Research Paper

Indigenous Democratic Governance in the Horn of Africa: Some Reflections on the Democratic Principles and Political Significance of Gadaa Governance

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Article Info	Abstract
	The Gadaa governance system is the political governance in which suppression and exploitation by the ruling is strictly forbidden as well as considered as wicked. This study was aimed at examining the indigenous Gadaa governance system in light of Western democratic ideologies and principles. To this end, the study utilized qualitative approach and extensive literature appraisal which is supported by existing document analysis. The study revealed that the Gadaa system serves as the basis of a democratic political system. It also showed that Gadaa governance is a feasible constitutional replica in this 21st century. The Oromo Gadaa system has strong democratic elements that concern with all spheres of the nation. Consequently, this study clearly point out the need to amalgamate the ideology of Gadaa governance system in the constitution of the state. Finally, this paper argues that revitalization, institutionalization and rehabilitation of this indigenous democratic governance system can contribute better in the democratization process of the state as well as the peace and stability of the Oromo nation and Horn of Africa.

1. Introduction

Before the formation of modern Ethiopia, the Oromo nation, one of the African indigenous societies, used the Gadaa system of governance to organize and order their society around political institutions. It helped Oromo nation to turn out to be self-governing and well thought-out both politically and socially in order to promote the Oromo nation wellbeing as well as autonomy (Assefa Jaleta, 2012). However, the political process that was set into motion by the mid-19th century to the area of the Zemene Mesafint was able to produce a full of ledged monarchy (Levine, 1974) which brought appalling system of discrimination and inequality for more than a century.

After modern Ethiopia emerged at the closing years of 19th century, however, Oromo nation started both internal and external protest demanding eagerly for their indigenous governance system. By its very principles and ideologies of governance, it is a designed indigenous governance system exceeding contemporary democratic system (Asmarom, 2006). Most of all, it is a balancing governance instrument not merely for the wellbeing of aboriginal peoples but also for the nonviolent coexistence of nature as opposed to a supremacy of a single political society, especially the Western democracy. Specifically speaking, most of the indigenous Gadaa institutions of governance are more democratic in several aspects than the imported Western style governance principles for the reason that no one size shoe fits all.

More important from political stand point, the democratization process of a given state would be more fruitful if it only considers indigenous knowledge and

governance. This is so because indigenous governance builds trust between the ruler and the ruled. There is a relationship between trust, indigenous governance and democratization. A good example to be noted here is the degree to which Greek and United States society were characterized by generalized social trust, directed at both the government and fellow citizens. Both states have been home to republican democracy; both are notable because they are successful in practicing democratization process.

However, there is a failure in giving realistic recognition to Oromo indigenous knowledge in general and Oromo indigenous governance called Gadaa in particular. As at present discourse, the expression of Gadaa governance system is interchangeably used with stipulations of traditional governance and/or local governance which bound its importance in the political culture and governance ideology.

According to Sharma (1993), in order to make democratization process triumphant, government and governance structure should be part and parcel of the society. In this regard, based on his work, it is possible to make out that the Gadaa governance system is an indigenous governance that can more organizes and governs Oromo nation on one hand and speed up the democratization process on the other hand. It is thorny to leave out the political and social issues of the Oromo from the principles of Gadaa system. For instance, some scholars (Asefa Jaleta, 2012) note that the Gadaa system organized the Oromo people in an all-encompassing democratic republic even before scholars arrived from Europeans with the intention of building democracy.

Moreover, there are different studies (Pankhurst, et al. 2008) undertaken so far on democratization process and democratic governance by different scholars. However, almost all of them are concerned with controversial issues of human rights and democracy without giving focus on the role of indigenous governance. And most of them, yet, remain within the neo- western conceptions of governance and fail to recognize the indigenous democratic governance system. And some scholars (Nikolas, 2010 and Leus, 2006 as cited in Habtamu Disasa, 2017) at different times argued for and against the indigenous governance of Oromo Gadaa system. Above all, the Gadaa indigenous governance system is criticized in relation to

its failure to cover all democratic ideology of governance, composition involvedness, gender inconsiderateness and political significance in democratization process. Here it is possible to argue that they have approached the study of Gadaa governance with different academic backgrounds and cultural orientations, as a result, diverse interpretation of its principles and standards possibly will increase.

At a standstill, some attempted to reduce the scope and content of Gadaa governance system to the spiritual globe without any recognition to its multi-dimensional administrative political spheres (Habtamu Disasa, 2017). For instance, Asmarom (2000) states that Gadaa institution is one of the famous indigenous African institutions that deals with aspects of human society which is limited to economic, ritual and military. Asafa (2007) although noted that the Oromo had an unrestricted system of indigenous governance institutional structure, the focus of the study is given on the role of Gadaa system in conflict resolution without addressing the democratic elements of Gadaa governance. Likewise, Tenna (2009) argued that the Gadaa system is intricate, all-inclusive and convenient system. However, in his work the role of indigenous governance, specifically, Gadaa governance in relation to democratization process is not premeditated. Despite the fact that Asmarom (2006) demonstrate the fact that the Gadaa governance structure is a political governance system with strong self-governing basics, the nexus between democratization process and Gadaa governance on one hand and political significance of Gadaa governance on the other hand is not addressed.

In fact, there are some writers who consider the Gadaa system as spiritual practices alone and hence try to undermine its political significance. Hinnant, for example, views this system as politically irrelevant, playing ritualistic roles only (Hinnant, 1978). These scholars disregard the function of Gadaa governance system in each aspect of the Oromo nation which also includes politics, environmental, religious and philosophical aspects. This and other related factors made the existing literature on Gadaa system too general. So, by taking into consideration all these points, conducting this study is firmly imperative.

2. Methodology

With the aim to scrutinize democratic principles and political significance of the Gadaa governance in the horn of Africa, this study employed a qualitative approach. The study adds to the existing discourse on the subject by examining the democratic principles and political significance of Gadaa governance. This rationale is initiated from the writer's hypothesis that unlike western democracy, there are untouched democratic values in the Gadaa system which can solve governance crisis but not appropriately and effectively used by the government and institutions. To achieve this objective, qualitative research approach is better for the reason that it attempts to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people attach to them (Creswell, 2003). In other words, qualitative research is, basically, interpretive in that it involves analyzing data and finally making interpretation or drawing conclusions about the data analyzed (Ibid). Accordingly, secondary data that were collected through a systematic reading of books, journal articles, reports and credible internet sources are qualitatively interpreted and analyzed. Given its broad and complex socio-political aspects of the Gadaa governance system, the scope of the study is delimited to its democratic principles and political significance.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Gadaa Governance System as Better Option: Does it Convincing?

Some scholars assume that Gadaa governance system has some democratic discrepancy by depending on limited number of studies which hardly focus on its governance structure and system (Assefa; 2008). When comparing Gadaa indigenous governance system with modern democratic governance, it is possible to argue that Gadaa governance system is a better option of governance. By taking this issue in to consideration, the next focus of our discussion will be identifying reasons that make the Gadaa indigenous governance better than the western style based governance and ideologies.

The Oromo society experiences a sense of possession and considers the Gadaa governance system as their worth (Tenna Dewo, 2008). The wisdom of belongingness is innate to people's outlook. Thus, it is more than simple political directive. In contrary to this, in western governance system, citizens think the arrangement as pure political governance (Abanyam, 2013) and even search to see other possible options. This clearly shows that they externalize the western governance system rather than internalizing it. In addition to this, Gadaa governance system has multifaceted interconnection with civilization, custom, standards and societal faith of Oromo society that its leadership is considered as a principled administration rather than political governance. However, as far as western democratic governance is considered, people do not consider it as their shared worth. They perceive it mainly as influential regulation, lawful reflection or legal provisions. In Gadaa governance system, political decisions are made by principled stipulation whereas in western governance, political decisions are almost subject to the authorized guideline as well as political calculations (Gufu Oba 1996). Practically, Qallu is the moral side of governance that is consistent with other Gadaa institutions and important in the check and balance of power.

Unlike western governance which is inaccessible to the local communities, Gadaa governance system is easily accessible to the local community. It is advantageous since it is affordable to the constituent of Oromo community. Additionally, the political game in Gadaa governance system stresses the resolution of protagonist with each other rather than making entire winner or loser. Here, the concept of Oromo community talks may rationalize this truth. In line with this, the socio-political sentence aims not at revenge but resuming social stability, compensation, confession, resolution, pardon, open-mindedness and nonviolent co-existence (Mekuria Bulcha 1996). The process of justice running is less costly in view of the fact that individuals have tough decent pledge. By considering these and other related factors it is possible to argue that Gadaa governance system is politically smooth and trustworthy procedure of governance system.

On the other hand, as far as western governance system is concerned, it establishes right and wrong, winner and loser rather than reconciling the protagonists. Thus, there is a political notion of win-lose outcome or total triumph of one group over the other. Here the political judgment is aimed at punishment and giving lessons to others the hardest way rather than forgiveness and peaceful coexistence (Hinnant John,

1978). This indicates that unlike Gadaa governance system the western governance system is not based on open consent.

Even if the socio-political, economic and executive rules and laws do not exist in a written form as a constitution of state in Gadaa governance system, it is in the reminiscence of individuals and entrenched in social values of Oromo society (Ibid). In western governance system, rules and regulations are not socio-politically, culturally and psychologically internalized by individuals. It is also less affordable to the local community that societies feel as it is imposition type of governance system (Daniel, 2014). Hence, it is possible to argue that when comparing with Gadaa governance system; western governance system is a complex and ambivalent bureaucratic procedure of governance system.

3.2. The Political Dimension of Gadaa Governance: A Look at its Democratic Implication

Historically, the Oromo people were independent and self-governing nation until the end of the 19th century. As also stated before, indigenous governance play a significant role in building democratization process on one hand and trust between the society and the ruler on the other hand(Feldman, 1966). By taking this in to consideration and arguing that Gadaa governance system is a democratic indigenous political system of Oromo people and other nations, this section points out the political substance of Gadaa governance. An important debate is going on relating to whether the Gadaa system can practically be applied in the contemporary Oromo societies. Attitudes significantly differ in this regard. But one issue scholars of democratic governance seem to agree on is that the unswerving model of the Gadaa governance system to modern political reality is unthinkable, due to western globalization and the legacies of imperial regimes influence in Ethiopia (Mohamed; 2013:18).

It is evident that it is difficult to say with certainty a given political governance system possesses the characteristics of a democratic implication and possible to implement unless conditions are met and expressed clearly. To be specific, it needs more insightful and appropriately conceived traits that help us better understand the political dimension of the governance system. In our case of Gadaa governance, all member of

the Gadaa stage collectively rose to the highest position of political and social role in the societies. Due to this, it connotes a period of eight years. Here, what makes this type of political governance attention-grabbing is that in the nature of Gadaa governance system, power is not exercised from the center. A part from this, there is balanced representation of all peoples. This indicates the fact that the nature of Gadaa governance system is federal state structure. The Gadaa leader is called Abba Gadaa (meaning head of the reign, father of the scepter), (Jemjem and Dhadach, 2011 cited in Tesema Ta'a, 2016). In fact, one may inevitably venture into a discussion on other aspects of the Gadaa governance ideologies, when he/she intends to study its political implication and dimension aspects. Accordingly, if the discussion of Oromo Gadaa system from its structure perspective is pointed out, we are simultaneously talking about its complex system of political governance. In this case, we can talk of the Gadaa system just like when we talk about systems such as democracy and aristocracy. Even if there are differences in ideologies, principles and contents, all these systems of governance basically focus on political context of democratizing process of the state.

At this point, what we need to be clear with is the concept of democracy, democratic governance and its elements. Concerning this discussion, they may vary even among various systems of governance that we often consider as democratic state and not democratic state. For instance, Mohammed Salih states that democratic governance in general and democratization process in particular is not about the process and procedure of political power shift from one regime to another (2001:20). He rather argued that democratic governance is about political participation, the skill of peoples to articulate their inclination freely and how this is assured according to a given institutional structure and jurisdictional power (Ibid).

Salih's conception of democratic political governance system would undoubtedly assist us to reveal the nature of autonomous essentials and democratic functionality entrenched in the Oromo Gadaa political governance system. His conception focuses on limited period of governance, check and balance, values and attitudes of the people that the society elected. And in Gadaa indigenous governance,

the period of eight years is set as the period of one term of presidency which has its own meaning. At the end of term of presidency which is at every eight years, Oromo hold a big and general assembly so as to revisit and revise contents of their laws. In addition to this, the periodic assembly has a power and duty to examine and improve qualities of working rules and regulations. Here, the member of the national assembly known as Gumii or Caffee is made up of all the assemblies and councils of the Oromo who review the existing laws and make new laws when needed.

In addition to this, they also evaluate the men in power and resolve major conflicts that could not be resolved at lower levels of their judicial organization (Asmarom, 2006). Saying this with regards to the political notion of Gadaa governance system, it is worth to note that this indigenous system has been challenged by different internal and external factors (Asmarom, 2006). The existence of factors affecting Gadaa governance practice suggests the need to find the possible everlasting solutions to these issues which may include but not limited to institutionalizing the system and incorporating in the rule and regulations of the state. It is evident that there are studies conducted by some scholars (Dereje Hinew, 2012) which mainly focus on the analysis of the Oromo nation Gadaa governance system features. Hence, there are inadequate studies undertaken to be support that Gadaa governance principles has more democratic elements which is even so difficult to find in the republican type of democracy. By considering this, the focus of the next section of this paper would be on the scrutinizing the democratic elements of Gadaa governance system.

3.3 The Democratic Elements of Gadaa Governance System

Despite its origin and theoretical disparities, democratic governance has similar subjects and topics of debate in dealing with its indicators (Mohammed Salih, 2001). These may include; significance, scopes as well as indicators. Under this section, this paper will focus on an assessment of democratic governance indicators in Gadaa governance system.

One indication of democratic governance is free, fair and periodic election. Based on this, it is evident that Gadaa governance refers to the eight year period of government. There is also clear division of power and

responsibilities. Concerning this, the Gadaa governance system is a multifaceted system in which the Oromo are divided into different patties and take part in political, military and cultural affairs (Baissa, 1971). All party had detailed function and purpose to perform in five periods of eight years each. What happen at the end of political regime change also determines to what extent the procedure and process is democratic and all inclusive (Daniel, 2014). Accordingly, in Gadaa system at the transfer of power, the waiting party would hold ceremonies and become the ruling party for a period of eight years. The leaders of the previous retired into an advisory role while the new leaders were entrusted with defense and governance of the Oromo nation. Its leaders exercise full decision-making power and responsibility regarding military and civil matters affecting the Oromo.

When it comes to the other focus of democratic governance, the central attention of any study is the process of law making and law enforcing. In line with this, there are three organs within a Gadaa governance system that are ethically, politically and functionally interdependent. In addition to this, different scholars considered the Oromo Gadaa System as a greatly developed autonomous political and legal system. For instance, Pankhurst and Getachew, (2008:28), as well as Asmarom (1973:31), similarly argued that the institutional governance and conflict management in the Oromo people is processed by independent but interconnected organs such as the Gadaa judicial or dispute settlement, the Qalluu (spiritual leader) and the Gumii which mean national assembly. Here, it is obvious that the three systems are mutually supporting and it is difficult to understand one without the others. Consequently, often such a tough and in depth sociological and anthropological research of some of the above scholars in general and Asmarom in particular considered the Gadaa system as a democratic political and military system with strong democratic elements manifested throughout selected political leaders (Tesema Ta'a, 2016). Due to this, we can argue that what makes the democratic quality of the Gadaa system more strong another way from a variety of systems of governance is Oromo people take and internalize Gadaa governance as value, identity and ways of life. It is so because it is difficult to argue that all principles of

western democracy are gracious with African worldview. Specifically, some of these western principles have rather helped to lessen the African civilizing principles.

Marco Bassi (1996) point out some important implications of the Gadaa governance system which is possible to declare basic to modern Oromo politics in particular and Horn of Africa in general. One such significance is the participatory approach from down to top that he believes can be extended to modern Oromo polity. The extensive dialogue through which consensus under the Gadaa system is reached is an exemplary participatory leadership. Here it is also possible to highlights not only political participatory system of good governance but also the economic significance as the Gadaa model could be taken as a inspiration to keep both the resources controlled by the center and the powers delegated to the political center as limited as possible, in order to reduce competitions. This has been one of the major causes of devastating inter-ethnic conflict in post-colonial Africa states. Consequently, Asafa (2007) also notes that Gadaa governance system was based on the principles of check and balance, division of power, balanced opposition and power sharing between higher and lower administrative organs which prevent power from falling into the hands of despots (Asafa 2007:48).

A part from the above discussions, the notion of freedom which western scholars and philosophers (John Locke, 1962) used to put at the midpoint when they discuss democratic governance and democratization process of the state is also critical. When it comes to the case of Gadaa Oromo, it is tricky to disconnect individual freedom from social freedom. For instance, in this indigenous governance system there is a principle known as saala-fokko which identifies individuals with society and considers them as one and the same. This relation is not simple legal necessary in the sense we know today, but rather realistic decent binding that have embodied the courage of unity, universal identity, and common internal peace.

Finally, it is also important to note that the Gadaa system is not only apolitical democratic system centered on humans but it also encompasses the value of nature which also safeguards the natural environment. The Oromo Gadaa system promotes democratic customs (Asmarom, 1973, Workineh, 2005) and contains requirements for the security of the rights of both human being and non-human species. The bonds between the environment and the people are not only material but also spiritual and moral (Workineh, 2002). From its nature, it is possible to argue that there is a clear and close corresponding relationship between the Gadaa governance system and republican principles of governance. However, at the same time there are democratic elements which are found in Gadaa indigenous governance but not in Western style democracy.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, we have discussed that the Oromo had democratic and civilized type of governance system that developed their own cultural, religious and political institutions and shaped their history. It indicated that the Oromo nation have an all-encompassing socio-cultural, moral and political guide unified under the given of Gadaa political governance. They constitute their whole ethical life as the mirror of all other aspects; such as economic, norms, politics and conception of truth that holds them together. The Oromo practice all these aspects of life at various stages of socio-cultural practice across generations.

Based on this study, it is possible to outline different critical principles of Gadaa governance system which are even missed in discussion of republican democratic governance of western democracy. This principle of governance includes but not limited to balanced opposition, periodic succession, democratically ranked social structures, the principles of accountability and the principle of seniority and succession. There is no doubt that these principles of indigenous governance can serve as the foundation to which modern ideas and practices of development could be incorporated. In contrast, the recent Gadaa system development is operating only as one part of the culture of the Oromo people, but not as an independent political system which needs further academic and research works.

Finally, it is evident to argue that as Gadaa governance system is innate to the horn of African in general and to Ethiopia in particular, it helps to maintain the norms, values, morality and the general culture of indigenous people. This enables the country to pursue a stable peace and development easily. Hence, the

government should encourage the development of indigenous governance system that is consistent with the nation cultural values. In this way, the state can move away from the existing governance crisis and adverse effects of western democracy.

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