CHAPTER 3

GADA SYSTEM: A STOREHOUSE OF VALUES

It has been shown in the earlier chapter that Gada is a comprehensive system of life and values. Primarily it values life from an intrinsic perspective. The value that Gada ascribes to life makes things, relationships, actions and behaviours valuable. Again, these are the values that intrinsically value life. This chapter endeavours to look into the issues as to how Gada as a comprehensive system of life and values emerged and unfolded, what values it cherishes and how does it apply these values and what mechanism it uses to promote the good and demote the bad values.

Like in many other parts of the world, African societies are comprised of tradition­laden tribal societies of the past both self-sufficient and almost homogeneous. Tradition has given way to a society characterized by great diversity between groups, beliefs, values and interdependent economies. As a consequence, African societies are experiencing a new wave of socio-economic, moral and political values. At this point in time it is imperative to go back in history and explore what systems and views, beliefs and imaginations embodied those traditions. Oromo is one of the African traditional societies with a fascinating socio-cultural and political system (i.e., Gada) that attracts intellectual pursuit.

3.1. Emergence and Evolution of Gada System

When did the Gada System emerge? How did it evolve? It may not be simple to provide easy answers to these questions. Tracing to the exact date when Gada as a system emerged, and the exact name(s) of its founder(s) is very difficult. This issue remains being an open question still inviting scholars of relevant background for further exploration. However, there are different responses to the questions, which can be used as a springboard for further exploration. Some of the modern writers trace the origin of the Gada system as far back as the 16th century, whereas some others contend that the system was developed in the remote past although it is difficult to specifically state the exact date.

Still there are other informants who contend that Gada is as old as the history of Oromo. But this assertion may not help us to move further. As an advanced and comprehensive system of thought, Gada should be the outcome of the cumulative effect of
human reflection; Gada is the result of the cumulative effect of the cultivated minds and culture. No society had been initially created with such developed mind and culture. It is through course of time and history that human mind develops. Thus, although it is difficult to figure out the exact date when the Oromo Gada System emerged it is possible to guess that it emerged and developed in eventual course of time. Some writers and informants seem to agree to the statement of Gemetchu and Aneesa, who asserted that Gada “is said to be of ancient origin and to have undergone a number of modifications since its inception.” (Wendy, eds. et al. 2005: 253) Indeed Gada, on the basis of the accounts of many informants, underwent a long standing evolutionary development. This evolution could be seen in two stages – the earlier stage and the modern stage.

3.1.1. Early Stage

This stage refers to the development and history of the Oromo Gada System prior to the Gada of Gadayo Galgallo (1457 – 1465), which is very often used as a benchmark to study the history of the Oromo Gada system. As mentioned earlier, although it is a daunting job to trace the specific date when Gada began evolving it is possible to report the different opinions of people about the total span of time. Mormor contends that the Oromo Gada existed several centuries even before the Birth of Christ. Although he does not provide a substantial evidence for his assertion Mormor holds that Gada existed for about 3668 years.

Jaatani has a different view. He holds that Gada existed about two hundred years before the Gada of Gadayo Galgallo. Even this period, according to him, is divided into two – the time when Gada was actively operating and the time when it became inoperative. The first refers to the time when twenty five different Abba Gadas stayed in office for eight years each. From this a conclusion can be drawn that Gada existed for two hundred years before its disruption. The second period marks when Oromo stopped practicing Gada. Following its interruption Gada ceased to be operational for about seventy two years. In other words, Gada ceased to be functional until Gadayo brought it back to operation. Legesse seems to confirm the contention of Jaatani when he says, “The Gada System and its cultural foundations have been around for at least five centuries, and some aspects of that culture – particularly the astronomic calendar – may be of far greater antiquity, possibly going back to the 2nd century B.C…” (2000: 81)

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According to the narration of the Borana informants, Gada ceased to operate [for seventy two years] because the system lost its dynamic features when the Abba Gadas who were in office tended to stay in power for life time. In general, the first stage in the evolution of the Oromo Gada System, according to some Borana informants, covers the period from the early 13th century A.D to the end of 15th century A. D.

3.1.2. Modern Stage

Gemetchu contends, “Oral historians attribute the current version” of Gada “to a leader named Gadayo Galgallo in the middle of a fifteenth century and indicate that minor structural modification has continued since this time.” (Wendy, eds. et al. 2005: 253) Borbor, Jaatani and Chaalaa have confirmed this. Oromo restarted practicing Gada as a comprehensive and well organized system beginning from the time of the Gada of Gadayo Galgallo. Gadayo is believed to have brought Gada back to a living system. It was when Gadayo was in office as Abba Gada that Gada acquired a solid and integral body of defined components. According to Borana informants, Gadayo was a strong Gada leader and innovator. He was believed to be the first Gada leader in profoundly developing the Gada organizational structure, rules and regulations. He could, therefore, be popularly known as the founder of the “modern” Gada System.

Daawe Gobbo is the other important Gada leader to whom many of the Borana and Guji informants owe a remarkable credit in the history of Oromo Gada System. On the basis of the account obtained from Chaalaa and Jaatani, he was the 31st Abba Gada in 1697 and was the first to convene Gumigayo, the Gada assembly that still, to some extent, functions in the present day Borana. Well defined and articulated laws were enacted and proclaimed by the Gumigayo of Daawe Gobbo.

Initially, Oromo had one Gada System. Owing to the demographic growth and expansion on one hand and the failure of some Abba Gadas to give correct leadership on the other gave way to the establishment of local Gada systems in different areas. Historical accounts show that Oromo made great migration in the 16th and 17th centuries. They spread east, west, north and south wards from their original home. This made impossible for all the Oromo to remain under the ancestral Gada System. Historically the first well known split in the Oromo Gada System occurred in 1593 when Doyyo Boroo was in office as Abba Gada. (Chaalaa) In the accounts of Borana and Guji informants, under the leadership of Doyyo Boroo, Oromo for the first time in their history failed to reach
consensus. As a result they fought one another and split into clans, and this opened the way for the adoption and pursuance of different local Gada rituals. Those who broke away from the main Oromo land formed and adopted their own local Gada system, which is basically the duplicate of the original one.

3.2. Gada as a System of Thought

How do we characterize Gada? In what system of human consciousness could it be categorized? Is it a religion, politics, philosophy or just uncritical and nebulous form of thought? No simple answers to these questions are possible. Certainly one thing is clear; Gada is not either ‘this or that’ but it is ‘both this and that.’ As a complex system of thought, it encompasses features of religion, philosophy, politics, uncritical assertions and beliefs. A critical analysis of Gada, however, reveals that it is a system of thought that attempts to offer solutions to problems, answers to questions that Oromo encountered in the reality of life and the world. It does this either in religious, philosophical, political, imaginative or even in superstitious way. In general, Gada is the Oromo world view. This section is endeavoured to particularly bring out its philosophic feature to light.

3.2.1. Gada and Philosophy

Is Gada a philosophy? If the answer is ‘Yes, it is’; then what are the features that make it a philosophy? If the answer is ‘No, it is not’, then what features does it lack to be a philosophy? Could a traditional outlook be a philosophy? Before attempting to answer these questions we need to disclose the formidable challenge laying in our way to the answers.

3.2.2. Debates: Traditions vs. Philosophy

The Oromo of Ethiopia is one of the important constituents of African nations. Currently critical debates are prevailing among scholars as to whether to judge African traditions are philosophical or un-philosophical in nature. The western thinkers are predominantly of the opinion that oral traditions are un-philosophical. Some African philosophers, however, contend that at least some traditional values, beliefs and systems are the results of philosophical reflections. That is why currently debates on whether such a thing as ‘African Philosophy’ exists or not are being conducted. It may not be logically valid to assert the philosophic nature of Gada before first addressing these debates.

Although no one has categorically denied ‘African Philosophy’ as such, there are scholars who doubt its existence because of various reasons. Samuel Oluoch Imbo, in his
work, *An Introduction to African Philosophy*, writes, “Anyone who examines the literature cannot fail to be struck by the frequency of articles with such titles as “Is There an African Philosophy?; “African Philosophy: Does it Exist?”; and “Do We Have an African Philosophy?” ...” (Imbo, 1998: 17) These titles of articles suggest that there is an explicit doubt about the existence of African Philosophy. The pressing issue, however, is what meaningful reasons do the sceptics have for doubting the existence of African Philosophy?

Apparently for some of them there is no ‘African Philosophy’ in the strict sense of the word. Instead what exists is Ethno philosophy. In his book, *Oromo Wisdom Literature*, Prof. Claude Sumner writes, “Ethno philosophy is not philosophy. Even if one succeeded in showing some distinctively African contribution to human civilization, this will not be a philosophical contribution since mythology is not philosophy.” (1995: 18) If ethno philosophy is identified with mythology, of course it cannot be philosophy. But we doubt that ethno philosophy is a mythology. Why do we call it ethno philosophy if it is irrational, non-rational, and superstitious and an unchecked belief just like mythology is? Most importantly why some scholars consider African Philosophy as ethno philosophy; and what does the term ethno philosophy itself mean?

‘Ethno philosophy’ is a pejorative term. In an attempt to explain what the term is used to mean Imbo writes, “Indeed, the appellation “ethno philosophy” is something of an insult, because to be an ethno philosopher is to be seen by the universalist philosophers to purport to practice philosophy in a manner that deviates from the conventional.”(Imbo, Ibid: 53-54) Again what does the ‘conventional philosophy’ itself mean? What deviation is made from it? These questions suggest that there is even a debatable issue about the meaning and application of the term convention. In the present context, the word ‘convention’ is used to mean a system of thought constructed by individual authors. That means, since philosophy is always the work of personal reflection there is no such a thing as collective philosophy – a philosophy of society.

The following statement from Prof. Claude Sumner seems to reinforce the argument stated above. “… in the west at least, you do not have a philosophy without a philosopher, because philosophy is the result of an individual thinker who keeps his distance from the world around him...” (Sumner, 1995: 19) Well, this was how philosophy was made in the context of the west. What makes it impossible for African
philosophy to have its context in which it is considered? Why the western philosophy is always taken as the measuring rod? Just as the western world has its own model, why Africa cannot have its own? Let us assume the existence of philosophy without a philosopher to push the argument further.

In the west it is the philosopher [or author] who is cited or referred to, but in the traditions of Africa in most cases it is the sages or elders who are cited. Sumner asks, “... is the elder a philosopher in the western sense, or a philosopher in the sense of a wise man only?” (Sumner, Ibid: 22) In so far as his or her idea stands rational and critical in contrast to the common level knowledge or understanding he is a philosopher. What makes an elder not to become a philosopher as long as his view remains rational and critical? What decisively matters is not who the philosopher is, but to what extent he distances himself from the common ground to which every one belongs.

The other point to be addressed in connection to the question of Prof. Sumner is the consideration of the western traditions as a standard. What makes it impossible for the African philosophy to have its own way of unfolding? Why should the western way of philosophizing be the unshakable model? Is it possible to deny the existence of Gada System simply because there was no single author for it? Or are we to say that it is not a philosophy? Using the western philosophy, values and systems as a standard to evaluate our own systems and views may not always be advisable. We are in different contexts, and in different levels of development. To use everything of the western as a standard is denigration. In fact, it is epistemologically important to compare and contrast different traditions in order to show the distinctiveness of each. But this holds true not for everything, in any place and at any time. Thus there is nothing that necessarily holds back an elder from becoming a philosopher in African traditions, although the western traditions might have not experienced this.

The above contention suggests that philosophy is always the work of a critical mind of a person. Not all minds, but the best that is capable of rising above ordinary consciousness that could do philosophy. In this sense, when we say philosophy embeds in the traditions of societies, it does not mean that it is the community as a whole that develops that philosophy. Although philosophy is the work of an individual who, as Sumner says, distances himself from the common level consciousness of ordinary people,
it could eventually prickles down into the political, social, cultural and moral life of people provided that it is endowed with the power of applicability to the concrete life of these people. In this sense, the philosophy which is borne out of the mind of the individual has the chance of being changed into social consciousness in the form of religion, science, law, political life, etc.

In the context of some African and Asian philosophical traditions, there seems no rigid boundary between the philosophy of the individual and the collective consciousness of the society. In these traditions philosophy is more of a lived life than a contemplative exercise. For instance we can take the philosophies of Buddha and Confucius. Both Buddha and Confucius were philosophers. They enormously influenced the mode of life and belief of people through their philosophies. After their death, the philosophies that they developed were modified into religious beliefs that are now being pursued by the millions. But it must be noted that when such philosophies change into social consciousness in the form of religions, political thoughts, etc. they slip out of philosophical realms. Thus there is a possibility for a philosophy to emerge from and submerge into a tradition, and accordingly for an elder or sage to be a philosopher.

The other controversial issue is whether oral traditional accounts have the nature of philosophy. According to the contention of the Universalists, there can be no philosophy without its written form. They argued that philosophy should be presented in written texts. That means writing is one of the essential features of philosophy. Unfortunately African traditions are transmitted orally from the past to the next generation. Viewed as such, how African traditions could be said to have developed philosophical reflections in the absence of written text? For example, Paulin Hountondji contends, “Literacy is presupposed by philosophy.” (Imbo, 1998: 24) This means “writing is the crucial determinant of whether a philosophy exists.” (Imbo, Ibid: 24). In drawing a conclusion from this, a universalist may say, “oral tradition is incapable of sustaining critical thought and exchange.” (Imbo, Ibid: 25)

One should disagree to this position. We may think that this is true in the western context, because they have philosophical traditions that have been transmitted from generation to generation through literary means and culture. Africa had not been lucky for this. But this does not mean that Africa is without any philosophical tradition. We argue
that written text is not the essential feature of philosophy. Indeed, literacy is very important for the survival and flourishing of philosophy, but not basic in determining what it is. Henry Odera Oruka, a universalist, but who has a reservation for the orality of philosophical traditions, argues that Socrates is a parallel example of a sage who never wrote down his thoughts and yet is generally considered a great philosopher (Imbo, 1998: xii). We can agree with Oruka, and substantiate our agreement with the following arguments.

Do those who doubt the existence of African Philosophy because of its oral nature accept Socrates, Confucius and other thinkers from the ancient world as philosophers although the latter did not present their thoughts in written form? If they do accept Socrates as a philosopher they must also admit the existence of African philosophy regardless of its being unwritten. If they do accept Socrates as a philosopher despite his lack of literary work and deny the existence of African Philosophy for the same reason, then they are either biased about or ignorant of African intellectual culture. The third possible alternative for these sceptics is to deny the fact that Socrates was a philosopher for the very reason that he did not write anything about his thoughts. In this case we need to set up a new criterion for calling certain intellectual inquiry a philosophy. In actual fact there is no doubt, in the history of philosophy, about Socrates being a philosopher. Thus its verbal nature alone does not prevent African tradition from being philosophy. It is arguable that just as any written material cannot be philosophical, any oral tradition cannot be said to be un-philosophical.

Indeed any tradition is not a philosophy. It is that which rises above the common level traditions that could be a candidate for being considered as a philosophy. At this point, we agree with the Universalists that philosophy is and should be an objective and universal enterprise. One common and objective feature that any philosophical system entails is rationality and criticality. E D. L. Miller defines philosophy as, “the attempt to think rationally and critically about the most important questions.” (Miller, 1984: 15) What makes philosophy what it is, is its rational and critical approach. This is the substance, the universal and objective feature of it. All others variants are its modes that show how, why and in what situations it is done, but not about what makes it what it is. The definition of philosophy given above contains three aspects – the subject who has the
power and interest to explore, the object that is to be explored and the method that the subject uses to explore the object. Rational and critical examination is the method of philosophy. In other words, philosophy is a criticism of a commonsense understanding. A philosopher does not accept beliefs, opinions, assertions or judgments without a rational and critical scrutiny. He uses the method that makes him rise above what is believed to be a common knowledge.

The objects that philosophy rationally and critically attempts to examine are the reality of the world and the place of man in this world. Particularly the questions that have not yet been answered and the problems that have not yet been solved by various applied disciplines are left to the domain of philosophy. Thus the failure to recognize the philosophical nature of a view (on the simple ground that it is oral and lack of single author) which is highly rational and critical about the most important questions of life and reality is unsound.

The purpose of all the arguments that we have thus far made are to lay a ground of justification for the existence of African Philosophy that is being embraced in the bosom of the African traditions. The universality of philosophy does not necessarily alienate it from particularized cultures. Philosophy is made in cultures that provide the environment for its making. That is why Imbo (1998: 19) contends that although universal, philosophy is never entirely divorced from culture. We cannot put tradition here and philosophy somewhere there. Philosophical systems have features that are common to all and also culture-specific features. That is why we categorize them as ‘Western Philosophy’, ‘Eastern Philosophy’, ‘African philosophy’, etc. We call them philosophy, because they have universal and objective features. We say ‘The philosophy of this or that tradition’ because they have some unique features due to the taint of the specific culture in which they developed. By this, we do not mean that wherever there is tradition there is philosophy. Undoubtedly, however, there is tradition wherever there is philosophy. Thus in some of the African traditions there are philosophical input and outputs.

A system of thought that makes a difference to the common form of traditional beliefs by rising above it is philosophic for its critical and rational approach. This is the reality of some of the African traditions. It becomes unreasonable if we deny the rationality and criticality, the comprehensiveness and relevance of some of the systems of
thought in African traditions. It is also worth noting that there is a possibility for philosophy to change into traditions. When in the form of knowledge, religion or politics it diffuses into the life of people, accepted and pursued by them it could be turned into some common form of social consciousness. At this juncture it may cease to be a philosophy, because it becomes a fixed body of social consciousness, norm or belief. When it takes this form it ceases to be rational and critical engagement. Thus although it might not be as strong as that of the west, Africa had a well developed philosophical tradition of its own.

Then can we say Gada is a philosophy? Before answering this, let us raise another question that should be addressed first – is it possible to admit the existence of Oromo Gada system? Its reality is self-evident. But it has no single author and written form. Yet it is an elaborative and comprehensive, critically reasoned and logically organized form of thought. If we cannot deny its existence, rationality and criticality, then it is a philosophy although it does not seem to have been authored by a single individual and lacks written form. Gada is an Oromo traditional system that has been orally transmitted from the preceding to the succeeding generations. Despite its being traditional, we argue that Gada is the Oromo philosophy of the world in general and of human reality in particular. It raises deep questions about life and critically evaluates the problems of life and seeks meaningful solutions to them. Its deep insight, well thoughtfulness and structure, comprehensiveness and applicability to life situation indicate that Gada is the outcome of rational and critical reflection - the reflection of the world and the place of man in this world.

It is only the mind that stood above the existing ordinary consciousness and viewed everything rationally and critically that has brought Gada into existence. Although we unfortunately failed to get the name of the author(s) the fact that it was the result of the critical mind of the individual Oromo cannot be doubted.

Metaphysics: As a philosophy Gada contains metaphysics, epistemology, social and moral philosophy as its major components. Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with the questions and explanations of reality. Gada, in its metaphysical speculation, is concerned with the concept of one and only one reality and the relationships of all things [that are less real] to this reality. It posits that the supreme
reality beyond which there is no other greater reality is Waaqa. All other things are either the creations or the manifestations of this reality. Men together with the entire world are its creations.

**Epistemology:** According to Baxter, “Gada is a cognitive system rather than an instrumental organization and its rules provide categories for cognition in areas way outside the narrow boundaries of the sets themselves…” (Bartels in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 2) As such it is the philosophy of knowledge, which is concerned with what we can know and the means we employ to know. Chaalaa states that human object of knowledge; according to Gada is everything that is accessible to the perception of sense organs and to the conception of our mind. It regards that we know not only those things that are accessible to our sense organs, but also those which are beyond the reach of our sensory perception. In the view of this informant for Gada, the process of knowledge acquisition involves the use of sense experience and intellect. Physical objects and their manifestations are perceptible whereas realities such as Waaqa, god and Ayana can be known through the deduction of mind. Concepts of systems such as Gada system, moral value, etc. are all the products or the cognition of human mind.

**3.2.3. Gada as Moral, Social and Political Philosophy**

Baxter writes, “Gada epitomizes what social relationships should be, not what they are. In that sense, gada is a political philosophy and a theology.” (Bartels in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 2) Indeed Gada is concerned more with the issues of values to be considered than with things of facts to be known. As such it is an axiological discipline that attempts to define and prescribe what humans ought to be and not to be, what they ought to do and not to do. It is more concerned not with the description of facts of life but with the aim of finding the way for the creation of good kind of life. From this perspective Gada is a normative discipline.

The above explications amply suggest that the Oromo Gada System contains components of moral, social and political philosophy. Taken from this perspective, Gada is the Oromo philosophy of life. It considers that human beings have intrinsic value since they all are the creatures of Waaqa, god. In the hierarchical relations of all creatures humans hold the second rank in the ladder next to god - the creator. Hence, according to
the accounts of Gada, humans ought to be respected and taken care of as ends in themselves and not as means for some other ends.

There are two reasons for Gada to consider the value of man as intrinsic. One is religious and the other is social. Gada believes that all human beings are brothers and sisters as they are created by the same reality, i.e., Waaqa. “He (Waaqa) has created us in a way we should help each other, not in a way one makes the other a tool of his own. He has created us in a way we should treat each other equally and generously.” (Dorsis) A human being with the power of reason should not use his brother or sister as a means for his own personal end as this is both religiously and morally wrong. This is the religious reason why Gada says that human beings should not be treated as means for the sake of anything.

The other reason Gada considers is anchored in the interest of the individuals and society. Even if we think of the intrinsic treatment of human life from pure secular perspective we find that it is still imperative because of its intricate nature. All humans have interests, in the pursuit of which they act and behave. In society the way each and everybody acts and behaves towards each other is very important to life; and this is determined by the value that the society attaches to it. The values that we ascribe to the life of man make the latter either honourable or the otherwise. I want you and others to honour my life; you want me and others do the same to you; others want you and me honour their lives; and we also want them to honour ours. Thus for Gada honour is the value that we all as humans want. “Honour,” according to Tamiru, “is the soul of our life.” Gada teaches to honour human life regardless of the colour of skin, gender, age, profession, position, power, wealth, etc, because honourable life should be treated honourably.

The question why do we respect persons as ends not as means was put to different informants to know whether their convictions accord the above stated position of Gada. Four different answers were received from informants. The first group argues that we respect others because a failure to do this is committing cuubuu, sin. “Waaqa does not permit us to do harmful things to fellow human beings. If we do wrong to humans we act against his will, and hence it is cuubuu, sin which is culpable. Consequently god makes us unpleasant for having committed such act.” (Dewo & Tamiru) What saves men from this punishment is nothing but refraining the self from inflicting harm on others. Thus we
ought to obey the will of god. We do this because we fear his punishment. For this group of informants this is the truth that Gada taught them.

The second group of informants argued that we do respect others because god loves us doing that. Doing whatever god loves us to do is morally good and right. And doing whatever god does not love us to do is bad or wrong. Although this view is very similar to the view of the first group of informants, it is slightly different from the first in terms of its notion of motivation. In one form or the other both groups maintain that god wills us to respect one another. Toore Guyoo, an informant from Guji (Adolaa, 2008) says, “We ought to obey the will of god, because we love him; and we love him because we believe that he also loves us. We express our love by doing all what he loves us to do.”

The third group of informants maintains that persons do good things for others because they also want others to do good for them. If one would like to be respected by others, then she/he ought to respect others. As one informant neatly puts, “I want others to do good for me, and I cannot get this [from them] by doing evil to them. Any wrongdoing inflicted on others may bear at one time or another same to oneself.” (Mormor) This is what many moral thinkers characterize as “reciprocity”. As Chaalaa precisely puts it, “The cumulative effect of what you do to others is ultimately yours. When you serve the good purpose of others you are also serving your own good purpose, because it pays you back in kind.”

Two informants who could be categorized in the fourth group had exceptionally peculiar position. Both of them contended that men like doing good for others because it makes them happy. One of the two argued, “Whenever I do something beneficial for others, what immediately fills my mind is not the idea of a reward from somewhere but happiness or satisfaction from inside.” (Abdulkerim, Jimma: 2008). The remark that Teib Abbafoyi from Jimma again gives is the supplement of this. He said, “If there is anything that an Oromo expects as a reward for doing good to others, it is satisfaction. To me there is nothing more important for man than his satisfaction.”

When critically analyzed none of the positions of the above groups treats human beings as an end. The first one considers that persons ought to be respected because of fear
of punishment. For the second it is the love that the moral agent has for god that motivates her/him to respect other human beings. For the third group it is the concern for one self that makes one to respect the others. The fourth group considers the respect for others in terms of the satisfaction of oneself. In this sense, the respect we have for others is conditional. We do it when we want to avoid something that is undesirable for the self, or when we want to get what we need. That means we do not respect others if there is nothing that we want to have, or we want to avoid. Thus the four positions stated above make human values extrinsic, and hence they do not comply with the principle of the Gada system that considers human value as intrinsic.

3.3. The Purpose of Gada System

As mentioned earlier, Gada is basically a social, political and moral institution. It defines and prescribes the values to be pursued and avoided in social, political and moral life. As humans we stand in certain relationships with one another since we need one another for this or that reason. Consequently we necessarily have or establish relationships in which we treat one another in certain way – the treatment that is either beneficial or harmful to one or both parties. Therefore human beings cannot live and develop without these relationships and treatments. If togetherness is indispensable for the survival and flourishing of life, then rationally knowing and guiding this togetherness is a necessity. Social, political, moral, cultural, etc. values arise from this.

Almost all informants maintained that human beings are related not only to their own fellow human beings, but also to nature and Waaqa, god. Just as humans need many things from one another they also need many other things from nature and Waaqa. The purpose of Gada is to make the relationships existing between or among people, nature and Waaqa harmonious. Generally it is the system that prescribes how people ought to live together in order to make their life worth living. As a political institution it defines how people must treat one another, what is legally allowed and prohibited to do, what administrative structures are to build and how justice is served. As social and moral institution it prescribes what rules to pursue, what actions and behaviours to avoid, or how people ought to treat one another, nature and Waaqa. Fair treatment harmonizes and unfair treatment antagonizes the agent with the other party. In general the harmony between or among the related parties is the highest goal that Gada strives to achieve.
Gada as a system emerged and developed as a necessity of life. It is not a contemplative but a pragmatic philosophy. No doubt that life confronts problems, questions or challenges in the interrelationships of things. But for this life to survive and flourish, problems should be solved and questions must be answered. Gada as a system addresses these challenges. It attempts to create a harmonious and happy life by avoiding violence, reducing human suffering, and by arbitrating conflicts. Therefore, it is the system evolved out of the will of the society and sustained by it for the good of this society. The will to do right or good, or the will to avoid evil or wrong is inherent to the Oromo society.

3.4. Gada and Politics

Politics is characterized by the relationships of the ruling body and the ruled society. What type of rule it is, is determined by the kind of means the ruling body uses to come to power, by the interest it serves and by the method of rule it adopts. The question of interest is more decisive than the others. In other words, the relationships largely depend on the kind of interest that the ruling system pursues. It may be a daunting task to rule the society in a way all the members of diverse classes and groups could be satisfied. This always makes the question in whose interest does the ruling body rule the society crucial. Whose best interest should be pursued – the particular interest of the ruling elite or the best interest of the ruled subjects? Could we have the system that accommodates both the interest of the ruled and the ruling without antagonizing them? This is the core issue of politics. Basically it is morally desirable if rulers rule in the best interest of the subjects, and undesirable if they do it against the interest of these subjects.

Gada is “the dominant political position.” (Legesse, 2000: xxii) According to the accounts of many informants Gada does not recognize the interest of the rulers as opposed to that of the ruled. If a need arises it is the interest of the ruling that ought to be sacrificed in favour of that of the ruled. Power is the expression of this interest. According to Gada power is the power of people, and hence it is acquired from their consent. It comes from people and should serve the purpose of these people. It is taken over peacefully not violently, from and through people. Undoubtedly it is enforced not by coercive measure but by the rule of law. Power, seized, maintained and exercised not by any means other than justified, legitimate and peaceful ones serves the interest of people. Therefore, Gada
officials ought to act, behave or rule according the rules of Gada, which is basically derived from the consent of people. In the modern political terms, it is from, by and for the people. Gada is, therefore, a democratic system.

Mormor says, “In the Oromo Gada System power comes from the consent of people, and it serves the purpose of this people. Otherwise it ceases to be Gada.” This is one of its peculiar traits that make Gada what it is. People always desire peaceful and harmonious life, because it is beneficiary; and they dislike violence because it is harmful. Gada believes that serving the good desire of people should be the mission of political power. To explain the scope of people’s power Duubee states, “Gada does not only recognize that power originates from the interest and will of people, but also it teaches that these people have the power of bringing down those officials who fail to discharge their responsibilities according to the rule of law.” In support of this Legesse writes, “Power emanates from the people and if those to whom it is entrusted fail in their responsibilities, it can be withdrawn. This is the Oromo version of ‘government by the people’.” (2000: 126)

If power belongs to the people, and if these people have the power to recall those who abuse their authority, then it means the society enjoys good governance, to use the modern terminology. Gada outlines, defines and employs peaceful means and ways for holding, using and leaving power so as to make people live together in peace. According to Oromo tradition people could be at peace politically only when the rulers rule and the ruled are ruled in accordance with the interest of the majority and by the rule of law.

3.5. Gada and Human Rights

The question of human rights arises from the value we ascribe to the life of human beings. There is a need that human life should flourish. This is possible only if these humans either individually or collectively realize their interest, actualize their capacities, pursue their own choices; live, think, act or move freely. In general life should intrinsically be taken care of. This is expressed in recognizing and respecting human rights. What place does the question of human right hold in Gada? Gada has a deep concern for human values. The attitude that Oromo have towards the value of people is expressed through the treatment of people’s rights at individual or societal level. The
protection of human rights is the heart and the objective of the Oromo Gada System. It teaches that people should respect the rights of one another, without which it is impossible to maintain peace and order. ‘If I do not respect the right of others, then those ‘others’ do not discharge the obligation they have to respect mine. Thus any individual who has a concern for his/her own right must have as much concern for that of others as he/she has for himself/herself.” (Tamiru)

The issue of human rights pertains equally to both men and women. But some people express their concern that Gada does not have as much care for women as it does for men. This was put to almost all informants in the form of a question. All denied the truth of the allegation. The position of Chaalaa is taken as the representative. He reports as follows: This problem arises from three sources - from lack of knowledge about Gada, from bias and prejudice, and from intentional defamation. To address this question we need to make distinction between the ideal of the Gada system and the reality of human practice. Gada ideally does not treat men and women unequally. It rather teaches that no one is superior or inferior. But just as it is true to other cultures people do not always act and behave according to the general ideals. Thus I can say that the problem lies not in the ideal of the Gada system, but in the practice of People.

To demonstrate the depth of concern that Gada has for the protection of the rights of females Chaalaa has further given us the following long story: A father had a girl in school. The girl was raped and became pregnant. When her parents asked who did this to her, she told frankly who he was. The statement of the girl, according to the Borana and Guji culture could not be doubted, because there is trust that the girl never tells lie in such serious matters. Even if there is doubt, the benefit of the doubt is given to the girl. The father of the girl took the case to the maanguddo, elders of his community. According to their culture the man who is responsible for impregnating the girl must marry her. And the elders ought to resolve the problem according to the rules and regulations of the Gada system.

While reviewing the case in point the elders asked the person against whom the girl and her father have filed the case. He denied, saying that he did not commit the said offence. The elders seriously advised the suspect that he should not deny what he did. Borana does not like such denial, because it breaches the norm of the society and ultimately it also counts against the culprit. But the ‘culprit’ kept on arguing that he could
not be held responsible for what he did not do. ‘If you insist that I am the culprit, let us make a blood test after the child is born. If it would be proved that the child was mine then I will marry her. Otherwise I cannot be responsible for the said. Thinking that they had exhausted all possible alternatives to solve the problem, the elders stopped pursuing the case.

“According to Gada the law in reference to which the elders could settle the case was there in place. But the elders did not cite this law. They should have said to the culprit, “If you do not marry her we condemn you to caphana, exclusion from the community. Caphana is critical punishment offered in Borana. If a person who is believed to have committed a serious offence fails to admit the guilt, the form of punishment that the elders propose is caphana. It is a total exclusion from the Borana community. He who is condemned to this punishment cannot get any help or cooperation from the community. The elders, either intentionally or unintentionally, failed to say or use this penalty.

The father of the girl took the case over to the Gumigayo, the Borana assembly. While appealing to the Gumigayo he said, ‘My daughter became pregnant. Borana, you all know how serious this is. She is equivalent to a dead. I took the case to five elders. They sat twelve times to discuss on and resolve the problem. Finally they told me that they were unable to resolve it. I know that the problem is not beyond their wisdom to settle, but I do not know why they were reluctant. In the history of Borana there has never been man-caused problem that Borana could not solve. How and why could I be denied the right and respect I deserve in my community? These elders managed my case as if Borana did not have a mechanism of their own to solve their problems. Can any one of you tell me the man-made problem that we Borana were unable to settle? I do not think that you can. Then why these elders failed to settle my misfortune that I addressed to them? They made our Gada, a weak and inapplicable system. This unfair treatment obliged me to appeal to the Gumigayo.’

This appeal moved the Gumigayo. The Gumi asked the elders why they were unable to discharge the responsibility entrusted to them. The elders answered that the ‘culprit’ denied the case brought against him and they did not have any means to verify it. The Gumi again asked the elders, ‘Did you tell him that he would face caphana if he did not marry the girl he made pregnant?’ Unanimously the elders said, ‘No, we did not do that.’ The Gumi further asked, ‘Why didn’t you say caphana when you well know that this is
our law?” One of the elders answered, ‘The boy told us that unless the blood of the child is checked against that of his by professionals he cannot marry her’. The Abba Gada presiding over the gumi critically asked, ‘So did you think that the case could stop at the will of the ‘culprit’? It means you intentionally suppressed the case. Such evil intention spoils not only the case of the victim but also the system and norm of Borana. This is not the problem of the victim alone it is the problem of the whole Borana too. If we do not properly handle it today, tomorrow each of us will get it at our home.’

“The Gumigayo finally sentenced the five elders to a fine of five heads of cattle each. ‘If you do not want to accept the verdict, you all rise and stand facing the east and swear to Waaqa to prove that you did not abuse your responsibility.’ But no one of them dared to do it, because it is believed that if a person swears to Waaqa when in fact he is the culprit, then he immediately gets mad. The elders asked to stand and make a plea to the Gumi. Having secured the permission they all stood up in front of the Gumi and said, ‘Borana, hooraa buulaa, long live to Borana. We accept the verdict. But we cannot afford to pay the said. Borana nubaasaa, you Borana please forgive us, save us. After all how we Borana treat Borana unfairly? This is a self-defeat’

“Turning to the accuser the speaker of the Gumi said, ‘The Gumi decided that you get five heads of cattle from each, a total of twenty five heads. Hereafter it is your discretion. We leave to your conscience to consider whether you take as many as decided or reduce it.’ The accuser stood and responded, ‘Borana, I am proud of your judgment. You discovered the truth I lost; you restored the honour that I missed. It is because of you that I am honoured. I reduce two heads from each for the sake of your honour.’ The Gumi asked the accuser to further reduce the penalty. Finally he said, ‘I will give you my last words. Let each of them come with two heads of cattle – one jibicha, bull and one raada, heifer. All the heads must be healthy.’ The accuser got ten heads of cattle from the five elders who failed to settle the problem not because they lacked the knowledge but because they did it intentionally. The story does not end there. The Gumi advised to make the culprit to marry the girl. According to the Gumi if this problem was not straightened out it would develop to the extent of being the problem of the clans of Borana. Thus those elders who failed to resolve the case brought to them intentionally, had the moral obligation to straighten that same case. Finally they did it.”
This story, according to Chaalaa, shows the depth of concern Borana and safuu do have for the rights of women. But still there is a debatable issue in this. Whose right does the decision protect? Is it the right of the girl or the right of her father? If the girl did not have a father who would present her case on behalf of her, could she get the chance of being married by the one who raped her? Could she bring this case to elders or Gumi on her own, without being assisted? The following narration of Chaalaa again attempts to answer.

“In Borana if any woman encounters any act or behaviour intended to inflict harm on her she is free to tell her problem to any Borana elder she accidentally comes across. For example, if she is insulted or mistreated by someone in a town while carrying a firewood for sale she tells to any Borana elder (no matter whether she knows the elder or not) that somebody has insulted her. She gives him her name, address, tells him whether she is married or not, and the details of the incidence. The elder has a moral obligation to address the problem that the woman reported to him. Depending on the weight of the case, he may make other persons to join him. If he fails to consider the problem, then he is judged as a person of not moral standing. In some cases he could even be brought to stand in front of other elders for failing to resolve the problem reported to him.”

The above illustration implies that the Borana elders have moral duties to resolve such inter-personal conflicts and any Borana woman has a corresponding moral right to be safeguarded from any harmful act. What the informant tries to show us is that women, in Borana, are free to manage their own cases. But does this alone prove the absence of sexual discrimination? The problem of women is always presented to the male elders, not to females. That means women do not have significant role to play in the conflict resolution mechanism of Borana. But does this imply that there is sexual discrimination in Borana society?

In many parts of the Oromo region in particular and of the country in general, women have limited freedom to move from place to place. They are not free much as men are. But in Borana and Guji where the core of the Gada values are preserved women particularly, the unmarried ones have absolute right and freedom to move alone freely within their respective territories. No attempt of rape or any sexual harassment is committed against an unmarried girl. If someone commits such sexual assault and the victim reports the case to the elders either on her own or through proxy immediately the
guilty is sentenced to caphana. The critical question one can raise at this point is – are women respected as much as they are because of the fear of the traditional law of Borana, or because each and every one is aware that women as human beings deserve respect on equal footing with men? This is an open subject for further investigation.

3.6. The Making and the Rule of Law

How and in whose interest laws are made? What procedures are pursued when power is exercised? The way laws are made, the interest they cherish and how they are enforced by the ruling body of the given community affect human moral quality. If laws are made and enforced in favour of the peace and security of the society, then their moral quality is desirable and strong. Peace and harmony for Gada is inconceivable without some kind of norm or law that governs the life, passions and relations of people. In the Oromo tradition seeran, law has the highest authority in the order of human society. Almost all the informants involved in this study underscored the necessity of law.

“Human society that has no law, no matter whether written or unwritten,” Dagaagaa asserts “is no better than the beasts in the jungle. For that matter there is no such a human community.” In the attempt to elaborate this he further argues that even animals have laws – laws that they have not made but that which Waaqa has given them. There is nothing in the world that is not governed by law. Man in common with other species abides by the law of nature that Waaqa has given. But laws of nature alone do not suffice to control human behaviour. This limitation necessitates laws that men themselves make to administer their own behaviour. The report that Legesse gives us below consolidates the position of Dagaagaa. He writes that Borana say, “Seeri mumme, seera sare” (my italics) i.e., there are laws for everything, even for the dog.” (Legesse: 2000: 201)

In some cultures all laws are believed to have been given from God. For instance, the Abyssinian kings of Ethiopia sought to make people believe that the “… laws of Ethiopia are the laws of God, and are, therefore, not subject to challenge by their own people or by other kingdoms.”(Legesse, 2000: 14-15) But in the Oromo culture there are two seeran, laws – laws that are given from Waaqa and laws that are made by human beings. Gada is man-made law and safiuu is the prescription of Waaqa. “Oromo made laws to meet some of the great challenges that confronted them in history.” (Legesse, 2000: 140) On one hand challenges or conflicts in the reality of life are inevitable, and on the other there is strong interest to subdue the challenges so as to develop good life. Unless
the former is curbed or settled, the latter cannot be attained. This is what makes the making and enforcing of law a necessity of life. The Oromo Gada believes that law is the strongest tool for the maintenance and promotion of good life.

Legesse writes that one of the most interesting aspects of Oromo tradition is that laws are treated as a product of human deliberation not as a gift of God or of heroic ancestors. There is little in Oromo thought that suggests that laws are natural and, therefore, immutable. (2000: 208) Or political “...laws are made by men and can therefore be unmade by men.” (Ibid) They are not given once for all but constantly revised and renewed. But what is the institution that is responsible for making laws in the traditional Oromo society? In Gada the highest political power is bestowed to the Assemblies such as Gumigayo of Borana, Me’ee Booko of Guji and the Chaffee of Maccaa and Tulamaa Oromo. Making laws is in the authority and responsibility of these assemblies. As Chaalaa puts it “Indeed the making of laws is one of the prominent tasks of the Gumis, Gada assemblies.” These assemblies that are convened in different regions of the Oromo society are very similar to the parliament of the western world. According to the observation of Legesse the Gada Assembly sits as a law making body, revises existing laws and proclaims new laws. Some of the changes this Assembly makes are fundamental. (2000: 33)

In the Oromo context, man-made laws are dynamic. Every eight year when the Gumi or Chaffee is convened laws are assessed to check whether they are still relevant to the concrete life of people. If they are found to have lost their vital power they can be banned, abandoned or revised, and new laws are reinstated if issues necessitate the legislation of such laws. New social phenomenon, relationships or style of life may necessitate the making of new laws. Legesse again states, “among the southern Borana the laws are recited one by one in the national assembly and they are debated and, if need be, they are altered. If there is no need to change particular laws, they are reaffirmed.” (2000: 209) For example, the following narration of Chaalaa proves that the Oromo Gada reviews the existing laws and declares new ones every eight year: Earlier there was a false belief that if girls were sent to the schools they easily could get involved in sexual affairs, and this would give rise to many social problems. But now the Gada officials came to notice that educating girls has more value than the risk incurred for sending them to schools.
Therefore, Gumigayo set a new law that girls [women] shall be sent to schools and get educated. This is one new law that recently came to force.

Chaalaa continues to report the endorsement of another new law. The Borana people do not like to use bad language against anyone. Unfortunately in recent times some people were heard using bad language against mothers while insulting or fighting with their off-springs. In the norm of our society mothers are treated with love and respect. But now we are experiencing some persons insulting mothers in order to insult their sons or daughters. This immoral behaviour is growing and infiltrating into Borana community through people in schools and towns. Borana people could not tolerate this. In support of this Jaatani also argues that let alone using language against mothers whom all walks of life love, it is immoral to use this kind of language against any human being. The Gumigayo held in July 2004 passed a law that a person who is found using such bad language against mothers shall be punished Qakee. Qakee is, in Borana another serious penalty given for severe offence committed. A person penalized Qakee should pay at least five head of cattle or shall be excluded from the community. In some sense, it is similar to caphana.

There is an interesting point in the Oromo tradition of law making. Although laws were presented in oral form still there is neat and clear demarcation between those norms that could be proclaimed as laws and those remain being customary norms. The following observation of Legesse cleverly makes this point clear. The legislative tradition of the Oromo is an uncommon phenomenon in traditional Africa. In most traditional societies laws and customs are not distinguished. … Not so in Oromo society. Even the legal idiom and the rituals that surround the meetings of the Oromo national assembly reflect the idea that the laws are made by men can therefore be unmade by men.(2000: 208)

The Gada rules and regulations that are now being used in Borana and Guji are believed to be originally worked out by Daawe Gobbo, the 31st Abba Gada after Gadayo Galgallo in Borana; and by Makko Bili in Macca. According to Legesse these historic figures of Oromo are the great law makers of Gada System. Either Daawe or Makko did not do the laws all alone, rather many elders and Gada officials participated in the making. Legesse writes the response of his informant to the question he posed to him as to whether it was the individuals such as Daawe Gobbo or the Gumi who made many of the basic
laws of Gada. His informant says, “Daawe Gobbo is given credit for the work of the Gumi of which he was the leader. He was Abba seera, [the presiding councillor of the assembly] but it is the Gumi as a whole that made the laws. In fact Daawe made many propositions: some were accepted, some were rejected.” (2000: 210) According to the narration of Chaalaa, while stipulating laws about the rights and duties of each and every citizen all the members of the Gumi had full consensus except on one issue – i.e., extramarital practices.

They made long and serious debate on the question of what kind of law had to be worked out about the sexual relationships that was being practiced outside marriage. The core point of the debate was whether they should let the extramarital sexual relationships be practiced or banned. Daawe took one side, the side that favoured the outlawing of the relations. Another important figure was Dubbe, who took the opposite side. When the debate went into stalemate women were asked to take position. They supported the position of Dubbe and turned down that of Daawe. Since Borana do not reject the idea of women, the position advanced by Dubbe was adopted and proclaimed as a law, and that of Daawe was rejected. In any way “Most of the laws” that Daawe “proposed or sponsored have become the foundation of the Gada System.” (Legesse, 2000: 211)

It is a common knowledge that human life is intrinsically respected. Basically laws are made to protect the good of this life. Witnessing this Dagaagaa says that in Oromo tradition seera; law is the mechanism that enables people to live peacefully and harmoniously together. It makes them share concerns, take care of one another and protect the common good. That is why Gada gives immense weight to law and its rule. But we can ask - is it really true that laws make people live in peace and harmony? Does the reality of the current Oromo life prove that this is actually the case? Have Oromo, as law-abiding people, been living in peace?

The wars and violence, and their tragic consequences that the Oromo have been experiencing, proves that the simple presence of law does not guarantee the prevalence of peace and harmony. Can we, therefore, think that what these informants say is reliable about the issue in question? The responses of the informants to the issue raised above can be grouped into two. Let us call them group one and group two. The condensed argument of group one goes like this: The simple presence of law does not guarantee peaceful life. We need to raise a question - what kind of law? There could be a law that protects the
interest of people. And there could be another law that safeguards the privileges of a few people. These two laws do not have the same role to play for the maintenance of peace. The first one favours peace and the second one provoke violence rather than encouraging peace. In the tradition of the Oromo Gada society law is made in the interest of people, not in that of the few elites or a particularized body of the society.

According to this argument, what matters most in the making of law, is the interest that should be the basis of the law. Whose interest should be addressed- the interest of the elites, class or the mass? If a law is made in the interest of at least the majority of people it is very likely that it maintains and promotes peace. Otherwise it is very likely for causing war and violence. In the Gada System of the Oromo people laws are made by Gada officials representing the whole people in a given community, in the best interest of these people. The norm of the Oromo society, therefore, "indicates that people view the laws as being their own, not something imposed upon them by a superior force such as a God or an elite class or a group of learned men or "tradition" in the generic sense."(Legesse, 2000: 209) When people think that laws are their own making, they unconditionally welcome its enforcement. That is why laws functioned in the context of the Oromo Gada System without any coercive force.

The argument of the second group looks at the problem from the angle of its applicability, or disposition of the agent. The concise form of the argument is this: The reason why we see wars and violence here and there all over the world in this time is not because of the failure of laws. The problem rather lies in the fact that some people do not obey laws. There could be something that they gain if they disobey the law and may lose that something if they obey that law. To gain or not to lose their personal benefit, they prefer breaking the law. Thus primarily it is not the lack or the failure of law that makes war and violence possible and rampant but the lack of commitment to obey it. This argument seems to pronounce that there is nothing wrong in the law what so ever. Indeed there are grains of truth in it.

Sometimes it is possible to have beautiful laws in books, when their practical application in reality is the opposite. It is not always because there are no good laws that corruptions, fraud, injustice, red tapping and other evil acts are committed. Rather because the agents do not have any moral and ethical competence or commitment to respect the
laws. This is a situation when and where the unwritten “laws” override the written laws. The question, “Who are the agents?” must be made clear. The agents can be divided into two – those who enforce the law and those who do not have the power to enforce it. To whom are we referring when we say “people do not obey laws – to one of the two agents or to both? Borbor, Chaalaa, Tamiru and Dagaaga have the same answer to this question although expressed it differently. The core point of their answer is: Some of those who are given the power to enforce the law break the law for the enforcement of which they are there in power. That is why corruption gets rampant. Some people of ordinary life also violate law. If everyone respects the law of the land and the rule of the society the tragic experiences of humanity could be less than what it had been and is still being experienced. The most dangerous threat occurs when a law is violated by its maker and enforcer. Even ordinary people can think of breaking laws only when they become aware of the loopholes that the makers and enforcers of the law have created for its violation.

The argument of both groups, have their own demerits just as they do have merits. That of the first group is valid in considering that the interest on which the law of a given society is based matters in keeping and promoting peace. Apparently it commits error when it fails to consider the importance of the will of agents in observing the law. The argument of the second group can be accepted for considering the will of the agents for obeying or not obeying the law, and it commits an error when it fails to admit that the underlying interest also matters in determining the authority of laws. The synthesis is that both the interest that underlies the law of a given society and the will of the bodies that enforce the law has a decisive role in keeping and promoting peace and harmony. Good law without good leadership is abstract, and good leadership without good law is blind.

As mentioned in the foregoing sections, the most important mission of law in the context of the Gada of Oromo society is to avoid violence and promote peace and order. To explain this Chaalaa states, “Law defines our right and responsibility. It makes us know what we must do and must not do. This is the necessary condition for human life to survive and flourish.” It means a law has power over people. But from where does the authority of this law emanate? According to the response of many informants human laws derive their power from the will and interest of people. Almost all humans want to be protected from harmful or injurious acts and behaviours of other men. In the Gada System
laws are the expression of the will or interest of the society. They get the authority of ruling the society from the interest of this society that seeks protection.

Yet, the other most important aspect is the applicability of law. In the true sense of the word the authority of law lies in its acceptability by the society over which it is intended to rule. To what extent Oromo obey laws? Commonly it is believed that Oromo are one of the most law-abiding ethnic groups in the country. An inquiry into the reason why Oromo sincerely obey laws reveals, that law inherently has the power to be more and above than everyone in the domain of human relations. According to the contention of Jemal “Oromo obey laws mainly because they think that it is something that stands above every one and binding on all.” The essence of law lies in the fact of its being obeyed or respected. The informant further explains, “If I and you do not obey it, and if others also do not respect it, how could it be a law?” This is indeed the Oromo impression of law as a whole.

Gada ascribes intrinsic value to the rule of law. It is not man who should rule man, but law. Man simply reinforces law. Basically for Gada System, man should respect laws not only because it is reinforced but decisively because it is intrinsic in nature. If one breaks the law he/she is unruly to Waqa [God], man and nature, and it is this that disturbs the harmony of reality. The belief that Oromo have in this truth has made them the law-abiding society. In many cultures the enforcement of law is backed by legally organized forces and implemented through coercive institutions such as police, standing army, court of law, etc. In such situations what decisively motivates people to obey law is fear of punishment.

But in Oromo culture not fear but mainly conscience or conviction that dictates a person to act or behave in accordance with the law. Amsalu says, “I respect law because it protects my life, right, dignity and interest. What is more worth respecting than this?” Although many of the informants have the same view regarding this, there are other informants who have a different opinion. Teib holds, “I think I should obey law without considering what it is to or for me. It must be respected as long as it serves the general interest of the society.” According to this view law must unconditionally be respected. Something good for the whole, should override the good of the self.
Gada believes that when laws rule all men the possibility of having good and peaceful life is very eminent. But when men rule laws definitely peace and harmony lose their ground. The major source of human conflict, according to many Oromo informants, is the violation of laws and norms of the society. When men place themselves above laws, and claim the power to rule over the law that should actually rule them, the promotion of good life and relation becomes questionable. Any society in which laws are subordinate to the interest and power of the rulers is constantly haunted by violence and insecurity. Laws, according to the gada notion, get the power of harmonizing the relations of people only when all people, without exception, respect these laws as binding on all.

In the gada system of the Oromo society both the ruling and the ruled are law-abiding. There is no one who could be an exception to, or who could stand above and beyond the law. “Even the Abba Gada himself is subject to the rule of law.” (Legesse, 2000: 29) All Oromo are equal before the law. There is no law for the Oromo which is binding on some and unbinding on the others. All ought to abide by law regardless of his/her position, power, wealth, sex, profession or trade. Otherwise it becomes the law without any power to hold.

In Oromo tradition this is not only the knowledge of those who rule but also of the ruled. As Legesse again remarks, “Oromo ideas of rule of law is reflected in the notion that those who govern the people must also be judged by the same laws they are empowered to enhance.” (2000: 200) The Gada officials, according to the belief of Oromo society, ought to act and behave in accordance with the law of Gada. They clearly know that it is their moral and legal obligation to obey the laws of the society. The power that the Gada authorities are given to rule the society itself is limited by law. If they exercise their power differently to the spirit of the law, then they commit seera cabsu or dabsu, meaning breaking or abusing the law. Any official who develops such undesirable behaviour towards the law would be forced to stand before this law that he defies.

It is interesting to note that the gada authorities do not use any force while exercising power and enforcing laws. The Gada officials in general and that of Borana in particular, “do not impose anything on others by the use of force or violence.” (Bassi in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 16) They do not have institutions such as police, prison and any other coercive agent to force the society. Even those who violate the norm of the
community may not primarily be punished by means of force, unless it becomes an issue of beyond tolerance. Gada system devises or prefers peaceful mechanism by which perpetrators could be brought back to their normal line. It is not the fear of punishment or the external disapproval of the society that makes both the ruling and the ruled to obey and enforce the laws, but the internal commitment and free will of each. While commenting on this Dagaaga says, “Laws are laws only if they are obeyed. Disobeyed laws are without effective power to serve the intended purpose. Thus the strength of laws lies in the unconditional will of all people to respect them.”

The sheer presence of law does not warrant the prevalence of peace and good life. In other words, it is also important to know how and in whose interest laws are made and implemented. As pointed out earlier Gada derives its law not from force or particular section of the society rather from the general consent of people. This law safeguards not the interest of a certain elites or class rather that of the whole population. Since laws, according to Gada, clearly define what one ought to do or not to do, each and every member of the community has rights and duties. All members of the community are expected to know what rights they have to exercise and what duties they are given to perform. Thus the decisive parameter for the promotion of good living is not only the making of law, but also the rule of law. Rule of law comes into force when everyone abides by law. This is expressed, in the Gada context, when everyone correctly claims his/her right and properly performs his/her duty.

It is important if one question is raised at this juncture. Oromo is a law-abiding society. In principle this is morally good. But should they obey any kind of law? As there are some laws that make people free, there are other laws that enslave them. Is it the moral duty for an Oromo to respect the law that encroaches on their rights instead of protecting them?

3.7. Law and Punishment

The ultimate aim of Gada is the maintenance and promotion of peace. Any act or behaviour that threatens peace, stability and cooperation among the community cannot be tolerated. Although the Gada officials do not use any forceful agent to enforce laws certainly the laws are implemented very effectively. One can ask, what could be done in case of violation? For an offence of mild nature advices, warnings, compensations, and
imposing certain fine could be employed to correct the culprit. The latter has the right to negotiate either to go free or for the easing of the penalty imposed on him/her. For the crime of a serious nature severe punishment is the appropriate price. That could be either a death penalty or the exclusion of the perpetrator from blessing and prayers, even from the exchange of greetings and from the peace. (Bassi in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 17) There was time when extreme cases of crime were punished by death, although it occurred very rarely. See also Guma which is another form of punishment in case of killing.

One of the serious penalties for brutal wrong doings is excommunication or exclusion. This involves different steps. If the lower steps fail to bring the perpetrator back to the norm of society the next higher step of penalty to be considered is abaarsa, curse. Baxter (Bassi in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 17) writes, “The last resort, after withholding greetings and blessings, is the curse which separates its recipient from the social and ritual support.” In Oromo tradition abaarsa, curse is a serious and last penal step. Before imposing curse the issue must be thoroughly and successively discussed for exhausting all possible alternatives, at the level of greater authority (Ibid). If no other possible alternative is found, then the curse to be given could be formulated at the general assembly and imposed. This is a severe punishment for it “implies the exclusion from the community.” (Ibid) This penalty involves not only the exclusion of the individual [culprit] from the community but also his separation from the nagaa, peace and cooperation. This virtually makes life difficult to the culprit. In facing such a challenge the individual is left with two alternatives – either to seek the forgiveness of the community or to leave the community and go elsewhere.

3.8. Morality and Respect for Law

People should have a moral concern for the law. Laws basically protect the good of life, and hence their respect is morally demanded. Obeying law as an end in itself is a superior virtue. There could be particularities when a law comes in conflict with the interest of the individual. It is impossible to make and have a law unless some kind of disregard is made to the interest of individuals in favour of the interest of the whole. “It is important to remember,” Legesse emphasizes “… that law that is not founded on morality is a flimsy structure. In deed Oromo culture does not attempt to divorce one from the other.”(2000: 203) People break law mainly because they do not have a firm moral principle that makes them obey it.

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One may observe that people obey law not because obeying is an end in itself, but because there is at least someone to watch them disobeying it, or because they fear facing punishment in case of failure to observe it. In a situation where they could completely be free from the fear of being observed they resort to defiance. For a morally committed person, however, a law should be respected not because of the presence or absence of external conditions but because of the fact that it is an end in itself. Thus the basic thing that makes the Oromo a law-abiding community is the moral conviction that they have for the rule of law.

3.9. Gada Grades

In the above sections we discussed what Gada is, what its objectives are, and what kind of political system and law it cherishes. The following sections attempt to explain how Gada system practically applies its principles and rules to fulfil its objectives. Gada organizes the Oromo people on the basis of age-sets [or class] and grades. It defines the political and moral rights to be granted and responsibilities to be entrusted in terms of these grades. We need to note that there is distinction between class and grade. With regard to this Legesse writes, “The set or class is the group of people who share the same status and who perform their rites of passage together, whereas grades are stages of development through which the groups pass.”(1973: 51) In other words, the gada grades refer to “a conceptual scheme that defines the kind of activities, rights, and duties the groups assume successively throughout their active careers” (Ibid: 51) whereas the gada classes are classes that “have the obligation to transmit their authority to another class in a formal handover ceremony.” (Ibid, 51)

According to Donald Levine (1974: 132), “Each gada class or luba proceeds over time through a cycle of eleven named grades. ...The transition from one grade to another is normally marked by specific ceremony.” Gada is a system that extends across the whole life of an individual. Moral rights are granted to and duties are imposed on individuals according to the grade one has attained. Beginning with the life of a person, grade ends with the cessation of his life. Through his entire life a person remains in the system of gada. As he is born to it, he dies in it. At different stages of his personal development there is some kind of duty that is imposed on and expected of him, with the exception of Dabballe and Jaarsa (explained below). Duty is assigned and rights are accorded, according to the physical and mental maturity of a person. A grandfather, father and a son
could simultaneously be in the system. But they have different responsibilities or positions corresponding to the grades they belong to. That is why Legesse says, “... Gada is an effective method of distributing authority and responsibility across the whole life course.” (2000: 127)

Both classes and grades can easily be understood if we analyze the organizational structure of the society. The assumption of power, the roles played and the responsibilities shared and discharged depend on this structure. Bassi writes, “Bernardi ‘describes the dynamic interconnection between sets and grades as a way of regulating the social life of individuals. In their corporate promotion through the series of grades, members of a set progressively acquire specific powers, resulting in the ‘capacity to perform social acts’.” (in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 20) The male members of the community are classified as hieriya/hariyya, which refers to the members of one age-set. The word hieriya or hariyya literally means persons who are born within the same period of time. When it is used in the context of Gada, it means male persons who are born within the same period of Gada rule that extends over eight years of time. As they go through different stages of personal development the hieriya assume different roles and responsibilities; and hence are called Gada class.

Bassi pointed out, “Different social activities and responsibilities are associated with different grades.” (in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 20) From birth to death one Oromo man goes through different grades of Gada system. Diverse aspects of life are interwoven, criss-crossing and overlapping through Gada. “Gada is nothing but the system of life - the system that attempts to make this life worth living. Individuals are born, grow, develop and finally die. But Gada never grows old; it is the undying system of the Oromo people.”(Abdulkerim) Politically, some people mistakenly consider Gada as a rule of elders. But as witnessed by Legesse, “The Gada system is not a gerontocracy or government by elders.” It is people in the middle of the life course who hold the greatest authority, not those in later stages.” (2000: 127) The optimum stage of life when one ought to hold the highest social or political responsibility, according to Gada, is between 40 and 48 of age. Below 40 there could be physical strength but not sound mental maturity. Above 48 there could be mental maturity but there may not be equivalent physical strength. The Oromo believe that the most suitable stage in the development of a
person for holding power is when there is sound balance between the physical and mental capability of a person.

It is possible to compare the Oromo system of Gada grade with the Indian Ashramas. For the Indians, the stages of personal development in the individual life are divided into four Ashramas, each of which is said to comprise twenty-five years. The first twenty-five years in the individual life is devoted to learning or education. The next twenty-five years is the second stage that ends when the individual becomes a man of fifty years. This specific stage is dedicated to the fulfilment of marital, parental and economic desires. The stage from fifty to seventy five years is the third. The individual who has attained this stage begins to retire from the worldly life and pursue ascetic one. The final stage of the individual life extends from seventy five years of age and beyond. This is the stage in which the individual is committed to spiritual life in order to achieve reunification with Brahman.

Very similar to the Indian Ashramas, the Oromo Gada system organizes people according to generation-sets. Although the responsibilities that are required from the individual who attains each stage are defined in both systems there is a difference with regard to the number of years to complete each stage. For the Indian Ashramas there are four stages, each of which consists of twenty five years, whereas the Oromo Gada system has eleven age-sets (grades), each of which consists of eight years. The other point that makes the gada grades different from the Ashramas of India is that it is not an age-grading system rather it is a generation grading one. (Levine, 1994: 134)

Oromo societies practice Gada from place to place in different ways. Although the essence of the system remains the same throughout, the gada grades sometimes differ in terms of names, numbers and time. For more clarification we consider the following grades as examples - concentrating on only with what is commonly understood.

1. **Dabballe**: This is the first Gada grade. It designates the son who is born when his father is in the Gada office. The sons of the Luba (the gada class that is in office) who are between 0 - 8 years of age constitute the grade. All the members of this Gada grade, as Legesse states, are the “sons of the gada class who are in power as leaders of Borana society as a whole.” (1973:52) The Dabballe occupy a special place in the society in terms
of knowledge, leadership, and are known as sons of the first born (ilm aan Korma). Those children who are born “out of time” ... are known as the “sons of the aged (ilm aan Jaarsa) and are not allowed to hold the highest position of authority.” (James and Mill, 2005: 254)

Although this is a period of childhood, by virtue of being Dabballe the sons of the Gada officials hold a special position in the society. “Dabal’le indeed, are holy children and a source of blessing. They are born ideally, during the time their fathers’ gada set is in office.” (Bartels in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 4) According to Gada system, these children are partly human and partly divine [Waaqa] and hence are believed to be among “the principal mediators between man and God.”(Legesse, 1973: 53; See also Bartels in Brokensha, 1994: 4) Bartels again writes that Leggese “notes acutely that “Dabal’le are ... invested with powers and attributes similar to the Kallu.”(in Brokensha, 1994: 4-5)

Those sons of this grade are highly taken care of. Only few children are born when their fathers’ Gada class is in office. They are believed to be the lucky and holy ones, because they are born in the right time, and hence have the legitimate right to claim the Gada of their fathers after forty years. “Parents try to protect their Dabballe children by giving them unattractive derogatory nicknames.” (Legesse, 1973: 53) Within the bound of this grade they are not given real names and are believed to be sexless. They dress in a way they look girls. In explaining the purpose of this Doyyo says, “We do all these to protect them from different dangers and evil intentions. We take care of them because they are the future leaders of our community. We cultivate them today to arm them with knowledge, skill, good will and confidence for them to become good leaders of the community afterwards.”

Since they are attributed with some spiritual power no body tends to beat children of this age-set. The Borana and Guji Oromo do not physically punish children in general although such punishment is not prohibited. “In the case of the Dabballe, however, the parent is prohibited by custom from ever punishing them physically.” (Legesse, 1973: 53) A Dabballe extremely depends on the treatment of others for his development. Gada advises people to take care of such a child so that the child grows well in physique and virtuously in character. They are to be protected from harm, given love and attention. “We believe that Waaqa loves them, otherwise they would not be born in such a right time. We love and give them deep attention so as to make them grow with desirable character trait.”

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The following statement of Donald Levine (1974: 132) reinforces this. He writes that Dabballe “receive special love and attention, and are regarded intermediaries between man and God.”

Although Dabballe are feeble both in physical and mental terms, they still have important social and moral roles. In witness to the social position that the dabballe have Bartels writes, “... any house where a Dabal’le is to be found is an asylum for people in danger of being severely punished.” (in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 5) In support of this Legesse holds, “The very act of touching the person of a Dabballe when in danger guarantees safety.” (1973: 53) Adding to this Bartels states, “When a woman has problems in giving birth, a Dabal’le is called in to put his... hand on her belly, while the women present are praying for a successful delivery.” (in Brokensha, ed. 1994: Ibid) Even the “mother of the dabballe... enjoys a variety of privileges.” (Ibid) As Levine (1974: 132) points out, “Their mothers are entitled to special honorific treatment.” Particularly in Borana such mothers wear a special kind of hairpieces symbolizing that she is the mother of a son in that grade. Other women respect and even offer her gifts, and “Childless men and women come to her to seek her blessing.” (Legesse, 1973: 53)

All these morally desirable things are invested in these children because the fate of the future Oromo is greatly influenced by how these children act and behave in the subsequent grades they attain. If they are taken care of at the root the probability of becoming a person of desirable character is high. If they are left to an arbitrary life then the probability for them to become a person of desirable quality is low. As Duraa says, “The tree that you do not cultivate (prune) well when it is very young, does not give you the fruit you need when it gets old. The Oromo see across all generations. They do all what they do, not only to address their immediate and urgent needs but also for the generation to come.”

2. Foollee or Gammee Titiquaa: This is the second Gada grade or stage in the personal development of the sons of the Luba. It covers the time from eight to sixteen years of age. Upon entering the second grade the members of the class “are given proper male names for the first time, and they are given a boy’s haircut ...” (Levine, 1974: 132) In his attempt to report the remarkable event experienced during the transition from the dabballe to the
foollee, Legesse (1973: 55) says “the hair shaving rite and the giving of names” takes place. The transition requires elaborate and detailed ceremonial and sacrificial activities.

With this transition the role and activities of the boy change. Although parents are still responsible to look after their sons, in this grade the members of the class start learning how to work and discharge responsibilities. The members of the grade are given minor responsibilities and granted little independence. In the first grade the son was more close to his mother than his father. But in the second grade he assumes the responsibilities very often entrusted to men or fathers. “After the ceremony he is urged to go out and help his father to build and maintain the kraal.” (Legesse, 1973: 56) To specify this responsibility Legesse continues to state, “The principal responsibility the boy assumes after his rite of passage is the responsibility of looking after the small livestock and horses of the family.” (Ibid) Levine (1974: 132) on his part says, “In this grade they are made responsible for looking after calves and horses. They also spend time singing songs of love, war and mischief.”

Not only do they assume social responsibilities but also relatively start enjoying personhood. This is expressed or realized in being allowed to go away from homes and villages. But the community makes sure that the independence these sons exercise and the responsibility they discharge could be within their capacity to perform. It is believed that it could be anomaly if it is more or less than what they could deserve by virtue of their age. Along with this, they are given normative education orally. Grandfathers and fathers, grandmothers and mothers teach stories, folktales, proverbs, songs, etc. to these young sons of the Gada officials, to make them acquire good character trait in all aspects of life and activities. They are instructed not to use bad language and not to show bad behaviour against any one, and to be friendly or brotherly, compassionate or kind to all. Upon reaching sixteen years of age, they leave the second Gada grade behind and go over to the third one which is known as Qondaala.

3. Qondaala or Gammee Gurgudaa: This is a grade that extends from sixteen to twenty four years of age for the sons of the Luba. Upon entering this stage the sons of the Gada officials start going long distances for hunting, raising cattle and performing heavy works and duties. “The responsibility of the third grade is to take family herds into untamed river valleys for long period.” (Levine, 1994: 132) They are expected to learn and perform the
works and responsibilities that go with their physical and mental maturity, and hence held responsible morally for their actions and behaviours. For all the actions and behaviours that are morally right they can fully be praised, and for their wrong and evil actions and behaviours they are corrected or criticized.

In the intention of preparing for the future indispensable public responsibility they start organizing themselves. Three years before they leave the grade, they come together and form a body of their future leaders called hayyu council (Chaalaa, Ibid). The leaders are elected on the basis of their good characters such as wisdom, physical strength and courage. Forming hayyu council makes them to look at themselves as fully responsible persons who have attained the first full-fledged personal development. It makes them feel, behave and act as full grown adults.

4. Kuusa: This is the fourth stage in the development of one generation-set. Sons of the Luba class who are in the age of twenty four to thirty two years assume immense responsibilities. Individuals who were elected in the previous stage as members of hayyu council could formally be reinstated in office. “At the beginning of the fourth grade the luba class is ritually constituted as such. Six men are invested as senior councillors of the class.” (Levine, 1974: 132) They assume full authority over their age-set, not on the entire community. Those members who belong to this grade are expected to have sound knowledge and experience gathered over the last grades. They exercise power first on a part in order to prove that they are capable of doing it over the whole community in the next higher grades.

According to the observation of Dagaagaa the members of the Kuusa grade are expected to learn war tactics, the history of Oromo, political and religious values, ritual ceremonies, laws and administrative practices. “As leaders of the gada class they were expected to play a prominent role in warfare.” (Legesse, 1973: 68) Levine (Ibid) also writes, “During this grade the class must undertake a prescribed war party.”

5. Raaba Dorii (32-40): If the rules of Gada strictly followed no member of the class is allowed to marry before entering this grade. “Those men who are in the grade cycle and who are of the appropriate age when they reach the raaba grade are expected to marry.” (Legesse, 1973: 65) Being a householder the individual becomes a responsible husband.
Yet there is something for which the member of the class is not entitled. He is not at least ideally allowed to raise a child until he enters his fortieth year of age. In case a child is born when the father is still in this grade that child is abandoned, at least in principle. As a result, it is believed that there was time in Oromo history when Borana couples (the Raaba husband and his wife) practiced infanticides. This was a paradox to the Borana society.

On one hand each and every Borana family has a strong desire to have as many children as possible, and on the other they practiced infanticide thinking that it is a sacred duty from which they cannot escape. (Legesse, Ibid: 70) The practice made the Gada which is basically a humanitarian system paradoxical. Since it is the only grade before the assumption of full authority over the entire society, it is one of the most important in the life and personal development of the individual belonging to the age-set. The members of this grade must consider different things in all possible angles for assuming power in the next grade. The period of this grade together with the previous one, which makes a total of sixteen years, is the period of preparation for taking full power over the entire society.

6. Gada (40-48): This is a grade in which all individuals who have gone through the last series of grades become Luba. The Oromo society believes that upon entering the gada class at the age of forty or minus, the individuals have equipped themselves with the knowledge and skills of administration. It is believed that they have morally, physically and mentally become competent to properly handle the affairs of the society. Legesse (2000: 116) writes, “We can define the gada class or luba as a segment of a generation that assumes power for a period of eight years, whereas Gada is the years when the members of the class stay in power as the rulers.” Luba refers to a group of people who have legitimate right and privilege to take over power whereas gada refers to the term of office for the luba to stay in power. All the members of the class have the legitimate right to hold the Gada office and exercise authority over the society. When the new class comes to power at the age of forty [or forty minus], the members of the outgoing class who were in power over the last eight years leave their office at the age of forty eight or minus. The outgoing gada class leaves office in peace with ritual ceremony. And those who come to power also assume power in peace with the same ceremonial functions.

A Luba is allowed for begetting a child only in this grade. In the eight years of the grade a fatherhood ceremony is celebrated. It is after the celebration of this fatherhood
ceremony that a Luba is expected to father a son. “Children born before this event have traditionally been abandoned, though the more recent practice has been to send them away to other tribes or have them adopted by families with legitimate fathers.” (Levine, 1974: 133-134) The son who is given born to the member of a Luba class after this event is the legitimate one to become Dabballe and the heir of the Gada of his father.

Every eight years, power goes from one Gada class (Luba) to the other class (Luba). Each member of the Luba class knows when he leaves his Gada office; and every member of the Raaba Dorii knows when it is his turn to get into this office. No confusions and chaos arise in the process of power transfer in the Oromo Gada system. The outgoing Luba, hands over power to the incoming class at a designated place and time. The two classes peacefully exchange the symbol of authority. The heads of the new ruling class “become the centre of political and ritual leadership for the duration of the eight-year term. They enter office as the outgoing class leaves, through a ceremony known as the “exchange of sceptres.” (Levine, 1974: 133)

7. Yuba I (48- 56): This stage is entered when the Gada period comes to an end. It is the former Luba or Gada class that becomes Yuba. The Yuba grade is divided into sub-grades - Yuba I, Yuba II (56-64) and Yuba III (64-72). That means this grade continuously extends over twenty four years. The individuals in the grade are partially retired, and they do not engage in crucial social responsibilities and authoritative tasks. But this does not mean that the Yuba persons have nothing to do in the society. They still serve their communities in advisory and judiciary capabilities. Particularly it is their duty to advise the new Gada officials and check whether the new officials correctly implement laws or not. Also they involve in mediating conflicts, sharing their experiences of life and knowledge with their own people. In general, overseeing whether the acts and the behaviours of their successors are morally right or not, and advising them not to do wrong is their main concern. When they reach seventy two years of age the period of Yuba ends.

8. Gadamojjii (72- 80): Gadamojjii which goes from seventy two to eighty years is a period when the individuals grow weak physically, but not mentally. Indeed they are believed to have acquired richer experience and better wisdom than any members of the given community. Although they are not as much responsible as they were in the Yuba
grade, they are not yet as absolutely free as they would be in the next last grade. They are attended for consultancy and knowledge of the past.

9. Jaarsa: An individual who is eighty years of age and above is called Jaarsa. In this grade all the members are completely set free from all public responsibilities. It is believed that a person of this age would cease to be both physically and mentally active; and hence must retire to rest. It is the moral duty of individuals and the society to take care of people who attain this grade.

To sum up the section: It can be noticed from the forgoing report that the Gada grade is structured according to the physical, psychological and mental maturity of the person of concern. The period when the Gada class comes to political office is apparently the peak time in the development of a person. Before the Gada office is taken over the responsibility of each member of the class increases from the preceding to the succeeding grade. In this sense, “Gada is an elaborate, well-constructed system for distributing power among all the generational segments of the society. All generations enjoy different kinds of power at different stages of the life course.” (Legesse, 1973: 128)

There is no grade that has no certain assignment. Full responsibility is entrusted and greatest power [authority] is bestowed on individuals only in the Gada grade that extends more or less from forty to forty eight years of age. This is a grade when a man is believed to have acquired complete physical and spiritual maturity. In the grades after the Gada class retires from the Gada office, the responsibility of each individual increasingly decreases with the decline of his physical and mental strength.

One can learn from the Gada age-sets, social roles and positions entrusted to the legitimate members of the class, that one ought to be or to do what he can be and can do at different levels of personal development. He should not be expected to be or to do more or less than what he can be or do. It is the time of childhood (i.e., Dabballe) and old age (i.e., Jaarsa) that relatively make one free from responsibilities. The individual in the grade knows what the society expects of him, and the society also knows what the individual is ought to do or to be. What responsibilities and respect the society in general and individuals in particular have towards a person belonging to a certain grade is also defined.
We think this is a meaningful way of organizing the society. Each has his own share in shouldering certain responsibility. One crucial area of human life where immoral acts are committed is power concentration and distribution. When few individuals concentrate power in their hands by depriving the others of sharing this power unfair treatment occurs. In this situation most capable persons could be deprived of actualizing their potentials, feelings of being marginalized develop and failures in solving problems due to the lack of capacity occur. It is only the few that determine the fate of the majority. The Oromo Gada solves this challenge by distributing power across the different age-sets (grades). “Balancing the power of one group against another is the principal method Oromo employ to guarantee power sharing between generations.” (Legesse, 2000: 128)

3.10. Five Gada Parties

There are five Gada divisions or groups that take office in rotation within the period of forty years time. According to Borana and Guji the five groups of Gada are: Birmajii Aldada, Melba Horata, Buudana Bifoole, Roobale Sabaqa and Duuloo Kiloloee; and according to Maccaa and Tulamaa Oromo Roobalee, Duuloo, Halichisa, Baara and Horataa. The members of the Oromo society are distributed in these five Gada parties. One who belongs for example to Birmajii Aldada cannot be a member of another Gada Party. When the term of office for one Gada party is over, then the next Gada party is legitimate to replace the outgoing one. And when this class again leaves office after ruling for eight years the members of the next third class take the public responsibility.

For example, supposing that the above five Gada classes were placed in the order of correct arrangements Birmajii Aldada is the legitimate class that claims office in Borana or Guji first. In view of Gada constitution, when this class completes its eight years tenure it must leave the office for Melba Horata, which again should leave the office to the third class, Buudana Bifoole. In this sense Duuloo Kiloloee comes to office after forty years. With this the first cycle of the Gada system ends and the second cycle begins. Thus the “Five successive gada classes make up a generation that occupies a complete semi cycle of forty years on the gada cycle.” (Legesse, 2000: 116) If the Gada in the first cycle of forty years belongs to the father of a son, the Gada of the next forty years is that of the son. For example, if a man assumes office right in this year, the son of this person (who is born in the Gada period of his father) will come to power after forty years from now. Every Gada
class keeps its turn of office. None of the class is allowed to claim office beyond the time
table already set for it.

These five kinds of Gada divisions are somehow similar to the different modern
political parties intending to seize power and rule a given society. One can say that the
organization of the Oromo of Gada into five different groups for the purpose of assuming
power is historically the blue print for the present day political parties. But there are basic
differences between the two. The modern political parties make a campaign of election
according to a scheduled time set by the constitution. One that wins the campaign takes
over power. If the party that has been in power thus far again wins the vote of the society
for the second and third times it again rules. But the five parties of the Gada have different
ways of seizing power. It is indispensable that each of them comes to power within forty
years time, and hence there is no rivalry campaign between them at the same time. In other
words, there are no election campaigns and competitions that are sometimes accompanied
by allegation, confrontation, and even bloodshed and death amongst the different Gada
divisions as it is in the case of the modern political parties.

In Gada system power does not belong to a particular group of people in which the
descendents inherit it from the ancestors. It is not a monopoly that a group of individuals
alone enjoy; rather it is that which every legitimate person shares according to the
structure and norm of the Gada system. Every member of the gada class very well knows
when and what responsibility could be entrusted to him as a Luba.

3.11. Behavioral Traits of Gada Officials

Since it is a system that strives for the prevalence of peace and harmony among
people Gada is an institution of peace. The Gada officials to whom the responsibility of
peace building is entrusted ought to remain in peace with each other, and with the society
at large. When he gives his witness about gada officials behaving towards each other Bassi
says, “I have never heard of any quarrels among themselves.” (in Brokensha, Ibid: 16-17)
The Gada officials are in power to make the mission of Gada, which is to make people live
in peace and harmony a reality. Officials with the duties of making people to have peace
and tranquillity should never be at odds with one another and with the society. As leaders
they must be good examples to their people whom they lead. Their exemplary gestures
have a tremendous role in influencing the behaviours of people to whom they are the leaders.

All the informants unanimously affirmed that the goodness of Gada officials is the shining light for the Oromo society. In an attempt to explain what the Oromo society expects from their Gada officials Chaalaa reports, “They ought to be our role models. Since they hold power in order to serve good purpose, we expect them to think, act and behave in good manners. They ought to teach us doing right not only in words but also in deeds. That is why we see in Gada officials serenity, humility, humanity and sincerity.” Duubee also has the same remark. “Those people who are in Gada office are not those who wait only for the others to do right, rather they are those who for themselves do it first. They are not rulers but teachers. They are not masters but servants.” Teaching others to do right is effectively possible by doing right, not by commanding and authoritively forcing them.

3.12. Division of Power

Concentration of power in the hands of one individual or a few does not exist in the nature of Gada system. The Gada class in office divides power and responsibility among its capable members. This is mainly for two reasons – one is to avoid the abuse of power, and second, to effectively execute this power and sincerely discharge responsibilities. Although responsibilities are executed on individual basis decisions are very often collective. The government of one generation-set consists of three major branches. In Legesse’s observation, “In its classic form the Oromo polity was organized as three principal institutions. These are the generational organization (Gada), the dual organization (Qallu) and the national assembly (Gumi). Of the three institutions, the most important is the national assembly known as Gumigayo in Borana…” (2000: 97)

It is a common level knowledge the concentration of power in the hands of the few does not only mean undemocratic, but also abusive. One can guess that Gada distributed power to its different components in the intention of avoiding these evils. As the remark of Legesse goes, “Oromo have created a whole complex institutional arrangement to prevent concentration of power.” (2000: 29) This distribution of power may slightly differ from one Oromo community to the other. We can cite the distribution of power and duties that the Tulamaa Oromo practices as an example.
The entire executive body consists of nine members called “salgan sadii Borana.” It is composed of three Abba Bokkus, of which one is the president, the second is the first vice president and the third is the second vice president. Abba Bokku is the chief official of the Gada class in office. Other officials are Abba Seera, an official in charge of laws and court cases; Abba Alangaa, an official who is responsible for prosecution, and Abba Dubbi, is the speaker of the Chaffee [parliament] who presents the decision of the executive body to the Chaffee; Abba Sa’aa, is an official in charge of the economic affairs of the community and Abba Dula, is one who is responsible for the army and the defence of the society.

3.13. The Supreme Body of Gada System

In its political aspect Gada has well established and organized structure. The higher body to which the supreme authority of the system is entrusted is the Gumigayo of Borana, the Me’ee Booko of Guji and the Chaffee of the Shawaa and other Oromo communities. ‘Gumi’ means the multitude and ‘Chaffee’ means “meadow” because the meeting of Gada officials is held outdoors on open pasture. (Legesse, 2000: 97) These are the assemblies that constitute the highest supreme body of the Gada system. Each of them could be considered as a parliament because in every eight years a new generation set [Gada class] comes to power. Legesse reports, “On this occasion of the national convention, all the major councils and assemblies of Borana come together. This is a grand assembly and carries the highest authority in the land. We refer to it as the “assembly of the multitudes” or the “assembly of Assemblies.” (2000: 125)

One may ask who are those who attend the assembly – are they all the people or their representatives? Whom do they represent – the people as a whole or a particular group? Legesse again points out, “At this important convention, representatives of the entire Gada system come together.” (Ibid) Bassi also reports, “All Boran, regardless of descent, locality, and generation-set differentiation, are concerned with the Gumigayo and may attend. (in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 25) In other words, members of the gada class who have “drawn from the different sections of the society, as well as ordinary citizens who have the ability to express their thoughts on matters of national concern, in addition to the different bodies such as Hayyu, Jalabaa and Makkala are all the participants.”
“There are assemblies of different types, involving different kinds of social groups, as well as of different levels, involving larger groups in a pyramidal structure.” (Bassi in Baxter, eds. et al.1996: 153) According to Maccaa and Tulamaa Oromo, for example, the power structure consists of three layers. At the top we find the grand Chaffee which is convened at national level. At the lower there are two bodies – one of which is the clan Chaffee and the other is the local Chaffee. The clan Chaffee is the second highest and the local Chaffee is the lowest and yet the most basic. Each of these makes decision over its domain. The delegates of the next higher Chaffee are drawn from the lower Chaffee.

What are the power and responsibilities of the Gada Assembly? The Assembly meets “to administer justice, to hear the historical and judicial report of the expiring eight years, to criticize some of the existing laws and legislate new ones, and to proclaim the future law and procedures…” (Legesse, 2000: 99) In short as Bassi puts, “…the assembly performs activities that are clearly political.” (in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 20) Once in every eight years the assemblies of Gumigayo of Borana, Me’ee Bokku of Guji and the Chaffee of Tulamaa and Maccaa Oromo are convened. These are great assemblies entrusted with the supreme power of legislating, revising and proclaiming laws, defining and redefining the territory of the Oromo land, delineating the rights and duties of the citizens, reviewing the activities of the Gada leaders, resolving conflicts and passing resolutions on issues of common concern.

The problems that these assemblies solve and the questions that they answer involve issues of politics, defence, economy, social life, culture, religion and environment. All these are brought to the attention of the assemblies for discussion and decisions. “All unresolved cases of conflict are taken to the general assembly for mediation and adjudication.” (Legesse, 2000: 33) Conflicts that could not be settled through other lower mechanisms could be brought to assemblies for their final settlement. “When a dispute arises it is taken to the assembly where people are confronted with the established norms.” (Bassi in Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 155) Each and every issue is thoroughly discussed to sift the important from the unimportant ones. “The parliamentary assembly debates issues until they reach consensus.” (Legesse, 2000: 98) Every participant has full right to express his ideas and vote for whatever motion he thinks to be right. No imposition of any kind is
involved “All binding decisions, concerning virtually all spheres of social activity, have to be reached during an assembly.” (Bassi in Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 153)

The Assembly has also the supreme authority for electing, appointing or assigning Gada officials. It assesses the activities and performance of the officials that are in office. “Incompetent leaders can be removed from office... Power emanates from the people and if those to whom it is entrusted fail in their responsibilities, it can be withdrawn...” (Legesse, 2000: 126) It is believed that incompetent leaders cannot properly use the power bestowed on them. They either intentionally or unintentionally squander or abuse it. Consequently injustice could be committed, the peace and harmony of the society for which this power is needed, could be threatened. When officials cease to act and behave in accordance with the norms and laws of the society such misdeeds arise.

Gada believes that one who does not respect the norm and law of society is not an asset but a liability to the society, and hence must be brought down. “When political leaders abuse their power, institutionalized procedures is employed to get rid of them.” (Legesse, 2000: 115) Laws are used not only to bring people to power but also to send them off power, when they are found unfit. Executing this is the ultimate authority of the Assembly. According to the observation of Legesse “The ultimate check on the authority of the Gada leaders or the electors is the assemblies of multitudes that represent all sectors of the society.” (2000: 113)

The Gada officials themselves very well know that they could be removed from office if they fail to competently discharge their responsibilities. Therefore, the decision whether the leaders of the Gada class in power “are fit to complete their term of office and continue to lead the Gada class for the rest of its active career” is the most important function of the Assembly. (Legesse, 2000: 115) That means the authorities of the Gada officials are questionable. If there is anything that guarantees their power, it is their own performance in accordance with the law of the Gada. In case of failure to act and behave according to the law, the assemblies have the right to remove Gada leaders from office, and have done so on several occasions in the 20th century. (Legesse, 2000: 114)

Defence is one of the important areas of authority for the assemblies to review. Aggressions that threaten the peace and security of people are critically reviewed, and
appropriate resolutions are passed. If engagement in warfare is found to be necessary it is in the power of the assembly to declare it. No Gada officials or bodies are entrusted with the power of mobilizing military force other than the Assembly. “In Oromo democracy the ultimate right to declare war rests not with the military leaders but with the gada assembly.” (Legesse, 2000: 76)

The assembly does not have any forceful mechanism to enforce all of its decisions. Regarding this Marco Bassi again states, “Once the individual or his representative has accepted a resolution, there is no need to enforce it by the use or by the threat of an executive force. The general consensus is the force.” (in Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 154)


An institution without a leader is inconceivable. But all personnel in the institution cannot be a leader. Thus there has to be at least a single symbolic leader heading the higher body of the system or institution. The character, competence, wisdom and creative power of the individual heading a system or institution has a tremendous impact on the development of that system or institution. Gada as a system has a single person who leads and oversees all the activities of the system, i.e., Abba Gada or Abba Bokku. Abba Gada or Abba Bokku is the leader of the Gada class in power. In designating the authority of the Abba Gada Legesse states, “The class in power is headed by an officer known as Abba Gada or Abba Bokku in different parts of Oromo nation.” (2000: 104)

In Borana and Guji the Abba Gada and Abba Bokku are different. The Abba Gada is the president or the head of the state and the Abba Bokku is a Gada official with insignificant power of decision. But elsewhere in other Oromia regions Abba Bokku to his domain is just what Abba Gada is to the Borana and Guji Oromo. Literally ‘Abba’ means father, owner or possessor. Bokku is “…a wooden sceptre that d’Abbadie compares with the mace of the English parliament. It serves as a symbol of the president’s authority.” (Legesse, 2000: 98) It symbolizes the power of the person who carries the sceptre. Abba Gada and Abba Bokku literally, therefore, mean the possessor of Gada and sceptre respectively. But metaphorically Abba Gada or Abba Bokku is the head of the Gada council in Oromo communities of different regions. In short the Abba Gada or Abba Bokku is the supreme leader of the Oromo people.
Power is transferred from the one grade to the next legitimate Gada grade. A new generation-set comes to power when the period of the generation-set that has stayed in power for the last eight consecutive years comes to an end. In Borana and Guji when the Abba Gada of the outgoing class hands over power to the Abba Gada of the next generation-set the former gives to the latter Baalli, white feather of male ostrich. This symbolizes the transfer of power from one to the other class or generation set. Whereas in other Oromia regions such as Shawaa, Wallaga, etc. what the Abba Bokku of the outgoing class hands over to the incoming one during the time of power transfer, is Bokku, the sceptre.

It is not by arbitrary means that one becomes the Abba Gada or Abba Bokku. Not anyone could be a candidate for holding office as Abba Gada. Gada has laws and procedures that neatly define who could be the legitimate person to take public office, and when and how political power is handed over. Accordingly a person who has a good potential for becoming the Abba Gada or Abba Bokku ought to be one who has gone through the first five successive grades; successfully demonstrated his good qualities and competence, has shown impartiality, eloquence, knowledge, integrity, patience and endurance. In other words, as observed by Dagaaga “Abba Gada or Abba Bokku ought to be a person of safuu. He must be one who speaks the truth, is wise, honest, decent, gentle, caring and far-sighted. He must be a man of good will to serve the collective interest of the society.” To put it differently Abba Gada or Abba Bokku ought to be a man of all possible virtues, which to a certain extent sounds Aristotelian view of morality. If he is good in one thing and bad in other he cannot be a person of safuu. Gada believes that a man of all possible good qualities has good potential for becoming Abba Gada.

In the Gada tradition wisdom [knowledge] is one of the most important qualities. It is a decisive criterion, as it is understood in the Oromo social setting. According to their belief a desirable leadership without good knowledge is impossible. In addition to wisdom; eloquence, confidence, truthfulness, courage, physical fitness, competence, patience, selflessness, impartiality and endurance are the important traits to be considered by the Gada grade. But if a leader is “Without sound knowledge none of these good qualities could consistently be used for noble purpose.” (Chaalaa)
Whether a person has all, some or none of these qualities is demonstrated by the activities that he performed in the previous grades. The main reason why a person is required to go through the different grades prior to the Gada grade is itself to make them gain all these good characters. Good characters are morally good, and hence Gada officials ought to be morally competent to handle the affairs of the society. They are civil servants. They have no special privilege. It is morally forbidden for any Gada officials to use their power for their personal end. They themselves believe that they are in power to serve the common cause of the many, not that of the few.

In Borana context in particular the Abba Gada ought to be a man of staunch belief in his Oromumma. He must be one who persistently use the Oromo language, believes in Waaqa (god), and has a strong will to respect the Oromo traditions, and practice all the rituals."(Borb & Dagaagaa) Oromo believe that a man of good knowledge can have all the good qualities mentioned. Commenting on this Bassi says that in the belief of Borana people “the greater knowledge of aadaa and seera, traditional norm and laws recognized by everybody as binding” is one basic requirement “for getting an office.”(in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 16) In short Abba Gada ought to be, in Aristotelian terminology a man of all possible virtues. It is a person of all good qualities that is capable of leading the society to good life system. Abba Gada or Abba Bokku is given a key power because he is believed to be a person of high profile.

The members of the Gada grade have the rights to elect their leaders and to be elected. The electorate elects those who have better profile than the rest. Since “women are actively excluded from the age-sets” (Legesse, 1973: 19) it is only men who can elect the leader. Gada officials are elected for an office only when they meet the requirements mentioned above. They ought to have qualities that make them better than the other members of the grade.

3.15. Responsibilities of Abba Gada, Abba Bokku

What are the power and the responsibility of Abba Gada or Abba Bokku? As a political system Gada seeks to serve the best interest of the society. The officials from top to bottom of the Gada office must have the capacity and commitment of enforcing and implementing the Gada policy. As Bassi noted, those whom the assemblies nominate for higher post in the system, are “Only those who are considered capable of responding
adequately to the responsibilities assigned to them...” (in Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 157) In his attempt to specify the required qualities Bassi writes, “This requires some definite qualities, such as knowledge of both substantive laws and procedural rules and rhetorical skills.” (Ibid)

The duties and responsibilities of Abba Gada are expressed both in affirmative and negative ways. “The Abba gada in power” as Legesse writes, “serves as a presiding councillor under normal circumstances and holds the power of “cutting” the debates and formulating the emergent propositions.” (2000: 100) He is also entrusted with the responsibility of looking after the welfare of the society over which he rules. The Abba Gada or Abba Bokku with the legislative and judicial authority; “conducts his parliamentary business under the shades of great trees that are highly respected.” (Legesse, 2000: 98) He has also to move from place to place in order to make sure that life is running in peace and tranquillity. Conflicts and problems of serious nature require his attention and that of other Gada officials. Settling conflicts and solving problems in the intention of ensuring peace and harmony, is one of their major missions.

As mentioned earlier, the Abba Gada as well as other Gada authorities cannot stand above the laws. It is the law that rules, not the subjective will or passions of persons in the Gada system. The Abba Gada is the leading figure not because he has the will to rule but because he is given the power of rule from the people of his domain – he is trusted for taking care of the power entrusted to him. If he breaks the Gada law then he will be brought to the hayyu. Therefore, it is the Gada constitution that rules the Abba Gada, and never is the vice versa.

There is nothing that makes the life style of Gada officials special to the ordinary members of the community. As observed by Bassi, “Political leaders carryout economic activities like anybody else for most of their lives.” (in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 16) There are given no special privilege to enjoy. They are in the office to discharge their moral and generational duties, not to serve their own purpose. If at all there is a support that they get from their community, it is simply what goes to compensate whatever the officials lose while devoting their time to the causes of the public. The community may render them assistance not because they are officials but because they must get compensation for the worthy time and energy they lose for the public good.
3.16. Rule of Gada: The Political Legacy

For Legesse who has devoted much of his intellectual resources, time and energy in studying Oromo without any doubt Gada is politically democratic. In his book, “Oromo Democracy: An Indigenous African Political System” he gave a detailed account and a deep analysis about the democratic nature of the Oromo Gada system. In the same book he writes, “The Oromo are one of the many peoples in Africa who invented their own variety of democracy and, as such their institutions contribute to our understanding of this aspect of the human heritage.” (2000: 93) Although it is predominantly conceived that democracy is the invention of the contemporary western world and civilization, Oromo people built democratic values, cultures and society long before that.

“Borana polity of which gada is only component,” writes Bassi “may certainly be considered a democracy, if ‘democracy’ is strictly taken in its classic meaning of ‘government of the people, by the people, for the people’ [Lincoln].” (in Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 159) The essential feature that makes democracy to be what it is is that it is the system in which power emanates from the people, ruled by the people and serves the interest of the people. As discussed above, the way power is seized, distributed and handed over; the purpose it serves, the way it is used and its organizational structure make the Oromo Gada system democratic. As Legesse rightly puts, “… in democracy power rests ultimately with the people …right which they exercise either by direct participation or by delegating that power to some leaders of their choosing.” (2000: 100)

Democracy is the invention of human mind. It is in the attempt to discover a ruling system that is more satisfying, accommodating and comfortably accepted by the majority that people developed the concept of democracy. Being a very complex and sophisticated system democracy was made possible by the rational and critical mind of man. In view of this Legesse writes, “Oromo democracy is one of those remarkable creations of the human mind that evolved into a full-fledged system of government, as a result of five centuries of evolution and deliberate, rational, legislative transformation.” (2000: 195) That means, Oromo developed democratic values and practices, life and system not spontaneously. In course of history they had to rationally and critically examine the concrete lives and relations, interests and conflicts, likings and aversions on one hand; and they had to organize ideas and principles in view of avoiding the undesirable and promote the desirable actions and behaviours of people on the other. What makes a system democratic

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is not only how power is handled but also how laws are made, decisions are passed and rules are enforced, rights and duties are defined, respected and discharged. Witnessing this Bassi states, “Boran decision making is regulated by ‘specific and complex procedural rules’, ‘reached by general consensus and persuasion, and is certainly “democratic”. (in Baxter, e.Js. et al. 1996: 20)

In Oromo society democracy is not only a system of rule or governance, but also the shared value of the society. Gada organizes the Oromo population into age sets or [gada] classes through which democratic values are internalized by citizens. The need of fair and equal treatment, peaceful and healthy relations, is all expressed in Gada. Oromo as a people of democratic temper and value are sensitive in respecting the right and freedoms of human beings. Their tolerance, patience, endurance, forgiveness and non-violence are all the qualities that constitute their democratic and moral values. But these desirable values were abused and good opportunities were wasted because of the dominant undesirable value system of the country.

3.17. The Current Status of Gada System

What is the current status of Gada? Is it a living Institution? What role and place does it have to make the life and interrelations of the Oromo society better? Gada is in the true sense of the word is neither a living nor a dead institution. Over the last one century it has been an aching system because of the critical blows it faced from loss of internal dynamism and primarily from external forces. What was the cause for the failure of the Gada system?

Although the informants are not able to pinpoint the specific cause of the problem, almost all of them agreed that there were internal conflicts and external aggression that prevented the Gada from developing. The internal conflict emerged because of the demographic pressure and the loss of vitality in the function of the system among the Oromo of some regions. The external cause is mainly the conquest and aggression that brought the political, economic and cultural independence of Oromo to an end on one hand, and the introduction of new religions and culture on the other. Levine observed,

Under the pressure of demographic changes, extension to distant territories, resistance to the infanticide rule, the attraction of other cultures, and most recently the constraints imposed by the Ethiopian state, it [Gada] broke down in
a variety of ways. The demise of the gada system is remembered as a terribly disruptive experience by many Galla [Oromo]. (1974: 145)

The demographic growth of people made the Oromo migrate in all directions. As they moved away from the centre of their origin their conviction and practice of Gada system was diluted. On top of that, the practice of infanticide, to some extent, made the Oromo people to undermine the Gada system. Basically the practice of infanticide is contradictory to the human concept of Gada system. Although the system considers human value as intrinsic, paradoxically it is again the law of this system that violates the right that infants have to life. This self-contradictory approach in the Gada system threatened its continuity.

The migration of people from all directions and their push to the farthest areas was the other factor that impaired the practice of Gada. Oromo tribes which migrated farther from the sixteenth-century homeland abandoned virtually all of the customs associated with the gada cycle. In part this was due to the distance from the homeland, since many activities associated with the gada cycle were tied to sacred shrines in the Borana and Guji regions, and the Oromo system lacked mechanisms for providing social control at great distances. (Levine, 1974: 144) These together with other factors, in some places, undermined the continuity of Gada system. Particularly in the regions where Oromo had grave conflict with the Amhara elites, Gada gradually was replaced by small kingdoms or moieties. Levine shares us his observation of this point.

The need for a continuing parliamentary organization was felt in areas where conflict with Amhara and other people were chronic. In such circumstances successful leaders of military expeditions, known as abba dula, transformed what had been a temporary role of war captain into permanent role of political leadership, often called moti (Levine, 1974: 144)

When Oromo was incorporated to the Abyssinian Empire all the institutions and their distinct cultures were severely suppressed. The Amhara conquest of the independent Galla [Oromo] tribes in the nineteenth century was followed by efforts to subordinate their political systems to that of the Imperial Ethiopian Government. In some instances gada ceremonies were suppressed and in most cases political authority was bestowed upon rulers recruited on a different basis from that of the traditional gada leaders. (Levine, 1974: 143)
In an attempt to destroy the identity of Oromo the Abyssinian ruling elite used all means to eliminate their distinct features. As Gada was one of the eminent Oromo symbols of identity the Amhara rulers made its destruction their number one target of attack. Particularly the political dimension of Gada was the anti-thesis of their system of rule. It was a democratic, humane, just and egalitarian system, and hence incompatible with the Abyssinian ruling system that was undemocratic, unjust and hierarchical. Oromo could be comfortable for the Amhara subjugation and exploitation only if they were alienated from their own system, i.e., Gada. It is only the Borana that have been able to maintain the basic institutions of the traditional gada system despite the demographic changes and the stains on human nature. All the other Galla tribes, however, have abandoned one or more central features of the system or have eliminated it entirely. (Levine, 1974: 143)

Consequently, Gada is not a living institution in the large part of Oromo land at the present. Bassi remarks that in many parts of Oromia it “was living as only in nostalgic recollections of the older people.” (in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 15) But a close look to the culture and the norm of the Oromo society reveals that Gada is still deep down in the life of this society. It has left its imprints through the entire structure and cultural features of the Oromo across the country. If one goes down to the grass root level and penetrates into the cultural life of these people he/she observes that Gada is still at work.

Currently, the status of Gada can be explained in three ways. There are places where Gada as a system is non-existent. The Oromo residing in these places know Gada as a fact of history, not as a living institution. There are also regions where Oromo communities were able to retain some [partial] features of Gada. Some of the original features have been abandoned, others have been adulterated with the different cultural traits of non-Oromo communities. In this situation it is observed only as a religious and ritual norm, not as an active socio-political system. Thirdly, there are regions such as Borana and Guji where the essential features of Gada are relatively retained at a large scale. In these regions Gada still has power over the society in solving problems and in answering questions – or in mobilizing and administrating the society.

There is one more important characteristic that still makes Gada a living system. The substance of the system is universal that neither time nor space impedes from being
valid and pertinent. It was able to survive all the atrocities probably because it is relevant, truth, rational, or vital. The system that survives destruction despite the chronic challenges it encounters has vital power to withstand the challenges.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussions we understand that gada is predominantly a political philosophy and system. It evolved and unfolded as a result of hard critical thinking about the most important questions of managing human life and relations. Taken from this perspective it is by and large the philosophy of the value of life. The purpose of Gada is nothing other than serving the good of human life. Serving the good of life also means protecting it from evil actions and behaviours. To accomplish this, Gada attempted to make people harmonious to one another, to nature and Waaqa by and through ritual practices, empirical leadership and dialogue. In other words, it had been striving to make people perpetually live in a just society based on a just system of administration.

In Gada political values and moral values are hanged together, the latter being the substratum on which the former is erected. That is why Gada is believed to be the storehouse of values. The political value of Gada expresses the fair relationships existing between the Gada officials (Luba) who are supposed to rule and the bulk of the Oromo society to be ruled. These relationships are defined according to the values ascribed to both parties – whether they are values of superiors and inferiors, or values of equals. In Gada system the Gada officials are not rulers and the people are not the ruled subjects in the strict sense of the word. It is preferable to call the officials ‘public servants’ and the people ‘free citizens’, because there are no sentiments of being superior or inferior, higher or lower either with the officials or with the people. The officials are there to take care of the society, and the latter is not a passive recipient since it also takes care of the whole system. The subjects have good ground to accept the officials, and the officials have legitimate reason to claim and take the Gada office. Both parties are less vulnerable to any challenge arising from within. If anything that incurs vulnerability to the power of the officials, it is their own poor or defective performance. The whole structure and principles, laws and practices of Gada system are organized in such a way that they can promote whatever is right and good for human welfare, and avoid whatever is bad or wrong. Thus even in its political dimension Gada system is ultimately an ethical institution.
Gada is not only a system in which the interest of the individuals and that of the society are fairly taken care of, but also it is very close to the law of nature, to the interest of people, unsophisticated, plain and clean. According to our observation, Gada excels even the contemporary democratic culture of the west for it successfully takes care of the welfare of people and avoids violence, chaos and wastage of huge amount of money for the seizure of political power.

References


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Notes

1. Haji Mormor claims that Gada existed for 3368 years. But no evidence is given to establish this assertion. The informant was not asked as to what basis he has to say that. This invites further investigation.

2. Caphana is a kind of punishment that the Borana Oromo use to punish a culprit for the serious offence he/she has committed. If a person is sentenced to caphana, he/she ceases to be a part of the society. Even he/she tends to stay in the society he/she cannot get any service from the society. It is impossible for him/her to get involved in marital life, to borrow anything from any one, to get help in case of trouble, to share anything with the members of the community. Even no one attends his/her funeral ceremony in case of death.

3. The researcher is unable to retrieve the source of this data.