact that institutions, philosophies, rituals and decisions of Gadaa system are purely democratic. Democracy, on the other hand, is often defined from the perspectives of the Westerners who are taken as a model of democracy. Africans however are criticized of not having democratic cultures. Thus, what is commonly known about Africans is that they are either stateless or autocratic.

In this part, the researchers analyze how *Gadaa* system in general and *Manbadha* general assembly of the Arsii Oromo in particular is participatory from the perspective of peoples' involvement in decision making, decentralization approach, roles and responsibilities of age grades and gender issues.

In this part therefore, the researchers confront this biased assumption and provide vivid justification of the presence of democracy in the Oromo of Africa long before the arrival of Western philosophy. Accordingly, this paper analyzes how *Gadaa* system in general and *Manbadha* general assembly of the Arsii Oromo in particular is participatory from the perspective of peoples' involvement in decision making, decentralization approach, roles and responsibilities of age grades and gender issues.

### Peoples' engagement in the system

Eligible persons including physically disabled individuals have full right to participate on *manbadha* general assembly. And everybody who can speak can present his idea to the multitude starting from commenting the issues raised to proposing of laws. In this case all eligible citizens are allowed to air their feeling. Bringing people together and allowing them to interact with each other in the course of decision-making activities on the other hand rebuilds their sense of sameness and belongingness.

In case of formal governments, few legislative organs prepare draft rules which are expected to be approved by the representative of the community. In Gadaa system however, the *Abbaa Gadaa* himself propose new laws to be accommodated in the upcoming term of office as a single and ordinary person. He by no means forces the community to accept his recommendations at its face value. Seen from this perspective, personal networks of individuals in power are of no influence and patronage has no impact on the process of making/amending/cancelling laws and implementation of the existing regulations. Amendment of the existing laws is also accentuated as deemed necessary; accordingly, the one who proposes to modify a given law should match his/her justification forcing to revisit the law by considering economic, political, environmental and cultural changes and problems arising because of the presence of that article.

The other participatory nature of *Gadaa* system is rooted in the reality that special support is given for children and youths to attend general assembly so that they can practice and shoulder this social responsibility in the future. Exceptional concentration is given to ideas raised by youths for the observation they bring to the attention of the *Gumii* (assembly) is believed to be unique and more imperative. Most of the time they use saying, *ilma diqqaa dubbii hin dhoorginaa; gaafa nu nama biyyee isaantu abbaa biyyaati*, which means do not prevent



**Table 1.** Arsii Oromo Gadaa structure.

S/N	9 sub-centers found Lower Waabee	Number of Sub-clan Assembly and Bayima		11 Sub-centers found upper Waabee	Number of sub-clan Assembly and Bayima	
		Number of yaa'ii	Number of Bayima		Number of yaa'ii	Number of Bayima
1	Assembly of religion and good oaths ( <i>Dhaddacha Amantii fi Kakuu Gaggaarii</i> )	21	441	Madda Walaabuu Assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Madda Walaabuu</i> )	29	841
2	Malxoo Court Assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Mura'a Murtii malxoo</i> )	21	144	Sararii Assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Sararii</i> )	23	529
3	Malkaa Ejersaa peace and reconciliation assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Araaraa fi Nagaya Malkaa Ejersaa</i> )	26	676	Baarree Assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Baarree</i> )	25	625
4	Dhaddacha Qananii Gammachuu Guuguu	18	324	Diriirii Assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Diriirii</i> )	26	676
5	Assembly of Relatives And Milk of Caancoo Mountain ( <i>Dhaddacha Aanaa fi Aananii Tulluu Caancoo</i> )	29	841	Midhaadduu Assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Midhaadduu</i> )	27	629
6	Central Qixiibee Laws Assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Heeraa fi Seera G/Galeessa Qixiibee</i> )	21	441	Bareedduu Assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Bareedduu</i> )	24	57
7	Banaa Bantii Assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Banaa Bantii Seemma Gadaabii</i> )	22	484	Alamii Kurkurruu Assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Alamii Kurkurruu</i> )	28	784
8	Giraaramoo Kofalee Proclamation Assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Yaa'ii lallaba Giraaramoo Kofalee</i> )	20	400	Roobee Assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Roobee</i> )	30	90
9	Guutaa Goodaa Assembly of Langanoo Shashemene ( <i>Dhaddacha Guutaa Goodaa Laangannoo Shaashamannee</i> )	23	499	Daayyoo Assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Daayyoo</i> )	25	62
10	-	-	-	Dumaalii Assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Dumaalii</i> )	26	676
11	-	-	-	Dalloo Garambii Assembly ( <i>Dhaddacha Dalloo Garambii</i> )	29	84

youths from giving ideas; because when we (elders) pass away they represent us and preside over the people. Similarly, women play pivotal role in bringing issues of serious conflicts to the discussion, crosschecking whether active Gadaa is devoting its time to the affairs of women (through their parallel institutions) and preparing ritual feast. More importantly, *Haadha Gadaa urjii* (the wife of *abbaa Gadaa*) (first lady) who is treated like the Abba Gadaa himself, is responsible to follow the rights of women.

The two investigators represent every member of the community and speak the intention of the members they are representing. This is performed to ensure and emphasize people's participation in social decision-making processes. Therefore, all the people of a

community or polity are involved in making decisions about their affairs. As a result, there is a solid ground to say that the demand for political participation and the involvement of the people in political affairs constituting basic question of democracy is not a new incident in Oromo.

#### Decentralization approach of Gadaa system

As it can be deduced from Table 1, the structure of Gadaa assembly is arranged in a way that participation of Existing laws are practiced and new laws are penetrated into the community through these vast administrative units. Thus, one can take a firm stand to sermonize the

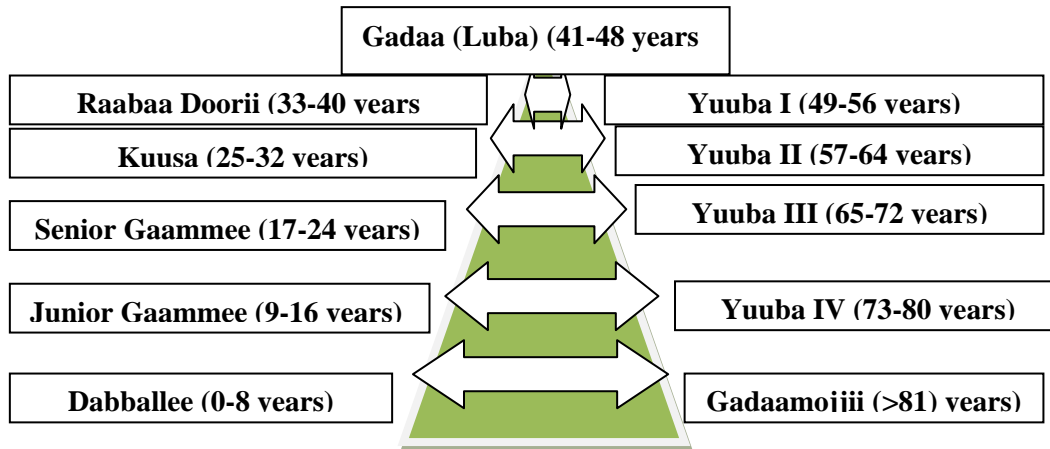


Figure 1. Structural relationships between Gadaa age grades.

existence of high-profile example of successful and meaningful participatory governance in Oromo nation.

**Involvement of age grades**

Laws that are proclaimed every eight year are not targeted at punishing offenders. It is rather all about restoration of peace, guarding normative pattern of the society and keeping of equilibrium between creatures. Any community member who fails to obey these customary laws is punished. The age grade responsible for executing serious punishments is the *raaba*<sup>6</sup>. Unlike current governments who use police forces or few justice bodies to enforce decisions, decrees are put in to effect by the entire community in Gadaa system. All the age grades in Gadaa system have clearly defined roles and responsibilities. From this angle, one can infer that the community not only involve in making and amending laws but also highly engage in the process of its enforcement.

**The structural relationships between the Gadaa grades**

Figure 1 corroborates the philosophical base of Gadaa system that age grades are structurally congruent. Accordingly, both physical strength and mental maturity of *Dabballee* and *Gadaamojiii*, junior *gaammee* and *yuuba* IV, senior *gaammee* and *yuuba* III, *kuusa* and *yuuba* II and *raabaa doorii* and *yuuba* I are equivalent. Accordingly, at the apex of this structure is *Gadaa (Luba)*. Since it is at the peak of all, there is no equivalent age grade in terms of both muscular strength and intellectual maturity. At this level, physical might and intellectual

development reach its climax and appropriate than other Gadaa grades to administer the community.

On the other hand, *dabballee* and *Gadaamojiii* share many common characteristics including being ritualistic, physical liminality, proximity to *Waaq* and knowledge deficiency. Because of this short distance between them, *dabballees* and *Gadaamojiiis* are nearer to each other despite their lengthy age gap. *Dabballees* respect their fathers (*Gadaa*) than their grandfathers. As a result, participation in Gadaa assemblies and structures are determined by this biological fact. Seen from this perspective, one can figure out the fact that very immature children and very old peoples hold ritual supremacy, while the middle aged segments of the society exercise political power.

**Gender issues**

From gender perspective too, Gadaa System of the Arsii Oromo is participatory. In the following paragraphs the arguments talking about insensitivity of Gadaa system to women will be invalidated by basing our premises on our informants' ideas.

Needless to mention, Gadaa general assembly and *Gadaa* age structure is dominated by males. However, this cannot be solid ground on which one can base his/her argument to criticize the participatory nature of Gadaa system. Basically, women cannot enter into Gadaa age grade because they are married at certain age in the middle of their stay which forces them to join another clan. On the other hand, each age grade has roles and responsibilities which often require separation from home and marching to distant and desert areas. Because of their social responsibility (nurturing children) however, women cannot do this. Contrasting to current bureaucratic responsibility which requires only intellectual viability, Gadaa governance has been innovated in a world in which physical potency (that is, walking in desert

<sup>6</sup> Military faction of Oromo *Gadaa*

areas and jungles and confronting war fronts) is equally important.

On the same move, presence of the mere fact that male dominated social institutions can influence the contribution of women to social affairs is not acceptable. There are a number of women based institutions in which their economic, political, social and cultural right is kept in equilibrium including *wijoo*, *ateetee*<sup>7</sup>, *siinqee*<sup>8</sup>, *qanafaa*<sup>9</sup> and *rakoo*<sup>10</sup>. On these exclusive women institutions women internal affairs are discussed and their right is guaranteed.

Therefore, their absence from law making assembly does not have an influence on laws pertinent to women for the philosophy of Gadaa system on the status and interest of women is upbeat. The philosophical understanding of the Oromo with regard to the role and/or importance of women in restoring peace can be backed by Arsii Oromo saying which goes “*Dubartiin Waaqa diqqoo*” literally meaning ‘women are small god’ accentuate their place in maintaining tranquility within the society and sustaining man-creature bond.

The dictum showing the centrality and reverence of women goes “*Hiddi garbii (acacia Albida) garba bishaanii dhaqqaba; hiddi namaa garba dubartiirraa madda*” to mean the root of *garbii* reaches river while the root of human beings reach/stem from women. The earlier mentioned axiom clearly indicates that the origin of human beings is women. The Arsii Oromo considers women as a source of everything. As trees (*garbii* in this context) cannot grow without water, men cannot exist devoid of the role of women.

On the other hand, no single law relegating women can be mentioned in the history of Gadaa general assembly. Nonetheless, individuals because of their individual interest might downgrade or harm women. These acts however do not have legal backing. In line with this, such inhumane acts on women might be related to weakening of Gadaa system and emergence of autocratic systems. For instance, the Oromo saying “*Halaalifoo nama nyaata; Amaariifoo nama dhaana* (he eats human like hyena and beats like the Amhara)<sup>11</sup>” is used to explain the cruel acts of some husbands against their wives. This indicates that declining of Gadaa governance and rising of monarchies have paved way for subordination and inhumane treatment of women. To put simply, the deterioration of Gadaa system has dynamically swayed the status of Oromo women. Above all, being Gadaa leader is all about shouldering responsibility and devoting oneself to the interest of the society. It is not seen as

power or authority for the leaders do not have any special privilege.

In general, men based institutions and women based institutions are evident in Gadaa system. Nonetheless, Gadaa system is the totality of all these institutions which are equally important in the functioning of the system. Generally, the earlier mentioned ethnographic evidences confirm that Gadaa system does not jeopardize women’s interests.

## CONCLUSION

*Gadaa* is an indigenous form of governance that is rooted in the realities of Africa. *Gadaa* general assembly is the most inclusive political dialogue and decision making event among the Arsii Oromo. The significance of *Gadaa* system to the current political discourse can be defined from the perspective of its participatory nature, check and balance mechanism all of which are viable impetus in current political arenas of our world. *Gadaa* system of governance has been shaping the political culture of the Oromo from the dim historical past through present and will continue in the future.

Generally, *Gadaa* system is participatory in all its nature. In terms of its structure, all age grades are required to accomplish certain political, economical, military and ritual responsibilities. From gender perspective too, men and women have their own contribution in the smooth functioning of the system. On the other hand, the five political parties are designed in a way that participation of all people is realized. On top of that, the assembly structure of *Gadaa* system is not left at top level; it is stretched to the local community so that the enforcement or implementation of laws set and administrative issues are backed by active participation of the community. As a result, shared behavior and legitimate relations between the *Gadaa* leaders and the people is ostensibly witnessed. In *Gadaa* system of governance, the exercise of political power is stretched to all the eligible people except for individuals barred from social gatherings because of serious breach of laws. Thus, *Gadaa* system of the Arsii Oromo is participatory from these perspectives.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Constitution of the country visibly put that every nation and nationality of Ethiopia shall have unrestricted right to administer itself; and this shall include the right to establish government institutions within the territory it inhabits. The finding of this research necessitates that participatory values of *Gadaa* system shall be harnessed to enhance democratic governance in current federal system of Ethiopia. Both the procedures and structures of *Manbadha* general assembly of the Arsii Oromo shall also be exploited in the polity of the nation to ensure

<sup>7</sup> goddess of fecundity

<sup>8</sup> Ritual stick used to defend women’s right

<sup>9</sup> *Qanafaa* is a sacred piece of wood curved in diabolic shape women’s tie along their forehead after childbirth. Deliverers tie *qanafaa* on their neck when they start going outside of the home. *Qanafaa* is believed to protect harm from such women for they are liminal.

<sup>10</sup> A ritual of sacrificing an animal or shedding of blood when virgin girl gets married which heralds legitimacy of marriage contract

<sup>11</sup> Autocratic governments who have been suppressing the community

public participation in making laws and resolving malignant conflicts. How each segment of the society is dealt with in the political affair of the society can also be learned from *Gadaa* system of the Oromo in general and *manbadha* general assembly of the Arsii Oromo in particular.

### Conflict of interests

The authors have not declared any conflicts of interest.

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