The Analysis of the Gadaa System in Comparison to Western Democracy

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Box 1: Key points of the chapter

- Apart from the Western model of democracy, there are other indigenous models of democracy in different communities with their own unique qualities and achievements, one of which is the Gadaa system.
- The Gadaa system is more egalitarian than the Western model of democracy in terms of the quality of the decision-making process, accountability, inclusiveness, participation, political game, and the leadership development process.
- The government should support the development of indigenous governance systems through the provision of policy and other structural adjustments.

Box 2: Key Insights of this chapter

Reading this chapter will give you insight in
- Indigenous governance system and its dynamics
- Convergence and divergence between the Gadaa system and Western democracy
- Basic qualities of the Gadaa system and its comparison with the Western model of democracy.

Box 3: Abbreviations

MPs = Member of Parliaments
CCEFD = Conclusions of the Council of Europe Forum for the Future of Democracy

1. Introduction

Since 1980s several scholars and international institutions such as the World Bank have recognized indigenous knowledge as a significant resource for sustainable development (Zelalem, 2015). Particularly, indigenous knowledge of governance is defined as using indigenous institutions and practices for the exercising of economic, political, and administrative authorities to manage
a country’s affairs at all levels (Sithole & Mbele, 2008; Warren, 1991). In Africa, many ethnic groups have their own (indigenous) forms of governance characterized by remarkable qualities (Ayittey, 1991). Even though in contemporary Africa, the mode of governance is undoubtedly influenced by Western values and ideals, the majority of African citizens value their indigenous system as it influences their daily life, including the food they eat, the languages they speak, the way they dress, etc. (Kojo, 2017).

Similarly, the Oromos are one of the indigenous peoples living in Ethiopia having their own indigenous governance system. Prior to their colonization by the alliance of European imperialism and Ethiopian colonialism the Oromos were independently organized both culturally and politically using their own governance system, called “Sirna Gadaa,” or the Gadaa system (Aseffa, 2012; 2005; Holcomb and Sisai, 1990). The term “Gadaa” has no single and unanimously accepted definition and has been defined differently in different disciplines by different scholars (Zelalem, 2012). This reveals that the Gadaa system is a comprehensive and multidimensional indigenous system that can be conceptualized from diverse but complementary perspectives (Debela, 2017).

The system has been defined from political, philosophical, sociological, anthropological, legal, theological, astronomical, and other point of views (Asmarom, 1973). For instance, etymologically, Tsegaye Gebremedihin conceptualized Gadaa as coined from the combination of two terms ka (God or Creator) and aada (norms), which taken together mean the norms of God (Tsegaye, 1964). Further, Asmarom (1973) defined the Gadaa system as an age grade system, wherein a class of people assumes politico-ritual leadership for a period of eight years, via an electoral mechanism. According to Asmarom, the system enabled the Oromos to unite their people both militarily and organizationally so that they were able to expand or to recover their territories and accommodate their increased population and stock.

Vis-à-vis its emergence, Aseffa (2012) has stated that nobody knows when and how the Gadaa system emerged as a system of governance. Nonetheless, Aseffa has argued that, irrespective of the absence of adequate knowledge of Oromo history before the sixteenth century, it is reasonable to think that the Oromo people did not invent the system only at the moment they consolidated as a group through the defensive and offensive wars that took place during the sixteenth century. Additionally, Baissa (2004) confirms that the Oromos were already under the governance of the Gadaa system by the sixteenth century; at the same time, a special publication of Guji Culture and Tourism Bureau (2016) contends that the system was already in existence in the fifteenth century. Thus, regardless of the varying conceptions of what the Gadaa system is and when it emerged, the system has been organizing the Oromo people.
around political, economic, social, cultural, and religious institutions for at least the last five hundred years (Asmarom, 1973; Baissa 2004).

2. The Context of the Problem

The Gadaa system has been investigated by both domestic and expatriate scholars from different perspectives. For instance, in a series of publications, the prominent scholar Asmarom (1973, 1980, 2006) has mainly focused on the nature of the system and how it operates among the Oromos. Similarly, scholars like Zelalem (2012, 2015, 2018), Baissa (1994), Aseffa (2011), and Dirribi (2011) have conducted different studies of the system. Their analysis has focused on the characterization of the system and on the question of its suitability to different contexts, in particular that of present-day Ethiopia.

Other scholars have also studied the system from the point of view of its contribution to conflict resolution and its grand philosophies regarding women’s empowerment. For instance, Kuwe (1997) stressed the role of the Siiqqee (women’s organization) institution in promoting women into the decision-making process under the Gadaa system. Meanwhile, Debela (2017) analyzed system’s suitability and feasibility to be used as an alternative system to the one presently in place in Ethiopia and argued that it should be considered as one of the recognized means of Afsol (the so-called Africa Solution), focusing in particular on the role of the system in resolving local conflicts and empowering women. But all the above studies mainly focused on describing the nature and structural setup of the system, while considering its values from different perspectives. Only a very few of them have conducted a critical analysis of the system in comparison with the Western model of democracy. To address this gap, this chapter means to identify the values of the Gadaa system and to compare it with the values of the Western model of democracy.

3. Indigenous Governance System and Western Democracy

In parallel to the old and indigenous system of governance, the so-called modern governance system (Western democracy) is often defined as “the rule of the people where rules are determined by the people who are to obey those rules.” Thus, as the system (Western democracy) has a positive connotations, many governments of the world connect themselves with it and claim to belong to it even if their society is characterized by little or no communal participation.1
For instance, among the 193 countries of the world that are recognized by the United Nations, 123 are said to have modern system of governance with the connotation of Western democracy (www.freedomhouse.org). More than half of those states claim that they have already set up the form of government that is characterized by communal participation, no matter what forms (legal or illegal) they are in fact operating under (Paula & Jean-Aime, 2008).

Despite its popularity, the modern model of governance is never perfect and never complete, and it was with this mind that Karl Popper said, “Democracy is the word for something that does not exist.” Moreover, it should be understood that democratic society is more than a democratically elected government. There is even a universal concern about the status of Western democracy, and political discontents and skepticisms toward the system are becoming widespread. Due to this, citizens often feel powerless and are discouraged from taking a more active role in their society (ibid).

Consequently, given this need for an alternative governance system, particularly an indigenous governance system that would meet the needs of non-Western societies has led to advocates of indigenous governance celebrating it as the single largest knowledge resource not yet mobilized in the development enterprise (Paul, cited in Warren et al. 1996). Accordingly, policy makers have recognized the importance of indigenous knowledge systems and developed funding mechanisms, legislations, and policy frameworks to identify and protect them (Tshwane University, 2013).

Particularly in Africa, the indigenous governance system plays a significant role in the thinking, behavior, and welfare of the community. For instance, in Ethiopia, the Oromo people have their own indigenous governance system called the Gadaa system, which has been described as an autonomous, egalitarian, and inclusive system of governance covering all sections of the society. Thus, it is the main objective of this chapter to analyze the fundamental principles of the “Gadaa system” and compare it with the fundamental principles of Western democracy in terms of its governance and power transferring procedures/practices.

4. Methodology

In answering the research questions and achieving the objectives set, the study utilized both primary and secondary data sources, while taking a fully qualitative approach. Primary data was gathered through an observation check lists by visiting all the ceremonies and events involved in the power transferring process under the Gadaa system at a place called Mi’ee
Boku, a place where this process is undertaken every eight years. In addition observation, Abbaa Gadaas, Hayyuus, elders, and key informants from local communities were selected using snowball sampling, and in-depth interviews were intensively employed. Finally, secondary data sources were collected from books, journals, bulletins, newspapers, and official publications.

5. Oromo’s Governance System before the Gadaa System

In order to analyze the governance system of the Oromo people before the development of the Gadaa system, the study used both primary and secondary sources, in which the kings (Abbaa Gadaas) and senior law makers (Hayyuus) were interviewed intensively and publications perused thoroughly. Accordingly, the study found that the Oromos experienced two phases of governance systems before the establishment of the Gadaa system. Firstly, there was a period of multiple kingships, wherein each family tree and clan used to govern themselves by appointing their own kings. However, there is no concrete data for how many years this multiple kingships system functioned, although the oral tradition of the Abba Gadaas and Hayyuus asserts that it persisted for many centuries (Jiloo Mandhoo, March, 2015; Guyo, March, 2015)

The second stage was a period of single kingship and queenship, in which men and women ruled as a king and a queen one after another respectively. This period was marked by many social problems, which forced the then-rulers governors to consider a different system of governance. As a result of these deliberations, which evolved over a period of time during which they considered the concept of dual administration, they came to consider a system of team leadership. Then, they devised a system of governance for their own social, cultural, political, economic problems and named it the Gadaa system (Guji Zone Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2016). Although some scholars argue that the system emerged fully-fledged rather than evolved, the Guji Zone’s Culture and Tourism Bureau confirms that the system has reached its present status through evolution.

6. The Leading Laws under the Gadaa System

Like any other society, the Oromos have been conscious of their cultural identity, their relationship with nature, and the existence of a powerful force that regulates the connection between nature and society. Accordingly, their knowledge of society and the world is classified into two categories: a) cultural and customary
knowledge known as *Beekumsa Aadaa*, and b) knowledge of laws, known as *Beekumsa Seera*. The knowledge of laws is further subdivided into the laws of God (*Seera Waaqa*), and the laws of human beings (*Seera nama*). While the laws of God are immutable, the laws of human beings may be changed through consensus and democratic means. Oromo customary knowledge is a public and common knowledge that guides and regulates the activities of members of society; some elements of this customary knowledge could be developed into rules or laws, depending on the interest of society (Gemetchu, 1993).

The Oromos’ political, social, economic, and cultural traits are highly determined by the values of the Gadaa system. There cannot be development (*finna*), peace, social justice, freedom (*kao*), prosperity, success, happiness, and moral values (*safu*) without the Gadaa system (Assefa, 2012). In an interview, Abbaa Gadaa Waqo Duubee affirmed that “Gadaa is our system of governance with age; grade and party descriptions and we use it for all of our spiritual, cultural, political, economic and social matters” (Waaqoo Duubee, 2015). Abbaa Gadaa Jiloo Mandhoo strengthened the argument by saying, “Gadaa system is all in all for us, and it is a means of governing each other, preserving our culture, and protecting our boundary, our peace and security” (Jiloo Mandhoo, 2015).

7. **Structural Set Up of the Gadaa System**

As will become clear below, the Gadaa system has its own governance structure that depicts the relationship between different actors. Under the system, out of the two fundamental laws (the laws of God and the laws of human beings), the law of God is the guiding principle of the overall governance system. Thus, the Gadaa and its officials are more accountable to the guiding laws of God than to the people. This means the fear of God and His values are the guiding and leading rules. Likewise, under God/next to God, the general public is the most respected and the most influential stakeholder in any kind of decision-making. Then, the assembly (*gumi gayo*) occupies the decision-making sphere, and the Abbaa Gadaa and his team are highly accountable to the general public. Most importantly, the assembly acts and works in the interest of the people. The seven cabinets are: Abbaa Torbiis (monitors of the implementation of any decisions and laws delivered during sessions of the *gumi gayo*), Hayyuus (formulators of rules, regulations, and laws), Fagaa (spiritual counselors/advisors and supporters of Luba /Abba Gadaa), Jalkeenya (the protocol officers of Abba Gadaa, and facilitators of the cases), Jaldhaaba (protectors of the laws of the land), and the Waamuras (facilitators of the meetings/assemblies and supporters of Abbaa Gadaa).
Diagram 1: Governance Structure of Gadaa System

8. Gadaa System’s Party Structure

Under the Gadaa system (particularly Guji’s Gadaa system) there are five parties (Harmuuufa, Roobalee, Muudana, Haalchisa, and Dhallana) that govern/rule as a government one after the other. One party rules for eight years and waits the other four parties to rule and come back to power after forty years. For instance, the party governing up to November 2015 was Dhallana, and the Harmuuufa party came to power in January 2016. Hence, the Harmuuufa will govern for the coming eight years, and then will pass power on to Roobale in January 2024. The last year’s outgoing Gadaa will come back after forty years. Despite their peaceful power transfer and peaceful preparation of candidates, there is tough competition among them. The parties compete with each other, and want their period of governance to be more powerful and fruitful than that of the outgoing and the incoming party.

Diagram 2: Gadaa System’s Party Structure

Source: Author
9. **Comparative Analysis of the Modern Approach with Gadaa System**

Based on the data gathered through a review of literatures on both the Gadaa system and the modern/Western model/approach of democracy, field visits (observation), and the key informant interviews, the researcher identified the basic elements and features of the Gadaa system and compared it with the Western approach/model of democracy. Accordingly, the below table shows the comparison made, and the argument arising out of it.

**Table 1: Gadaa system Vs Modern/Western democracy**

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- **Leadership values**: Leadership values are the governing morals and beliefs guiding the practices and procedures of a leadership system. Under the Western model of democracy, the guiding values and principles are the laws formulated by higher decision-makers/MPs. In contrast, under the Gadaa system priority is given to the values and principles of God (*Waaqa*), and these Godly values serve as the general frameworks for all laws and principles. Thus, the fear of God and His values comes first, and respecting the laws of the land takes the second priority. This does not mean that...
the system resembles a theocratic system, where the divinely appointed officials and priests claiming to know the will of God rule the people or where the state’s legal system is based on religious law. It is a system with two foundations. The first foundation is that Oromo’s philosophy, culture, governance, and politics build themselves on the fear of a supernatural God and do not engage in any evil acts. The Oromos believe that doing evil is moving against the will of the supernatural God, and they do have fixed norms defining evil. Secondly, under the Gadaa system, a Qaallu (spiritual father and counsellor) is very much autonomous and powerful in overseeing the performance, excellence, and the decisions of leaders (Abbaa Gadaa and his councils). Therefore, in contrast to the Western model of democracy, where the fear of God and His powerful laws are overridden and separated from politics and governance in the name of secularism, the Gadaa system prioritizes the fear of the supernatural God in every action and decision and –delegates to Qalluu great power in overseeing the leadership and leading some ritual and ceremonial activities. That is why any blessings and proclamations under the Gadaa system starts with “Waaqa hin Wayyu,” which means “God shall not be better?”

- **Bases of DecisionMaking:** It is apparent that any decision-making process needs a base for its validity. For instance, under the Western liberal approach to democracy, any decision-making process bases itself on the existence of evidence, and the evidence at hand determines the result of the decision. In the absence of evidence either there is no decision or an incorrect decision. In contrast, under the Gadaa system, as the governance system is highly attached to spiritual values and principles, priority is given to searching for the truth, rather than the evidence. For instance, under the Western model, if someone is accused of sexual harassment and there is no evidence for it, a person would be free, even if he had committed the crime. Under the Gadaa system, the spiritual values are the most respected elements and there is a belief that the result of lying is very harmful. Thus, even in the absence of evidence, the accused person would speak the truth to the court.

- **Sovereignty:** In the Western model of democracy, the principle of popular sovereignty is prioritized and praised publically. But in practice, elites’ sovereignty is highly appreciated. However, under the Gadaa System, God’s values are the sovereign and highly valued principles and receive the highest consideration, while popular sovereignty is valued as the second most important priority.
Center of Leadership: By its very nature, the Western model of leadership spotlights the headquarters leadership model, where the higher decision-makers live and work at the capital city of the nation or the country so that leadership is by distance, and laws and procedures are propagated down to the people. This system is called off-the community leadership, wherein leadership is located far from the populace. But under the Gadaa system, the leadership takes power and immediately starts its journey within the community. For their eight years of leadership, the officials move within the community so that they can treat all local community problems in person. This leadership is called in the community leadership, in which the life and living of leadership bases itself in and with the community.

The Result of Political Game: Politics is a game where the outcome of competing actors results in either lose-lose or win-win or win-lose scenarios. Hence, in a democracy of the Western model, political games mostly result in a win-lose outcome, in which the incoming party would win the game of politics and the outgoing one is always the loser, and election is the instrument of the game. Under the Gadaa system, as a rule of politics there are five political parties, and age set generations with different stages. Both the incoming and the outgoing Abba Gadaas are winners in the game. This is because when the incoming Abba Gadaa holds the position, his team moves one step forward with in Gadaa class; likewise, the outgoing Abba Gadaa also joins the Baatu class, or one step forward within the class. Then, with his team, the outgoing Abba Gadaa becomes a senior advisor and part of the highest decision-making class. Thus, the power transferring system always results in a win-win outcome where both the incoming and outgoing Abbaa Gadaas wait for the day of power transfer with a lovely gift in kind for each other. Finally, they discuss and consult each other on how to go forward together in the future.

Inclusiveness/Participation: Basically in a Western model of democracy, politics is dominated by those who can and are capable of running the affairs of the state. It implicitly excludes children, the young, and the elderly from the stadium of political affairs. But as the political participation under Gadaa system is based on age set, anyone joins the age set structure based on the age class, and the system is inclusive of all the age sets. On the other hand, the system is partly criticized by its lower concern to women's representation, particularly in the age-set of the Gadaa class. The research conducted for this chapter confirmed the concerns of critics in
two ways. Firstly, the system excludes women from the age-set leadership development process. Secondly, the system also puts zero probability for women to compete with men and hold leadership positions, particularly the Abba Gadaaship.

Nevertheless the system includes the following two main ground rules to validate women’s participation in various arenas. Firstly, under the Gadaa system there is an assumption that there are two types of power: positional power and influencing power. The men have positional power and the women have influencing power in the decision-making process. In other words, the women do influence the system of decision-making either through direct or indirect consultation. Secondly, the system provides an indirect mechanism for engaging women into political and leadership positions. For instance, to protect their rights and to ensure that their interests are included in any spheres of decision-making, the women have their own institution, called *Siiqqee*. This institution is a means through which women influence the processes and the structures of decision-making under the Gadaa system. Debela (2017) and Aseffa (2011) also confirm that the Gadaa system promotes women’s participation in all cases and that the women are the pillars of the Gadaa system.

- **Leadership Development**: The Western model of democracy is well-known for its competitive nature. The one who is the fittest will gain of all the chances, and the *survival of the fittest approach* is the guiding principle of leadership. With this value, an opportunistic approach to leadership is the most widely visible one, and chances and opportunities play an important role in helping people to engage in a leadership and political environment. In contrast, under the Gadaa system, mentorship of leadership starts from early childhood, and leadership development is progressive by its very nature. Thus, leadership development is the main value of the system, wherein all people attach themselves to their respective leadership development categories and a junior-senior hierarchy and mentorship process is arranged within the system.

- **System of Political Competition**: Under both systems there is competition for different reasons, especially for power and political representations. Under the Western model of democracy, the culture of political competition is based on hate, personal decisions, and determinations, which exacerbates conflicts, hates, and hatred. In contrast, under the Gadaa system, the competition is very peaceful where it is based on performance and excellence; keeping social and spiritual values as it is.
Any competition which runs out of the social values would be condemned publically.

- **Accountability:** Regarding the level of accountability, in the so-called Western democracy, elected and appointed officials are responsible for their actions and are accountable to the people. Officials must make decisions and perform their duties according to the wishes of the people they represent. Thus, irrespective of the interests and claims (good or bad) of the people, officials’ leadership is supposed to be guided by the values of the people they represent, which is why homosexuality, racism, and immorality are re-emerging globally. But, as we have already mentioned, currently the system is criticized in many ways, and citizens often feel powerless and discouraged from taking active role in their society (CEFFD, 2007). As a result, the reality shows the reverse of the proclaimed vision, where a party’s accountability is the dominating concern over popular accountability. But, under the Gadaa system, the first and foremost accountability is the supernatural God (Waaqa), where all leaders believe that God is the master of everything, and the provider of any authority. Thus, not only elitits’ and party superiority but even popular accountability comes after God’s accountability.

- **Means – Ends Correlation:** In the Western model of governance, the fundamental principle guiding any actions and efforts is the fact that ends justify the means. In contrast, the reverse works under the Gadaa system. For instance, under the Western model of governance, despite the intentions and the reasons behind a given act, if the majority agrees with the act, it will be valid. But, under the Gadaa system, it is not the majority which matters but that which doesn’t contradict God’s and social values, benefits the people, and does not contradict cultural laws and the philosophies of the community.

- **Tests of Leadership:** Under the Western model of democracy there is no specific term of leadership for all countries: different countries use different periods (terms) of leadership. Leaders stay in power for the term of leadership given to them either by periodic election or by constitutional provision. In contrast, under the Gadaa system, firstly, the term of leadership is fixed, always eight years by its very nature. Secondly, the term of leadership is not a guarantee of remaining in power. Though the term is eight years, if the leading Gadaa class is not functioning well, evaluation will be carried out in the middle of the term (four years) and the leadership will continue leading based on the result of mid-term evaluation.
10. Conclusion

In Africa, many ethnic groups have their own (indigenous) forms of governance characterized by remarkable qualities. In Ethiopia, the Oromos are one of the indigenous peoples with their own indigenous governance system, called the Gadaa System. The main objective of the study was to assess the basic qualities of the Gadaa system and to compare it with the Western model of democracy. The comparison was made based on eleven identified values, like leadership values, base of decision-making, sovereignty, center of leadership, result of political game, inclusiveness/participation, leadership development, competition means and ends correlation, and tests of leadership. Finally the study found that the Gadaa system is imbedded in the heart and soul of the people and is superior to the Western model of democracy in terms of the above values. Finally, the study suggests that the government should support indigenous knowledge, particularly the indigenous governance system in terms of policy provision and structural setup.

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Notes

3. is defined as the cumulative body of strategies, practices, techniques, tools, intellectual resources, explanations, beliefs, and values accumulated over time in a particular locality, without the interference and impositions of external hegemonic forces (Gloria and George 2004).
4. Ethiopia’s largest ethnic group living in central and southern Ethiopia.
5. The Gadaa system took its present-day structure only during the fifteenth century; previously, the system was very complex and not as strong as of today’s.
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