

Archaeological Semiotics of Material Cultures of Gadaa Ritual Performances in Borana and Shewa Zones, Ethiopia

Garedow Abiba¹, Worku Derara² & Alfredo González-Ruibal³

Abstract

This study documents the archaeological semiotics of the material cultures of Gadaa ritual performances in the Borana and Shewa Zones of Oromia. Gadaa is the Oromo traditional governance system recognized in 2016 by UNESCO as an intangible heritage of humanity. There has been limited archaeological semiotics research aimed at documenting and analyzing the material cultures of the Oromo. This study used a qualitative research approach and employed a purposive sampling technique to select participants. The findings indicate that Gadaa ritual objects have multiple iconic, indexical, and symbolic meanings. The results confirm both change and continuation in the use and function of traditional ritual objects. Changes are attributed to the influence of modern forms of governance and the expansion of plastic and metallic objects. Currently, the material cultures of Gadaa ritual performances are available and used at various Gadaa ceremonies, despite these changes. A post-processual approach was employed to interpret material culture. Indeed, the study recommends further archaeological investigation to detail the documentation and preservation of Gadaa ritual performances.

Keywords: Archaeological semiotics, ethnoarchaeology, Gadaa ritual performance, material culture

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ejossah.v21i2.5>

¹Corresponding author: Salale University, Department of History and Heritage Management, Ethiopia. Email: garedow.abiba@aau.edu.et

²Addis Ababa University, Department of History & Archaeology, Ethiopia.

³Institute of Heritage Sciences of the Spanish National Research Council, Spain.

This work is licensed to the publisher under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derives License.

Article History: Received 15 May 2025, Accepted 22 June 2026, Published online 15 July 2026

Introduction

Material culture, encompassing physical objects, artifacts, and spatial arrangements, functions as both a medium and a message in ritual contexts (Hodder, 1991). Semiotics, or the study of signs and symbols, is a crucial analytical tool for deciphering the meanings of such artifacts (Preucel, 2006). Ritual is an element of the wider whole, and its archaeological recovery should reflect this rather than being an end in itself (Insoll, 2004). Importantly, rituals are formal and have their own style, material culture, and specific time and place. According to Kottak (2010), the repetition of ritual practices across years and generations serves to preserve the values attached to them (see also Rappaport, 1999). “Thus, we may say that our experience of the present largely depends upon our knowledge of the past... to legitimate a present social order” (Connerton, 1989:3). Material cultures, as the manifestation of structured symbolic practices meaningfully constituted and situated within society, are the concern of archaeologists (Hodder, 1982). According to Schiffer (1999), artifacts are essential components of culture because of their dual character as ideal and material, which is crucial in forming cognitive processes.

Notably, the Gadaa system is still practiced among the Oromo people, despite some disruptions. It helps maintain peace, exchange knowledge, and practice rituals among the people (Jalata, 2012; Ta’a, 2016). According to Legesse (1973), the Borana people are the reservoir of Oromo culture in general and the protectors of material culture in particular within their Gadaa system of life. Selecting Borana and Shewa zones for the study areas is not for comparison but for a holistic understanding of the Gadaa practices. Consequently, this study engages with the material and symbolic construction of Gadaa rituals from the viewpoint of archaeological semiotics, seeing objects as mediators of cultural transmission. This study deals with the function, meaning, and use of artifacts through direct observations of the contemporary community for archaeological interpretation. It focuses on ethnographic data/ethnoarchaeology to explain how ritual objects play an active function in society. Early ethnoarchaeological studies (Binford, 1978) emphasized the importance of studying living societies to build middle-range theories that link archaeological remains to human behavior. Ethnoarchaeological studies of symbolic archaeology (Hodder, 1982) show how artifacts encode meaning through use and context.

Significantly, the ritual and symbolic dimensions of material culture are placed within a primarily symbolic framework. Material culture variation is often dependent on these functional considerations (Hodder & Hutson, 2003). Another important material correlation of ritual is the presence of artifacts left by people.

This includes ceramics, incense burners, and other objects (Hodder, 1989). Given that ritual acts have symbolic meanings (Toren, 1999; Meskell, 2005), objects can also play a very important role in establishing our social, religious, and personal identities in contemporary society (Miller, 1987; Hodder, 1989). According to Burka, among the Oromo, metal objects are believed to have an extraterrestrial origin. A metal that drops in the form of thunder and lightning is called *sibiila bakakkaa*. It is believed that “it has extraordinary uses including protecting people from evil forces as well as healing them from diseases” (Burka, 2012:224). Accordingly, in every society, some symbols are more popular or simply better known than others. These symbols are what Turner calls “dominant” because of their widespread use and polarisation of meanings in society (Turner, 1967).

Burka & Giardino (2013) stressed the role of material culture and its symbolic implications in the daily life of the Oromo. Sirika (2017) presents that in Oromo society, objects and non-human organisms have an agency that affects how human agents interact with them. The objects have representations, and they store information about themselves and their human partners. Abiba (2018) expounds that ritual objects semantically have political, social, historical, and cultural values for the community. Assefa (2015) describes *ateetee* (women's fecundity ritual) as one aspect of Gadaa ritual practice where signifying material cultures are employed. Tadesse (2013) addressed the implications of ancient rock paintings of Harargee. He suggests that the Oromo *qaalluu* institution fundamentally underlies the social semiotic, linguistic, and epistemological structures communicated using the rock painting signs or motifs. In addition, Hailu et al. (2016) discussed artisans' roles in the religious, cultural, social, and economic activities of Oromo society. The artisans provide ritual clothes. In short, less attention was given to documenting the semiotic implications of Gadaa ritual objects.

Methods

The study was conducted in the Oromia, Borana, and Shewa zones. Fieldwork data were collected from August 2024 to February 2025. The research utilized a descriptive design and qualitative research approach to document and analyze objects of Gadaa ritual performances. The purposive sampling technique was employed to select the participants. The method was chosen due to the need for in-depth insight from knowledgeable elders, ritual experts, and custodians of the Gadaa ritual institutions. The approach allowed for a comprehensive investigation of the socio-cultural and ritual values of these objects. The data were gathered by

ethnoarchaeological fieldwork through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, focus group discussion (FGD), and document analysis.

Hence, semi-structured interviews were conducted in the districts of Arero, Fentale, Ilu Galan, Naannawaa Ambo, and Midakegn. It combined a diverse group of participants, including Gadaa leaders, Gadaa ritual experts, cultural historians, and spiritual figures as key informants due to their lived experience and knowledge on the subject. Participant observation took place in various Borana and Shewa zones, particularly during cultural festivals, including *irreechaa/dhibaayyuu* and ritual ceremonies of ateetee and the Gadaa power transfer. The locations involved include Ardaa Jilaa Badhaasaa, Ardaa Jilaa Guutoo, Chalalaki, Hora Harsadee, Odaa Bisil, and Tarree Luugoo. On the other hand, six focus group discussions were conducted with seven participants in each theme. Indeed, the background of each respondent was considered to acquire well-crafted knowledge about the subject under investigation. Archival materials and written historical records were reviewed.

Indeed, the data were analyzed thematically, grounded in the Peircian theory of archaeological semiotics, focusing on how material cultures function as icons, indexes, and symbols. To identify the function and contextual use of Gadaa ritual objects, the interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed. This research adhered to ethical guidelines for researching indigenous people and sacred ritual practices. All participants gave informed prior consent in writing where necessary and orally. The research respected cultural norms for the reverence of sacred rituals and the treatment or photographing of ritual items.

Results

Nature of Gadaa ritual performances and material cultures

Within the Gadaa ritual performances, material culture plays a central role in expressing symbolic meanings and reinforcing ritual, social, and political values. Informants argued that ritual practices such as power-transferring ceremonies, thanksgiving rituals, oath-taking rituals, women's fertility rituals, and ceremonies of conflict resolution are undertaken using objects. These ritual objects are numerous and vary by gender, the type of rituals or festivals, and the Gadaa age set. However, this research highlights some of the main ritual objects in Gadaa practices. The data obtained via FGD indicate that the fundamental tenets of the Gadaa rituals are widely accepted, legally enforceable, spiritually energizing, distinct, and unambiguous. This shows that Gadaa ritual performances demonstrate respect, unity, and solidarity among the groups, and the members interact within their bounds.

Key informants suggest that knowledge is passed from generation to generation through the making of objects associated with Gadaa ritual practices. The important thing in crafting these objects is considering and ensuring the cultural traditions of the people. The crafting is typically performed by artisans who specialize in making ritual objects. In most cases, the *siqqee* ritual object is made by the father and given to the daughter, a bride, at her marriage. However, according to informants, there are some circumstances in which this ritual object is made by an artisan. The scepter and *kallachaa* are made by selected persons who know how to craft them very well. Pottery ritual objects are made either at the *galmaa* (sacred house) of *Waaqeffannaa* (the Oromo indigenous religion) or at other pottery-making places for utilitarian objects, but are guided by the orientation of ritual experts.

Overall, blessing and activation lead to the symbolic empowerment of ritual objects. Once made, the objects must be blessed by a spiritual leader, including the *qaalluu* (a high priest in the *Waaqeffannaa* religion) or an elder ritual expert. This serves to awaken the spiritual energy of the object and align it with its function. In this regard, offerings and rituals of purification take place. Milk, butter, or honey is offered during the blessing along with chanting and prayer.

Archaeological semiotics of Gadaa ritual objects

***Bokkuu* (the wooden or metal scepter)**

Bokkuu is used as a sacred object. It is made using an axe. Researchers' observations indicate that the height and width of these scepters vary geographically; however, their physical features remain consistent. Currently, wood-made *bokkuu* is widely used among the Oromo in general and in the study area in particular. Informants explained that after a scepter is made, a sacrificial ceremony involving the slaughter of cattle is performed to appease its sacredness. Data from the FGD suggest that smearing the scepter is also a symbolic blessing of the object, signifying power and sacred ceremonial objects of the *abbaa bokkuu*, which is regarded as something that brings respect and fortune to the communities.

According to a myth obtained from some elders, it was believed that *bokkuu* made of metal descended from the sky. Accordingly, *Waaqaa* had dropped it onto the earth for the Oromo people to lead each other with it peacefully and genuinely. In this case, one of the key informants points out that a senior *qaalluu* among the *Maccaa* Oromo holds this *bokkuu* tied with *alangaa*. Holding *bokkuu* with *alangaa*, the senior *qaalluu* directs the other junior one. Based on observation at *Ardaa Jilaa Guutoo*, in *Borana*, *bokkuu* is tied with *ciicoo* (an object used to carry butter) among the *Borana*. People attend *dhibaayyuu/irreechaa*, a thanksgiving

ritual site, carrying bokkuu and praying to the creator for rain, fertility, and peace. One of the informants from Karayu said that “among the Karayu, abbaa Gadaa is known as abbaa bokkuu”.



Figure 1: Bokkuu (a scepter) tied to *ciicoo* (a ritual object used to carry butter)

On balance, the Oromo oral tradition notes that Waaqaa (God) gave it to the Oromo to lead peace, love, and stability. Similarly, the Dori among the Karayu say “yaa bokkuu numagarsi,” meaning “O, scepter, protect us,” to signify its religious significance. Dori are members of the Gadaa class in power in the Karayu Gadaa system. During the ritual performances on the eve of the Gadaa power transfer, they organize themselves and express that they are the vanguards of the community to secure peace and order.

Viewed collectively, observation, focus group discussion, and interviews enabled the triangulation of the bokkuu’s meaning. Iconically, bokkuu represents fertility and blessing. Indexically, it embodies peace and respect. Symbolically, it signifies power. Informants explain that bokkuu symbolizes the peaceful transfer of power to the next Gadaa leader at the end of every eight years. They have also stated that the object has religious implications, as much as it is used as a means of restoring peace. For focus group discussants, the possession and appearance of bokkuu during Gadaa ritual practice indicate legitimate authority and social hierarchies by marking the presence of the rightful leader.

Kallachaa (ritual headdress)

The kallachaa ritual object measures about 7-11 centimeters in length. It is a slightly conical cylinder with a diameter of about 2 centimeters and, in its upper part, a cone, which measures nearly 2.5 centimeters long with a base of about 3 centimeters in diameter. Most of the kallachaa nowadays are aluminum cast; earlier examples were made of non-ferrous alloys such as brass or silver. The emblem is attached to a yellow-white snail shell or ivory, standing erect on the forehead with the assistance of a strap. According to key informants, Konso smiths today are famous for casting it.

Mainly, Kallachaa is a symbol of power and guidance. According to oral tradition, the first kallachaa was of heavenly origin and was worn on the forehead by the qaalluu. Informants noted that kallachaa symbolizes a link between the human and the supernatural world; its function is to open up this connection between different spheres. According to some informants, it is interpreted as a ‘phallic’ ornament, while some informants described it as a sacred device. Indeed, the Borana people call it “*waan aadaa*” (things of culture). The data gathered via FGD has shown that “*it is a ritual instrument, one that can accrue cosmic energies. The kallachaa, a forehead-worn item by some dignitaries, is among the most visible traditional symbols of the Oromo people.*”

Furthermore, informants illustrate two different ideas regarding the symbolic expression of kallachaa. According to some informants, kallachaa is not a phallic object or a symbol of virility; instead, kallachaa is described as a sacred object and socio-religious mediator. Moreover, they added that *kallachaa* is dangerous, and only qualified persons such as *abbaa* Gadaa, retired Gadaa officials, and qaalluu may handle it. Thus, they described it as an emblem of the qaalluu (chief priest) or of the retired *abbaa* Gadaa. For those informants, it symbolizes a link between the human and the supernatural world; its function is to open up this connection between different spheres. This shows that kallachaa emerged as one of the conceptually contested ritual objects. Several of those interviewed indicated that kallachaa is exclusively a sacred item and expresses moral integrity, spiritual shelter, and the divinely endorsed nature of the Gadaa System. However, there are also interpretations of kallachaa that present its long, narrow shape and pointed form as phallic representations and as symbols of the fertility, vitality, and generative force associated with men.

In sum, focus group participants could not agree on any one perspective, but ultimately, all acknowledged both lines of thought and concluded that the kallachaa exists on multiple semiotic levels, as both a sacred symbol of authority and a symbol that embodies the concepts of fertility and life-force. Therefore, the

multiplicity of meanings provides a means of understanding the dynamic and multi-layered semiotic logic that characterizes the Oromo people and their ritual material culture that an object or its representations have a series of overlapping, negotiated, and contextually dependent meanings associated with them. Accordingly, the visibility of kallachaa at the ritual place indicates both a spiritual conduit and a marker of political legitimacy, reinforcing social order. In the practice of *guddifachaa* (traditional adoption institutions), the adopters, the prospective mother and father, hold kallachaa and *caaccuu* during the *guddifachaa* ceremony. As a result, the *guddifachaa* child is referred to as “*ilmoo Kallachaa*” or “*Caaccuu*” to mean that the child is legally born to the family (Ta’a, 2016:90). This shows the multi-meaning nature of these objects among the Oromo people.



Figure 2: kallachaa (ritual headdress)

Moreover, one of the ritual experts clarified that kallachaa holds an indexical metaphoric meaning in several ways: It casually indicates that the wearer has undergone necessary rituals and is morally qualified to exercise power. According to the informant, kallachaa indicates the presence of a sacred obligation, meaning that its wearers are under oath and the moral strictures of *safuu*. Similarly, in mediation ceremonies of a legal or conflicting nature, the kallachaa indexes the gravity and sanctity of the proceedings. A FGD discussant revealed that in the Oromo cultural tradition, kallachaa is a symbol par excellence. It symbolizes the bond between the leader and Waaqaa. It symbolizes trust bestowed upon the individual by society, symbolizing ideals like truthfulness, justice, loyalty, and service. This headdress has been institutionalized for centuries as a signifier of sacred leadership in the Oromo tradition. In Gadaa ritual and cultural ceremonies like the transfer of power (*baallii dabarsuu*) and other thanksgiving ceremonies, in

the personage of the kallachaa, there is a reinforcement of leadership legitimacy through communal cultural legitimization rather than the charisma of the person.

Alangee/Liichoo (Whip)

Based on fieldwork observation, alangee, a whip, is a handheld ritual object carried by abbaa bokkuu, qaalluu, and abbaa alangaa (father of the court), during lawmaking, conflict resolution, and ritual times. Apart from these contexts, this object can be handled by the groom and elders in weddings, conflict resolution, festivals, and rituals. According to elders, alangee is a whip made from hippopotamus skin, giraffe skin, and the fertile organ of a bull, which symbolizes strength and the continuity of generations, respectively. The stick of the whip can be made from ivory, especially if it is double-tipped. There are two types of alangee: one with a single tip and the other with a double tip.



Figure 3: Alangee (a whip made of hippopotamus hide)

Remarkably, in its iconic capacity, alangee visually and materially represents authority and discipline. Its coiled or elongated form resembles movement and control, while the cracking sound it produces mirrors the enforcement of order. According to key informants, the whip is fashioned to communicate potential energy, flexibility, sharpness, and readiness. Its appearance in rituals iconically models the watchfulness, swiftness, and positiveness expected of a Gadaa leader or judge.

Likewise, as an index, alangee points to the immediate presence of ritual authority and legal action. The elders in the study area noted that its presence in public adjudication sessions signifies that a decision or pronouncement of justice is imminent. When carried by an abbaa Gadaa or ritual official, the alangee indexes their role as enforcers of Gadaa law. In this way, it becomes a performative object that makes authority visible and tangible. Symbolically, alangee stands for the moral and ethical order upheld by the Gadaa system. According to the data from FGD, alangee represents not violence, but the ethical

restraint and discipline necessary for maintaining social harmony. In oath-taking rituals, it is held aloft or touched by those swearing the truth, embodying both the weight of their words and the consequences of falsehood. Through its ceremonial use, the alangee becomes a moral signifier of justice, leadership responsibility, and communal coherence.

Waciitii (Bowl Pot)

Waciitii is one of the small clay bowls used in Oromo indigenous ritual practices. Potters craft this pot, taking guidance from ritual experts. “Pottery is also symbolically and technologically likened to stages of human life, and is treated accordingly” (Sirika, 2017:60). The decoration on this bowl pot for ritual purposes is unique from that of other utilitarian objects. According to informants, during the Gadaa power transfer ceremony, ateetee, and irreechaa rituals, butter is melted in waciitii. Additionally, this ritual material is also used in buna qalaa (“slaughtering of coffee”), which is common among the Oromo. The Oromo people have been practicing the “slaughtering of coffee,” which is an integral part of every major ritual practice. After the preparation of coffee-slaughtering takes place, the blessing of the community proceeds.



Figure 4: Waciitii (a bowl pot for buna qalaa- “slaughtering of coffee”)

Iconically, waciitii stands without a hearthstone and is endowed with teat-like decoration. In this regard, the four decorations on waciitii symbolize the teat

of a cow, representing fertility. On the other hand, the bottom of waciitii is not like other bowl pots; rather, it stands without a hearthstone because it has feet. This characteristic enables people to eat with each other from this bowl. It symbolizes the cohesion of the Oromo people coming together to create intimacy. The pot thus visually and materially embodies the sacred alteration of ritual practices.

Indexically, waciitii points to the presence of ritual action and sacred intention. Its appearance in a gathering indicates that a ceremony of peace, blessing, or remembrance is underway. Thus, the pot is not just a container but a sensory indicator of spiritual connection. Symbolically, waciitii stands for reconciliation, hospitality, and collective memory. It is central to rituals that bind communities, resolve tensions, and invoke ancestral wisdom. The symbolic “slaughter of coffee” via waciitii marks a non-violent, ethical ritual that prioritizes moral restoration and spiritual purification.

Irroo (Armlet)

Worn on each forearm, the irroo is the most important material object that the qaalluu or abbaa Gadaa keeps in his office. Focus group discussants describe that irroo can be made from copper or silver. The width and thickness of the armlet depend on the size of the wearer. Its manufacture, distribution, and use are under strict ritual and cultural control. Informants mention that qaalluu usually wear the silver armlet, as it is a simpler one, even though qaalluu can wear the copper armlet. Irroo is a highly sacred ritual object in the qaalluu institution. Participants stress that a qaalluu without wearing irroo could not possess the spirit that comes to them. This is because qaalluu wear massive bracelets together while performing ayyaanaa (the spirit). In Gadaa ritual practice, the armlet is not mere ornamentation.

Similarly, community elders contended that irroo is a symbol of legendary value, representing power and holiness. The shape of a circle features prominently in Gadaa teachings, such as the cyclic nature of the 8-year Gadaa. It embodies cyclical living, intergenerational transfer, and the wholeness of virtuous deeds. Moreover, the materials themselves (in this case, metals or natural fibers) are specifically chosen to represent purity and connection to the earth, like sacred natural substances. One ritual expert elaborated that the visibility of the irroo during public ceremonies serves iconically: it illustrates who possesses sacred or political authority, usually comparable to the divine relationship the wearer claims.



Figure 5: Irroo (armlet) and its corresponding 3D model

On the other hand, the irroo indicates the wearer's successful initiation into Gadaa rituals or religious ordination by the qaalluu system. A ritual specialist emphasized:

Its adornment on the body particularly implies their willingness to defend safuu, the Oromo ethical-moral principle. For instance, on a qaalluu, it suggests his blessing and position as a mediator between spiritual and temporal states. On a Gadaa chief, it signifies his rightful election and assumption of office, at times after religiously sanctioned ceremonies. It is also a mark of community trust since it is only bestowed upon those who are morally upright and reputable.

Accordingly, the irroo signifies religious authority (in qaalluu), political legitimacy (in Gadaa), moral integrity, and cultural continuity. The Oromo embrace it as a cultural emblem, tied to identity, law, and divine order. Key informants elaborate that to wear an irroo without legitimate initiation is approached as a serious breach of safuu, symbolically interpreted as disobedience against the divine and communal peace. Irroo also symbolizes peace and divine grace. During major rituals, such as seeking rain, fertility, or Gadaa transition blessings, the presence of irroo implies the invocation of Waaqaa's grace by vested representatives.

Siiqqee (Sacred Staff Held by Women)

The siiqqee (ritual staff) is one of the objects given to a bride during her marriage. It is crafted by the daughter's father and, in certain circumstances, by artisans. Key informants argued that trees such as *Harooressaa* (*Grewia bicolor*), *Ejersaa* (olive), and *Waddeessaa* (*Cordia abyssinica*) are intentionally chosen and mostly used in crafting siiqqee. The length of the siiqqee corresponds to the height of its

owner. However, in most cases, the height of the siiqqee is said to be below the niche of the owner's lower jaw. The decoration on the siiqqee staff and the intentional selection of tree type have extrasomatic meanings. Concerning the origin of the siiqqee institution as the power of Oromo women, the oral account from an FGD in the study area argues that it dates back to the evolution of the Gadaa system.



Figure 6: Crafting of siiqqee (a ritual staff held by women)

According to the bearer of the staff, its design and ornamentation embody femininity, sacredness, or the marital and community status of the woman carrying the siiqqee. Symbolically, in its form and ornament, the siiqqee embodies dignity, maturity, and female tenacity. It resembles a walking stick or scepter, similar to male counterparts like bokkuu, but is used by married women. The discussant

points out that the availability of a siiqqee indicates the social identity of the wearer—a married woman or elder woman who signifies someone with rights and ritual privilege. When deployed in community ritual or protest, it references collective grievance or protest, especially against injustice, gender violence, power disorder, or social disorder. In siiqqee institutions or in ateetee ceremonies, its use indexes power, membership in cultural and spiritual healing, or community mediation. The discussant summarizes that siiqqee references power and membership in customary laws and morals defended by women.

Participant observation confirms that women hold siiqqee at the thanksgiving rituals, power transfer ceremonies, and women's fecundity rituals. Its meaning is culturally constructed and transmitted, not self-explanatory to outsiders unless one understands the Gadaa socio-political structure. Symbolically, siiqqee stands for the negotiated, institutionalized female authority in Oromo society, a symbol of both divine and social legitimacy. It is one of the material cultures in which Oromo women can play cultural, economic, political, and religious roles in their society. Siiqqee serves as the symbol of the power of Oromo women.

Caaccuu (Cowrie shell)

It is one of the ritual objects in ateetee and irreechaa, as well as at the time of a march to ardaa jilaa (ritual landscape), even though it is mainly used in the cult of ateetee. Key informants contend that, as with bokkuu and kallachaa, the origin of the cowrie's shell was claimed to be not handmade, and this ritual object is believed to have come out of the earth's core through the center of both the river and the mountain. Accordingly, caaccuu was found between a river and a large stone, and it was seen as the kallachaa of women. Caaccuu symbolizes Oromo women in multi-directions, and it is a chief symbol of females among the Oromo. Connected to its symbolic representation, there are two different ideas.

Basically, the informants suggested that the caaccuu symbolize the human body, especially the skeleton and teeth, not the female reproductive organ. In contrast, others explained that it depicts the female organ, symbolising fertility and the earth at the opposite end of the sky. In addition to the above idea, field observations indicate that this ritual material culture symbolises female reproductive organs. Key informants argued that caaccuu's visual resemblance to the female reproductive system contributes to its iconicity as a fertility symbol. The shell's ovular, curved shape and shiny white surface visually evoke birth, life, and regeneration. Their use in women's ritual dress is no coincidence; it is a replication of the Oromo worldview premises of generation and nurturing. Caaccuu thereby represents life itself in iconic form. The visibility of caaccuu ornamented women

during ateetee parties is an indication of the energization of ritual space. Caaccuu serves as an indicator of a woman's status as a moral agent and marks ancestral continuity, legitimacy, and ritual authority when it appears in inherited ritual objects. Thus, their occurrence is an embodied index of lineage and sacred responsibility.

Besides, as symbols, caaccuu are culturally constructed significations not through resemblance or causal relationships but through social convention. Caaccuu represents protection, spiritual implication, and morality within Oromo cosmology. Their repetition in reconciliation, oath-taking, and supplication ceremonies is an indicator of their symbolic role as conveyors of ethical and cosmological order. They are no mere ornaments but deliberate, significant motifs that encode communal values and spiritual aspirations. Therefore, caaccuu acts as a symbolic anchor in both individual and collective acts of devotion and resistance.



Figure 7: Caaccuu (cowrie shell)

Jaanoo Afaan Lamaa (Big Pot of Two Mouths)

It is a large clay pot with two mouths, used to prepare porridge during the ateetee ritual. Jaanoo afaan lamaa is very different from other utilitarian porridge-preparing objects (see figure 8). It is a very large pot. The pot symbolizes human anatomy. Elders who interpret the symbolic meaning of the ritual artifact

stated that the Oromo give the name to the decoration on the pot and the whole body of the pot with the decorations on it. Within this context, the jaanoo (big pot) has nine ears and nine lines. According to the informant, it symbolizes the nine councils in Gadaa practices. Two mouths represent *oboo* and *cooraa* (elder and younger family), respectively, which is common among the Maccaa Oromo. At the ateetee ritual, the women from oboo (senior) make porridge only through one mouth. And the women from the cooraa (junior) make porridge through the other identical mouth.



Figure 8: Jaanoo afaan lamaa (two-mouthed pot)

Jabanaa Afaan Lamaa (Two-Mouthed Coffee Pot)

Jabanaa afaan lamaa is a two-mouthed coffee pot. The coffee ceremony is rich with material artifacts with designated meanings. The key informant insisted that dichotomies of decoration on the pot and other objects explain the Oromo philosophy of dividing living things into two: male-female, God-earth, and life-death, which are in turn connected.

One elder clarified that during the coffee ceremony, the women who are hosting the ceremony often hold up hot jabanaa on their palms, and the ritual experts or elders in a family pray the following:

<i>Yaa waaq jabanaan jabaa miti,</i>	<i>O Waaqaa! Pot is not strong,</i>
<i>Situ jabaa!</i>	<i>It is you who are!</i>
<i>Gubaa nu baasi!</i>	<i>Save us from suffering!</i>
<i>Nagaa nuuf kenni, hamaa nu oolchi!</i>	<i>Give us peace, save us from evil!</i>

In the above prayer during the coffee ceremony, jabanaa symbolizes peace for the community. According to informants, clay vessels symbolically represent human beings who could not endure inequitable judgment and deadly disease, which are believed to be beyond an individual's capacity to establish peace (wealth, health, fertility) and to deter (famine, drought, war). Here, the concept of “jabanaa” is not strong, referring to the fact that human beings are not strong by themselves and that the source of their strength is Waaqaa. And *gubaa* (suffer in life) in this context means bad fortune in the Oromo traditional worldview, and even the Oromo say *qabbana* (cool) to *abiddaa* (fire).

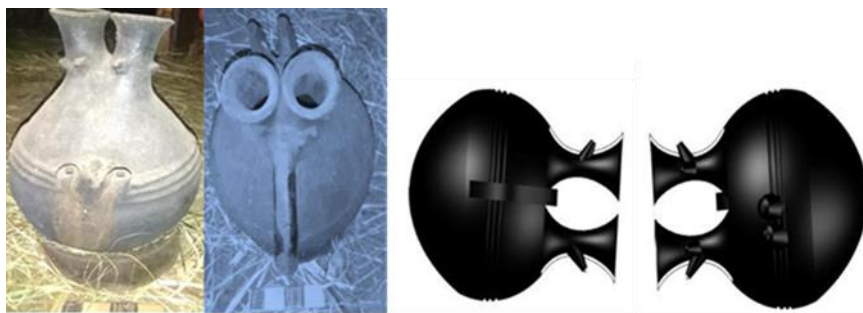


Figure 9: Jabanaa afaan lamaa (two-mouth coffee pot) and its corresponding 3D model

Maarashoo (Butter Pot)

Maarashoo is a butter pot used in *taaboree* (children's rite of passage) in the Oromo tradition. Based on fieldwork observation, during *taaboree*, age transformation takes place. At the *ateetee* ritual and specifically during *taaboree*, newborn cow's butter is prepared in *maarashoo*, and all children from the neighborhood join to eat together. *Taaboree* is one of the best-known and lovely *gaammee xixiqqoo* rituals, at which male children enjoy eating whatever they prefer in a group. It is the first *Gadaa* grade. This means in the *Gadaa* system, there is *hiriyyaa* (born of the same age grade), and the child should join his *hiriyyaa* (age set).



Figure 10: Maarashoo (butter pot)

In return, the children bless the cow and the owner of the cow. Elders narrate that four teat-like dots on maarashoo (see Figure 10) show *jiidha hawwu* (wish of fertility) for the cow and women also. The nine wavy lines symbolize the presence of nine councils in the qaalluu institution and in the Gadaa system, which always oversee societal problems and reconcile them.

Changes and continuities

It is worth noting that the Gadaa system still finds reference in symbolic objects such as the bokkuu (sceptre of authority), kallachaa (symbolic emblem of male leadership), and caaccuu (cowrie shell used in ritual by women). They retain their symbolic value and are likely to be kept in clans or families. Traditional clothes and ritual decorations (beads and animal skins) are still employed. Elders argued that, irrespective of changing some forms of their cultural contexts, these objects retain their place as carriers of religious authority and cultural continuity. However, pottery objects that carry various meanings and symbolic implications that are used in Gadaa ritual practices are replaced by portable plastic and metallic objects.

Overall, various causes have been blamed for the alteration and deterioration of the Oromo Gadaa system. According to informants, the underlying cause for the demise and transformation of the Gadaa system among the Oromo was the transition to a modern governance structure. Informants state that with the decline of the Gadaa system's practice, various Gadaa institutions began to diminish.

Increased urbanization and migration have disrupted the traditional communal lifestyle essential for the Gadaa system's operation. The introduction of industrial objects is another factor in the change in the use of traditional ritual objects. The expansion of Islam and Christianity in Oromo communities also played a role. However, in the last few decades, there has been a revival of interest and efforts to adapt the Gadaa system as a part of modern governance. The potential of the Gadaa system as an indigenous governance model is investigated by researchers such as Jalata (2012), Hasan (1990), and Ta'a (2016), who enumerate its democratic, inclusive, and sustainable principles. The system's worldwide applicability and necessity for preservation and reconstruction are also highlighted by UNESCO's 2016 designation of it as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Discussion

The findings of the study suggest that, very often, some of Gadaa's ritual objects were sacred; for this reason, they could be handled only by a few initiated individuals in the study area. Correspondingly, many scholars argued that Oromo material cultures, such as kallachaa and bokkuu, have been described as sacred objects (Bartels, 1983; Knutson, 1967; Hasen, 1990; Burka, 2009). This implies that the value of the Gadaa ritual material culture is obtained from its symbolic function.

Above all, the symbolic function of the bokkuu as an emblem of political authority and moral legitimacy parallels that of similar leadership staffs across Africa. The Okyeame poma is a wooden ceremonial staff from Ghana, topped with a figurative sculpture symbolizing authority, wisdom, and the power of the spoken word for the Akan people. Marais's work on Okyeame Poma, based on Peirce's semiotic perspective, states that "Iconically, the artwork on the poma depicts a lion and a child, with the child touching the lion. Indexically, the poma points to the authority of the okyeame, but also to a proverb from the Asante culture" (Marais, 2020:105). A Kongo nkama ntinu scepter ("ceremonial staff of the chief") functions in a similar way, having iconic, indexical, and symbolic meaning in Kongo society; it gets its meaning as a legitimate ruler's tool (Bridges, 2013).

Therefore, phallic stelae, waga statues, wagar objects, and ritual materials associated with fertility found in the Horn of Africa represent the use of a Cushitic symbolic system that connects sacred power, fertility, and ancestral legitimacy through material culture. Archaeological evidence ranging from carved gravestones at Tutu Fela and Tututi in southern Ethiopia to stelae and burial mounds at Aw-Barkhadle shows that carved stone markers and anthropomorphic or phallic motifs were used before Islam, in connection with Waaq, the Sky-God of

the Cushitic people (Ehret, 1995; Mire, 2015). Ethnographically, similar symbols can be found among the Oromo and Konso peoples; for instance, the concepts of divine fertility, social regeneration, and the connection between humans and the cosmos are embodied in the kallachaa (Amborn, 2009; Hallpike, 1972). In the case of Oromo Gadaa ritual practice, kallachaa, a sacred object, serves as the semiotic anchor for expressing authority and continuity of lineage—concepts that are consistent with the larger Cushitic material culture and with phallic symbolism as expressions of life, reproduction, and the fulfillment of the cosmic mandate. Thus, when viewed in comparative perspective, the archaeological evidence and the symbolic materials from Somali, Konso, and Oromo cultural contexts show that a shared Cushitic ideological structure is encoded in material culture.

Importantly, among the Yoruba of West Africa, cowrie shells were used as objects of divination and symbols of messages in ritual practices, having other social and economic functions. Cowries are seen as objects of medicine, bearers of symbolic messages, and a medium of exchange (James, 2012). Archaeological findings from East Africa indicate that there was an exchange of cowrie shells into the interior part of Africa. Cowries being circulated in this manner serve to remind us of their historical significance, connecting people in inter-community and cross-cultural relationships (Moffett et al., 2022). In the same manner, the FGD discussant suggested that, because ornaments were used in ritual for many different purposes and were generally not produced locally, their use reflects the historical context of trade and exchange among the Oromo people and other communities. The archaeological recovery of cowries in bundles from Khami in Zimbabwe, in ritual contexts at Historic Cave, suggests that cowries may have been used in divination practices from the 18th century onwards (Moffett et al., 2022:894).

Consequently, in the semiotic approach, culturally shared meanings are to be found in cultural works and representations (the “texts” of a culture, in the wider sense). For instance, the word *siqqee* is used as a metaphor for (1) “protection” and (2) “mediator”. Moreover, as an institution, *siqqee* “functioned hand in hand with the Gadaa system as one of its built-in mechanisms of checks and balances” (Kumsa, 1991). Furthermore, symbolic implications of Gadaa ritual performances like *bokkuu*, *kallachaa*, and others play a key role in sustaining peace among the Oromo (Bulcha, 2015; Abiba, 2018). On the other hand, the material outcomes of people's activities make it possible for other people to treat them as indexical, drawing inferences about what made them possible (Hodder, 2010). When people do draw such inferences (which depend on their semiotic ideologies), the meaningfulness of materials is part of a causal logic.

Thus, employing Peirce's triadic sign model (icon, index, symbol), this research uncovers the rich meanings of such ritual materials. For instance, the bokkuu is symbolic of legitimate power, indexes temporal leadership sequence, and iconically resonates with the straightness of truth and justice. The findings are in line with but extend previous research on material symbolism in Indigenous political systems (Insoll, 2012). The finding also substantiates Hodder's (1991) argument that material culture derives meaning from its ritual and social context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has investigated the semiotics of Gadaa ritual practice from an archaeological point of view, illustrating how material cultures such as scepters, cowrie shells, and other ritual objects are an effective vehicle of symbolic communication in the Oromo Gadaa system. Rather than being passive repositories, these materials actively contribute to constructing, preserving, and transmitting Indigenous knowledge and authority.

The results of this study have wider significance than archaeological interpretation. For future researchers, it calls for a more comprehensive semiotic and material analysis of Indigenous political systems, challenging researchers to explore how objects mediate power, memory, and identity. It also underlines the importance of integrating indigenous epistemologies into archaeological research on ritual and formation processes of the archaeological record, further decolonizing archaeology. Policy-wise, the study affirms the identification and preservation of Gadaa ritual sites and material symbols as key elements of intangible cultural heritage. Integrating such knowledge into cultural preservation policies and school curricula may promote cultural identity and intergenerational knowledge transmission among the Oromo and other Indigenous peoples. Effectively, the research attests that material symbols in the Gadaa system are living semiotic agents that still play a role in political and cultural life.

Acknowledgments

We thank the research participants for their valuable contributions. We also acknowledge the CFEE for the fieldwork grant. Finally, we thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments.

References

- Abiba, G. (2018). Documentation and analysis of material cultures at *Waaqeffannaa* religious sites: The case of Chalalaki in Mida Kegn district, West Shewa zone (Master's thesis). Addis Ababa University.
- Amborn, H. (2009). The Phallsification of the Kallačča: or, why Sometimes a Cigar is a Cigar. In *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, 395-407. Trondheim: Norwegian University of Science and Technology.
- Assefa, G. (2015). Description and documentation of Ateetee ritual among the Dirree Enchini community of West Shewa. (Master's thesis). Addis Ababa University.
- Bartels, L. (1983). Oromo Religion, Myths and Rites of the Western Oromo of Ethiopia: An Attempt to Understand. Dietrich.
- Binford, L. (1978). *Nunamiut Ethnoarchaeology*. Academic Press
- Bridges, N. (2013). Loango Coast Ivories and the Legacies of Afro-Portuguese Arts. *A Companion to Modern African Art*, 51-73.
- Bulcha, M. (2015). Oromia's Irreechaa Festival - A Revival of an Ancient African Culture. An Attempt to Understand and Explain. Howard University.
- Burka, T. (2009). Why the Tumtuu is not so Marginalized: New Perspectives on the positions of the Smiths in Western Ethiopia, Wollega. *Nyame Akuma*, 72,12-20.
- Burka, T. (2012). Technological Variability in Iron Metallurgy: The Case of two Oromo Traditional Smelting sites in Wollega, Ethiopia. In *BAR International Series*, 2395, 212-226.
- Burka, T., & Giardino, C. (2013). Production vs. Destruction: Ethnoarchaeological Considerations on the Ideological Role of the Metals in the Oromo Society and Antiquity. In *BAR International Series*, 2472, 88-98.
- Connerton, P. (1989). *How societies remember*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hailu, W., Regassa, M., & Mohammed, K. (2016). The role of indigenous artisans in socio-cultural development: The case of weavers in Maccaa Oromo of East Wallagga, Ethiopia. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, 4(1).
- Hallpike, C.R. 1972. *The Konso of Ethiopia. A study of the values of a Cushitic people*. Clarendon Press.
- Hasen, M. (1990). *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A history 1570-1860*. Cambridge University Press.

- Hodder, I. (1982). *Symbols in action: Ethnoarchaeological studies of material culture*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hodder, I. (Ed.). (1989). *The meanings of things: Material culture and symbolic expression*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hodder, I. (Ed.). (1991). *Archaeological theory in Europe: The last three decades*. Blackwell.
- Hodder, I., & Hutson, S. (2003). *Reading the past: Current approaches to interpretation in archaeology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hodder, I. (2010). *Religion in the emergence of civilization: Çatalhöyük as a case study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Insoll, T. (2004). *Archaeology, ritual, religion*. Routledge.
- Insoll, T. (2012). *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion*. Oxford University Press.
- Jalata, A. (2012). Gadaa (Oromo Democracy): An Example of Classical African Civilization. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 5 (1). <http://trace.tennessee.edu/utksocopubs/80>.
- James, O. (2012). Importance of cowrie shells in pre-colonial Yoruba land, South Western Nigeria: Orile-Keesi as a case study. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2(18), 234-241.
- Knutson, K. (1967). *Authority and change: A study of the Kallu institution among the Macha Galla of Ethiopia*. Goteborg.
- Kottak, P. (2010). *Mirror of humanity: A concise introduction to cultural anthropology* (7th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill Companies Inc.
- Kumsa, K. (1991). The Siqqee institution of Oromo women. *In the Journal of Oromo Studies*, 4 (1 & 2).
- Legesse, A. (1973). *Gadaa: Three Approaches to Study of African Society*. New York: Free Press.
- Marais, K. (2020). Okyeame poma: Exploring the multimodality of translation in precolonial African contexts. In R. Gould & K. Tahmasebian (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Activism* (pp. 95–111). Routledge.
- Meskel, L. (Ed.). (2005). *The archaeologies of materiality*. Routledge.
- Miller, D. (1987). *Material culture and mass consumption*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mire, S. (2015). Wagar, fertility and phallic stelae: Cushitic sky-god belief and the site of Saint AwBarkhadle, Somaliland. *African Archaeological Review*, 32(1), 93-109.
- Moffett, A. J., Nyamushosho, R. T., Bandama, F., & Chirikure, S. (2022). Stringing together cowrie shells in the African archaeological record with

- special reference to southern Africa. *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 29(3), 862-901.
- Preucel, R. (2006). *Archaeological Semiotics*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Rappaport, R. (1999). *Ritual and religion in the making of humanity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schiffer, M. (1999). *The material life of human beings: Artifacts, behavior, and communication*. Routledge.
- Sirika, B. (2016). *Toward a history of the Oromo of Wallaga in southwestern Ethiopia: An ethnoarchaeological study of ceramic technological style and tuber crop domestication*. (PhD diss.). University of Calgary.
- Sirika, B. (2017). We Are Not Alone: Conceptualizing People-Things Relationship in Oromo Community in North America. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 4(1), 34-43.
- Ta'a, T. (2016). The Gadaa system and some of its institutions among the Booranaa: a historical perspective1. *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities*, 12(2), 81-97.
- Tadesse, D. (2013). Qaallu Institution: A Theme in the Ancient Rock-Paintings of Harargee Implications for Social Semiosis and History of Ethiopia. *International Journal of Archaeology Cultural Studies*, (1), 001-018.
- Toren, C. (1999). *Mind, materiality, and history: Explorations in Fijian ethnography*. Routledge.
- Turner, V. (1967). *The Forest of Symbols. Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Cornell University Press.