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The *Qaalluu institution*: An indigenous peacebuilding practice among the Gujii Oromoo in southern Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

We examine how the *Qaalluu institution* contributes to peacemaking and the administration of justice among the Gujii community. The *Qaalluu institution* is one of the many Gujii Oromoo indigenous *institutions* of conflict resolution, used exclusively to settle various types of charged disputes. By examining the histories of the community and neighboring ethnic groups, our study revealed that *Abba Qaallu* is a vital leader who governs all aspects of social, environmental, and political life. The *Qaalluu institution*, led by *Abba Qaallu*, is an organized structure composed of counselors that governs Gujii Oromoo and other neighboring ethnic groups, following supernatural (*Waaqa's*) law and order.

Keywords: *Qaalluu*, *Qaalluu institution*, Peace building, Conflict resolution, Ethiopia

Introduction

Conflict resolution and human development are interconnected and mutually reinforcing processes that must be coordinated to achieve equitable and inclusive development (Namsuk & Pedro, 2010; UNDP, 2012). The concept of peacebuilding emerged in peace studies more than thirty years ago. Galtung (1976) coined the term in his pioneering work on three approaches to peace: peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. Coning (2013) describes peacebuilding as an activity that aims to resolve injustice nonviolently and to transform the cultural and structural conditions that generate deadly or destructive conflict. Peacebuilding is a process that helps create sustainable peace and order (Miller, 2005). Along with conflict-resolution mechanisms, it is an essential tool for fostering sustainable peace and preventing the recurrence of conflict (Tesema, 2012).

Indigenous *institutions* and leaders in many parts of Africa remain significant contributors to peacebuilding. The administration and functions of these *institutions* vary widely across the

continent's cultures and localities. Colonialism and other social changes reduced the powers and functions of traditional chiefs (Kwabena, 2017, cited in Lenin, 2018). These *institutions* cannot be ignored (Ruth, 2017), as governance in Africa rested on indigenous *institutions* or chiefs before colonial rule. Zigale (2016) stated that indigenous *institutions*, by their very nature, are communal and collective, fostering peaceful coexistence. The Oromoo society established indigenous *institutions* for conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and the administration of justice (Gumi, 2016).

The Oromoo are considered the indigenous people of the Horn of Africa (Mohammed, 1990; Tesema, 2012; Jalata, 2017). In Ethiopia, different ethnic groups have established and used various indigenous conflict-resolution *institutions* unique to their cultures (Getachew & Alula, 2008; Gebre et al., 2011). Similarly, among the Oromoo, the *Qaalluu*¹ *institution* is the foremost *institution* in peacemaking processes. It operates from the highest moral ground in pursuit of peace and stability. It is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural and political philosophies of the Gujii Oromoo. However, few researchers consider it to be mainly organizations that make less contribution to political, social, and economic affairs (Temesgen, 2008).

The *Qaalluu* *institution* is the indigenous spiritual, cultural, and ethno-political *institution* of the over eight million Gujii-Oromoo. It is therefore an indigenous cultural, democratic, socio-political organization with legitimacy to command the Gadaa system, 'the Oromoo democratic administrative system in a hierarchy which is replicated down to the community level' (Girum, 2010; Asafa, 2012; Tadesse, 2018). Beyond providing legitimacy to power or leadership, the *Qaalluu* *institution* has effectively contributed to conflict resolution and the securing of justice. Conflict resolution and the securing of public safety and unity are seen as its principal duties. However, the role of the *Qaalluu* *institution* in cultural leadership and political representation in the community has received less attention due to several factors.

***Qaalluu* and its *institutional* structure**

The *Qaalluu* is exclusively represented by the Obbituu, a Gujii sub-clan. Because the power of the *Qaalluu* is hereditary, the nomination to be *Qaalluu* is therefore confined solely to the Obbituu groups. According to the *Qaalluu* principle, the Gujii *Qaalluu* is the supreme religious leader of the *Qaalluu* *institution* (Temesgen, 2008). Although the *Qaalluu* has no direct participation in formal administrative activities, he plays a role during the heydays of the Oromoo Gadaa system and its recognition (Asafa, 2012; Tesema, 2012; Jalata, 2017; Tadesse, 2018). In terms of structure, the

¹ A man with ultimate power who has the right to the legitimate power of the *Abbaa Gadaa*

Qaalluu institution comprises *Qaalluu* counselors under the supervision of the *Qaalluu*. The *Qaalluu institution* has a separate council, locally known as *Yaa'aa Qaalluu*, located at its headquarters. This council is headed by the *Qaalluu* (person). Parallel to the *Abbaa Gadaa*, the *Qaalluu institution* has an elected *Hayyuu*.² The *Hayyuu* serve as advisors to the *Qaalluu* and are responsible for overseeing the *Qaalluu institution's* day-to-day activities. The *Hayyuu* election follows a procedure similar to that of the *Hayyuu Garba* within the *Gadaa* system. Unlike the hereditary and unlimited office term of the *Qaalluu*, the leadership term of the *Hayyuu Muka Yaa'aa* (members of counselors with exceptional wisdom) is limited (Chala, 2017). They are elected for an eight-year term.

For the Gujii Oromo, the *Qaalluu* stands as the supreme hereditary ritual priest, a singular and paramount figure who anchors the entire *Gadaa*³ system. Unlike other Oromo branches where multiple *Qaalluu* may coexist, the Guji tradition vests this sacred, lifelong office in one individual, establishing him as the exclusive intermediary between the people and *Waaqa* (supernatural God). His divine mandate is to invoke blessings that ensure communal fertility, harmony, and prosperity. This role culminates in his presiding over the seminal *Gadaa* rites most notably the *Me'ee Bokkoo*⁴, the octennial ritual transfer of authority thereby sanctifying the continuity and legitimacy of Gujii governance and social order.

Embodying sacred neutrality, the Gujii *Qaalluu* exists apart from the secular, elected leadership of the *Gadaa* system. He transcends political divisions and is ceremonially prohibited from bearing arms, symbolizing his detachment from temporal conflict. Adorned with sacred regalia such as the *Kallacha* and the distinctive black *ruufa* turban, and supported by a dedicated retinue, he functions as both a ritual keystone and a moral compass. His ritual precinct serves as a spiritual epicenter a site of visit that consolidates Gujii identity and sustains social cohesion across a dispersed populace, offering an immutable sacred constant against the cyclical rhythm of political change.

Although a parallel form of *Qaalluu* the charismatic spirit medium channeling *ayyaana* (spirits) operates within broader Oromo society, including among the Gujii, it is the hereditary *Qaalluu* who remains the cornerstone of Guji religious structure. While spirit mediums provide personalized healing and divination at *galma* (gathering hall) shrines, often responding to contemporary crises, the undiminished prominence of the hereditary office underscores the Guji's

² Persons with extraordinary wisdom who provide counseling services to *Qaalluu*

³ Is the traditional, democratic socio-political framework of the Oromo people, branded by an eight-year rotational leadership cycle that governs all aspects of life through consensus, equality, and peaceful transitions of power.

⁴ Is the sacred ceremonial ground for the Gujii Oromo, functioning as the vital site for their *Gadaa* system's key rituals, power transitions, and communal decision-making.

profound fidelity to the classical *Gadaa* framework. In preserving this ancient priesthood, the Gujii Oromoo maintain a living bridge to their foundational spiritual and political heritage.

According to Tassama (2016), the *Qaalluu* institution among the Gujii and the Borana, which remains relatively unspoiled by modernity, plays an important role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. The *Qaalluu* handles cases that are socially and morally challenging or perceived as unlikely to be resolved by local elders. Minor cases are not brought before the *Qaalluu*; instead, they are resolved by *Hayyuu Muka Yaa'aa*, who oversees all day-to-day activities, including the routine administrative functions of the *Qaalluu* clans.

The *Hayyuu* have legitimate authority to decide on issues under consideration in the name of the *Qaalluu*. The *Hayyuu Muka Yaa'aa* is the group of *Hayyuus* assembled under the tree called *Odaa* to consider any case before appealing to the *Qaalluu* headquarters. The *Qaalluu* never intervenes to resolve personal disputes, which the *Hayyuu Muka Yaa'aa* settles. The *Qaalluu* is physically present at the proceeding during dispute resolution whenever he deems it a severe case. The site of the proceeding and/or the *Qaalluu's* physical presence qualify the decision as belonging to him. The *Hayyuu Muka Yaa'aa* is fully authorized to handle cases of the *Qaalluu* clan (families and relatives from which the *Qaalluu* was born). Cases such as well repair and excavation, supporting the needy, and settling disputes are handled by the *Qaalluu*.

The *Qaalluu* is a ritual leader who holds the highest authority to legitimize *Abbaa Gadaa* and to address complex intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts, as well as conflicts among the three phratries (*Haganaa sadii*), i.e., *Uraaga*, *Maattii*, and *Hookkuu*. He evaluates the performance of *Abbaa Gadaa* within each phratry, the system's performance, and the condition of human, environmental, cultural, social, and political security. He also prays to God for good rain and a prosperous life free from drought and disease. The *Gadaa* and the *Qaalluu* are the two political and cultural institutions of the Gujii-Oromoo society. Hinnant (1977), as cited in Assebe and Tadesse (2018), described the Gujii *Gadaa* system as a complex scheme of ranking, authority, and decision-making, consisting of an intergenerational structure that rotates every eight years. The following functions characterize it: it categorizes all members of the Gujii into thirteen generational grades that succeed one another every eight years, assuming progressive roles (from simple to complex) and social responsibilities. The generational grades are known as *Sulluuda*, *Dabballee*, *Qarree*, *Dhajjisa*, *Kuusa*, *Doorii*, *Gadaa*, *Baatuu*, *Yuuba*, *Yuuba Gadaa*, *Jaarsa*, and *Jaarsa Qululluu*. In the system, social hierarchy is a central organizing principle that groups generational grades into two categories: seniors (*gurguddaa*) and juniors (*xixiqqaa*). Members of the lower grades (*Sulluuda*, *Dabballee*, *Qarree*, *Dhajjisa*, and *Kuusa*) are

categorized as the generation of juniors, and the upper eight grades (*Raaba, Doorii, Gadaa, Baatuu, Yuuba, Yuuba Gadaa, Jaarsa, and Jaarsaa Qululluu*) are considered the generation of seniors. Membership in the Gadaa system is organized into generational sets so that a child can learn it across different hierarchies from the very beginning. We attempt to delineate the indigenous peacebuilding practices and justice administration through the *Qaalluu* institution among the Gujii Oromoo of Southern Ethiopia.

Limitation of the Study

Indigenous issues are multifaceted and complex, shaping the behavior of entire communities. This study focused on an indigenous peacebuilding practice among the Gujii Oromoo in southern Ethiopia. Gathering preliminary data, selecting the site, and approaching the *Abba Qaalluu* (*Abba Qaallu* Hall) were not easy tasks. Therefore, the quality of this work is not free from these limitations. The sensitivity of cultural issues requires careful consideration throughout data collection, analysis, and report writing. Indigenous communities do not readily accept outsiders coming to gather data, and they often feel uncomfortable providing information. These limitations were addressed through close, insider-led relationships with communities, clear explanations of the study's purpose, full respect for consent during data collection, identification of a suitable time for interviews, and involvement of local administrators throughout the study.

Research Methods

Description of the study population

The Gujii Oromo inhabit a geographically diverse and ecologically complex territory in southern Ethiopia, characterized by a pronounced altitudinal gradient. This terrain encompasses the cool, humid highlands, which descend into the arid, expansive lowlands referred to as *gammojjii*. The region's climate is defined by a bimodal precipitation pattern, featuring the primary *Ganna* rains from March to May and the secondary, less predictable *Hageyya* rains from September to November. The inherent variability and periodic scarcity of this rainfall constitute a fundamental environmental determinant. In response, the Gujii have developed a highly adaptive agro-pastoral livelihood system, necessitating seasonal mobility and meticulous resource management. This intimate relationship with a challenging environment has fundamentally shaped their social organization, cultural institutions, and collective resilience, forging a society intricately calibrated to the imperatives of its ecological context.

At the heart of this society beats a profound relationship with cattle. For the Gujii, cattle are far more than livestock; they are the currency of life itself. Livestock ownership denotes economic capital and social rank; however, these animals are more fundamentally embedded as operational capital within the kinship and ritual networks that structure the community. This deep connection is managed within a complex web of clans, bound by the unwritten but powerful *seera Gujii* (the customary law) that dictates how water is shared, where herds may graze, and how disputes are settled. It's a system sustained by the spirit of communal life where communities come together to build, harvest, and herd, ensuring no one is left behind.

Guiding this complex social world is one of humanity's oldest and most elegant democratic systems: the Gadaa. Imagine a society where leadership is not a lifelong crown but a sacred, rotating duty. Every eight years, a new generation of leaders, having been prepared for decades, steps forward. The *Abbaa Gadaa*, who is less a ruler and more a presiding elder, leading a council of advisors called the *Hayyuu*. Their authority, symbolized by the sacred *bokkoo* (scepter), is rooted in service and strict moral codes. The system's profound wisdom lies in its built-in humility where power is always temporary, always shared, and always accountable. Upon completing their term, a leader reintegrates into the community, transitioning into an advisory capacity to serve the public interest.

Yet, even this remarkable political structure does not stand alone. It is balanced and given ultimate meaning by a spiritual counterpart. While the Gadaa council manages the day-to-day affairs of the community, its legitimacy is sanctified by the *Qaalluu*, the hereditary spiritual leader who serves as a bridge to *Waaqa* (God). No *Abbaa Gadaa* is truly in power without the *Qaalluu's* blessing, a bond celebrated in the great eight-year *Me'ee Bokkoo* ceremony. In moments of profound crisis, a feud that threatens to tear clans apart or a disaster that feels like a divine curse the community turns to the *Qaalluu* for final judgment and spiritual intercession. This beautiful duality means that political power is perpetually checked by a higher moral authority, tethering the community's material survival to its spiritual well-being. In essence, the story of the Gujii is one of brilliant integration. Their way of life is a seamless whole, woven from the threads of a demanding land, the sacred bond with their herds, the democratic pulse of *Gadaa*, and the guiding light of spiritual tradition. It is a testament to how a society can flourish, not by conquering nature, but by learning its rhythms and building a world of profound balance, resilience, and shared humanity.

Methodology

We used primary and secondary data sources to elicit information on the *Qaalluu* institution. Primary data were collected from key informants purposively selected for their deep knowledge of the Gadaa system and of *Qaalluu* institution issues related to peace (context and trends). They were primarily elders, religious leaders, and personnel from culture and tourism offices located in the Abaya, Galana, and Bule Hora districts of the West Gujii Zone. To obtain information on the Gadaa system, the structure of the *Qaalluu* institution, and its duties, knowledgeable elders were identified through snowball sampling. Selection began with a few influential groups, and networks were then built with the rest of the population. The sample comprised 42 respondents, of whom 30 (20 elders, five religious leaders, and five from the culture and tourism office) participated in key informant interviews (KII), and the remaining 12 were included in the focus group discussion (FGD), divided equally across two sessions. In-depth interviews were conducted with personnel from the Tourism and Culture Office, elders, religious leaders, and *Abbaa Gadaa*, lasting 1 hour per participant. Focus group discussions were held in two sessions, each lasting 4 hours, with *Qaalluu* counselors and *Hayyuus* to gather information on the structure of the *Qaalluu* institution, its role in conflict resolution, peace, and peacebuilding, and its contemporary challenges. In addition, participant observations were conducted at *Abba Qaalluu* (*Qaalluu* Hall) during *Gondooroo* (conflict resolution), *Eebba Kenna* (ceremony of giving blessings), and *Fala* (ceremony for prayer to the supernatural power, i.e., God).

Results and discussion

Genealogy of *Qaalluu*

The Gujii-Oromoo community is a source of indigenous knowledge that has long endured through intergenerational transmission (Assebe, 2012; Taddesse, 2018). This society is a hub of historically original culture, governed by *Qaalluu* laws that function as a Supreme Court, guiding a strong social order, fostering sociability, enabling conflict resolution, and wielding significant power. Similar observations were made by Assefa (2012) in his study of Oromoo society, its cultural identity, nature, and the presence of a powerful force that regulates the connection between nature and society. *Qaalluu* practices are imbued with supernatural power to guide and resolve conflicts between Gujii Oromoo and their neighbors.

There is an oral tradition that the *Qaalluu* was dropped from heaven and gently appeared in one of the Obbituu cattle pens (*Moonaa Loon Obbituu*) of the Gujii-Oromoo sub-clan. Since then, the Obbituu has been recognized as the only *Qaalluu* family from which the *Qaalluu* lineage descends. It

is also believed that the *Qaalluu* child was born with *ruufaa* (curly hair) from the mother's womb. When he grew up, he giggled for the first time after seeing a Galalchaa girl (Gujii sub-clan). Therefore, since then, every *Abba Qaalluu* has married only girls from the Galalchaa Gujii sub-clan. His wife adopts his mother's name immediately after marrying him, a practice known as *Haadba Ambaa*. *Haadba Ambaa* (wife of *Abba Qaalluu*) plays a vital role in the practices of the *Qaalluu* institution.

Marriage is a significant criterion for becoming the *Qaalluu*. It is a prerequisite for the *Qaalluu* to exercise his full power in serving the community he represents. Therefore, *Haadba Ambaa* (*Qaalluu's* wife) plays an important role in the entire duties of the *Qaalluu* institution. She plays a vital role in the system when the *Qaalluu* is preparing for any traditional practices. The *Qaalluu* institution's conflict-resolution practices in society are morally acceptable when *Haadba Ambaa* completes her mission at home. That means the beginning of the tabernacle at home, which she performs, legitimates the system before the *Qaalluu* leaves home. She burns an offering of a mixture of coffee and barley seeds, smokes it, and prays to God for the success of the system, for approval of the *Qaalluu's* voice to be accepted by the conflicting parties, and for the people to hear his word. The second important role of *Haadba Ambaa* is to provide advisory services to women in society. She invites the wives of *Abba Gadaa* leaders and local women to share experiences and teach them about issues related to those cultural practices during ceremonies. Therefore, *Haadba Ambaa* is a symbol of womanhood and the mother of all women.

In the history of leadership by *Qaalluu*, the present Gujii Oromoo *Qaalluu* is the 16th in the lineage, i.e., Aagaa Saqoo, following Qullubbee Lookoo, Lookoo Gadaayyuu, Gadaayyuu Aagaa, Aagaa Dabii, Galaanii Aagaa, Boruu Galaanii, Addaayyoo Boruu, Saqoo Adaayyoo, Koyyoo Saqoo, Bariisoo Koyyoo, Eeluu Bariisoo, Hirbaayyee Eeluu, Tottee Hirbaayyee, Nagawoo Tottee, and Saqoo Nagawoo. These 16 lineages spanned many generations, adhering only to the rules and regulations of the Obbituu groups, and were all born from the Galalchaa mother. When *Qaalluu* comes to power, Gujii Oromoo and neighboring non-Oromoo ethnic groups provide him with gifts such as cattle, coffee, barley, honey, and more, locally called *Qodba* or *Kennaa* (the gift). After receiving these gifts, the *Qaalluu* delivers his blessing to the gift providers, the entire community, and the country.

Being identified as the future *Qaalluu* is not arbitrary. According to our respondent, only the mother and the *Kalloota* (*Qaalluu* counselors) follow up and, at birth, know whether the newborn has *ruufaa* (curly hair) and will be a *Qaalluu* in the future. If the baby is born with *ruufaa* (dense curl hair),

the mother immediately hides him and raises him with great care until he grows strong. The objective is to keep the newborn safe and secure from any challenges that may affect his physical and spiritual growth. The child is expected not to have any signs of bodily injury. He should be entirely good-looking, healthy, with eyes free of deformity, and personally attractive. The mother takes great care to ensure he grows with special care and develops a better code of ethics than other children. In addition, having leadership qualities is an additional criterion for becoming the Gujii-Oromoo *Qaalluu*.

As noted above, *Qaalluu* has its own council members, known as *Kalloota*, and the criteria for selecting *Kalloota* are membership in *baallii* (ethno-political party) and a commitment to social responsibility in the community. The primary duties of *Kalloota* are to follow up on the Gadaa system within the Gujii community on behalf of *Qaalluu* and to supervise the execution of *Abba Gadaa* leaders, ensuring they rule the Gujii-Oromoo effectively in accordance with the principles embedded in the Gadaa system. *Kalloota* brings the matter directly to the notice of *Qaalluu* if a Gadaa leader opposes *Kalloota's* decision. *Qaalluu* calls the *Abba Gadaa* leaders to his residence, known as *Abba Qaalluu* (*Qaalluu* hall). Then, *Qaalluu*, together with his *Kalloota*, begins resolving the charged disputes in the *dhaddacha ijibbaataa* (Institutional Supreme Court). The Gujii community believes that there is only *Waaqa* (God) above *Qaalluu*, and that his decision is final. Any decision made by *Qaalluu* is final in resolving disagreements. Under minimal circumstances, the Gadaa leaders may complain and refuse to accept the final *Qaalluu* decision. However, that will not change the decision made for any good reason. When that happens, the *Qaalluu* institution has the authority to relegate the Gadaa leader and promote another Gadaa leader without completing the eight-year tenure, through the locally known process of *buqqisuu* (relegation of power).

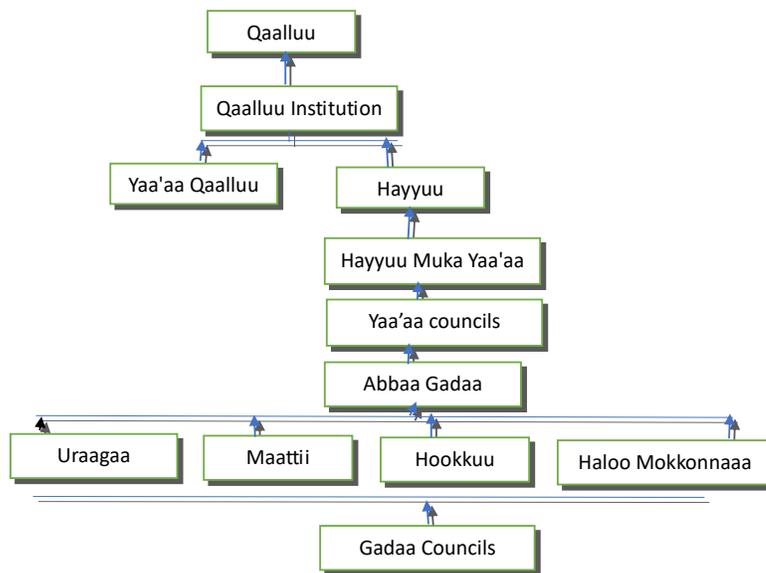


Figure 1: Qaalluu Social Structure

The residence of *Qaalluu* and the contemporary challenges

In Gujii, a narration states that the first settlement of the *Qaalluu* was at the present-day Wondo-Genet, near Hawassa town. The current settlement (Qootii), located in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region (SNNPR), Gedeo zone, is considered the 9th *Qaalluu* residence, with four *Qaalluu* lineages appointed there. The *Qaalluu* settlement was moved from Wondo to Wondiri, one after the other. At the same time, Bokkoo, Sisoo, Qullo, Daamaa, Daanchee, and Kallachaa were places of settlement, and Qootii is the present settlement. The basis for the move from one place to another is ritual maps (*kaaya*) identified through the sounds of certain birds, following the guidance of God's laws and order. It is unusual for *Qaalluu* to leave his house, called *Abba Qaalluu*. However, in case of a serious issue that calls for the involvement of *Qaalluu*, with great care and the performance of ritual prayers (*kaaya*), he can move out of his *Abba Qaalluu*. *Qaalluu* is not allowed to engage in activities such as farming, harvesting crops, or caring for his livestock and property. His property, source of wealth, and general survival depend on gifts from Gujii-Oromoo and neighboring ethnic groups. The communities present him with *Gumaata* or *Qodba* (gifts in cash and kind), which are highly valued culturally.

During the observation, we noted that the present *Qaalluu* settlement (Qootii), where *Abba Qaalluu* is located, falls within the administrative boundaries of the Gedeo Zone in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region (SNNPR). Regarding this issue, the informants reported

that Qootii was arbitrarily delineated for Gedeo in response to Gedeo's right to self-determination in the 2002 referendum, without the consent of the Gujii community. Presently, Qootii is inhabited by Gujii people; however, it is politically administered under the Gedeo Zone. This situation remains an enduring and unresolved problem that appears to lead to sporadic tribal conflicts between the two ethnic groups.

In recent times, the involvement of the political system in the *Qaalluu* institution, including the promotion of the *Abbaa Qaalluu*, has compromised the independence of the *Qaalluu* system and the indigenous procedures embedded in it. The ascendancy of the Ethiopian administration disrupted the tradition by appointing *Qaalluu* leaders to administrative positions. In this manner, the Gujii *Qaalluu* was appointed by the government as Deputy Administrator of the then Gedeo Zone until his imprisonment in 2010, and he passed away while in jail until his death (*baancufa liqinsutti*). They firmly believed that the place (Qootii) should be respected as a hub of Gujii-Oromoo residence and cultural practice, since *Abba Qaalluu* is a special place for Gujii-Oromoo.

To this end, Gujii-Oromoo elders strongly suggested that unless the Gedeo communities sincerely seek an excuse and forgiveness from the present *Qaalluu* for the former *Qaalluu's* death in the Gedeo Zone prison, their land is believed to be cursed. It is believed that the unfortunate death of the late *Abba Qaalluu* in prison was culturally a curse and socially condemnable. They also suggested that the higher officials of the two functional administrative regions (Oromia and SNNPR) should discuss the issue with elders from both sides very wisely to re-delineate the geographical boundary to Gujii Oromoo for the common benefit and to avoid conflict related to the residence of the present *Qaalluu*.

During the FGD session, participants reported that the Gujii and Gedeo share a common culture and are still governed by the same *Qaalluu institution*. The *Abba Qaalluu* of the Gujii-Oromoo legitimizes the authority of the *Abba Gadaa* in both groups, and the Gedeo people also present respected gifts (*Qodha*) to the Gujii *Abba Qaalluu* during rituals. Among the Gujii, spiritual authority is vested in the *Qaalluu* institution, and the *Abba Qaalluu* is considered the apex of the *Gadaa* structure, which resolves inter-ethnic conflict through ritual, thereby contributing to the coexistence of the groups.

***Qaalluu* institution in conflict resolution and peacebuilding among the Gujii Oromoo**

The *Qaalluu* institution serves as the center for litigation, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding. Large crowds often gather at *Qaalluu* ritual centers to hear cases. Despite differences in prominence and the size of their followings, the *Qaalluu* institution has its own supreme court that settles disputes and maintains social order. This court is believed to be held at a sacred place and chaired by the *Qaalluu*. The *Qaalluu* often invites *Kalloota* to hear their opinion and render a judgment. The *Qaalluu* then issues the final proposal, which is not necessarily the decision of the *Qaalluu* or his advisory elders. Instead, it may be proposed and substantiated by one of the *Qaalluu*'s attendants.

The court is an assembly of followers of the *Qaalluu*, with the full right to comment on any case that appears before it. It is believed that what matters is not who speaks but the spirit's supervision from the supernatural. Curses are pronounced in the name of the spirit (*ayyaana*), and their resolution is possible only by the spirit. Secondly, cases are appealed to the *Qaalluu* if the injured parties are unable to testify to the truth of the case before the district court or if the *Jaarsummaa* (system of negotiation led by elders) fails to ensure a resolution. The *Qaalluu* never dismisses a case on the ground that the evidence is insufficient. Thirdly, individuals often strategically shift to the *Qaalluu* court, based on the context of the relationships between the defendant and the *Qaalluu*, both in person and in spirit. Fourthly, regardless of whether the offender is willing to respond to the *Kalloota* elders or the *Qaalluu*, a plaintiff faithful to the *Qaalluu* and his spirit would not bypass this court. Such a believer in the spirit goes to the *Qaalluu* with two options: either to have his case resolved or to be permitted to pursue another alternative, including invoking the spirit.

Challenges and continuity of the *Qaalluu* institution

Based on the informant's suggestion, the current state of indigenous conflict resolution is severely challenged by escalating resource competition, ongoing boundary conflicts, cattle raids, and the involvement of political groups in intra- and inter-ethnic conflicts. As the causes and frequency of conflict increase, both institutional leaders and local elders lose interest and are unwilling to invest their time without sufficient salary or other incentives. In collaboration with formal institutions, the historical structure of indigenous systems has become subject to political manipulation. Government intervention in the customary system is creating an increasing gap between the authority of elders recognized by district officials and that of community elders in remote rural areas.

Informants strongly reported that district administrators treat customary elders differently based on their proximity to the political system. Directly or indirectly, government-appointed elders have

benefited financially from the district or from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). As a result, elders appointed by district authorities are not in a position to settle conflicts according to the historical customary law; instead, they serve to implement the formal administrative system. There is also a contradiction between formal and indigenous institutional courts. As a result, the community's trust in the indigenous system of conflict resolution has been degraded over time. The potential effectiveness of indigenous conflict resolution is diminished when indigenous authority has been eroded, and formal authority has increased.

However, the Gujii strongly believe that the *Qaalluu* descended from *Waaqa* to mediate between human beings and God; thus, they pay him homage. Therefore, the *Qaalluu* serves as a solicitor of peace from God and a facilitator of a peaceful relationship between God and human beings. He gives blessings and prayers as he travels through all the Gujii villages. To maintain peace, the *Qaalluu* prays to God, the God of creation, peace, and life; the God who created and guides everything; the God who created rivers, therefore, the God of rivers; the God who created trees, therefore, the God of trees; the God who is manifested in the form of *ayyaana* (holy spirit) (Hagmann & Alemayehu, 2006).

It is believed that the *Qaalluu* connects human beings to the supernatural and maintains peace between them and God. Likewise, the Gadaa promotes and reinforces peaceful relationships among human beings by enforcing *seeraa* (laws), *safuu* (moral standards), and *aadaa* (cultural practices) that it formulates every eight years. The Gadaa officials deliberate on these laws and regulations at different levels over the eight years and make necessary amendments. Therefore, minor issues such as family matters, neighborly disputes, and inheritance are resolved at the village or balbala level. In contrast, complex issues such as homicide are addressed at the level of the general Gadaa council.

The *Qaalluu* institution remains active among the Gujii-Oromoo and in some parts of neighboring ethnic groups, such as Gedeo and Sidama. Therefore, the *Qaalluu* institution is an important manifestation of the religious and ritual aspects of the Gadaa system. It legitimates *Abba Gadaas* through oath-taking and blessing ceremonies; supports the legitimacy of the Gadaa system and the transfer of power; and resolves conflicts among *Abba Gadaas*, if any (Girum, 2010). However, the *Qaalluu* and the *Qaalluu* institution do not directly interfere in the activities of the Gadaa system, since religion and Gadaa administration are separate, indicating the secular nature of Gadaa democracy.

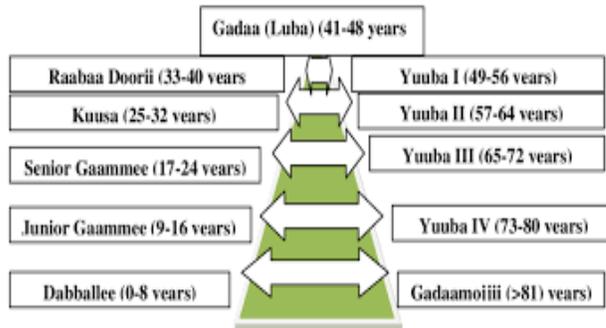


Figure 2: Schematic structure of Gadaa system

In addition, the *Qaalluu* of Gujii-Oromoo, as the religious heads of each moiety, serve as a check-and-balance within the Gadaa system. This is the prototypical basis for balanced opposition and power-sharing (Asmarom, 2000, cited in Assefa, 2012). The position of *Qaalluu* is inherited and held for life, unlike a political office. The Gujii-Oromoo people designed several indigenous institutions, yet the majority of Oromoo scholars and others know the *Qaalluu* institution and the Gadaa System only by name and fame in Oromoo life and practice (Jemjem, 2011; Assefa, 2012; Tadesse, 2018; Gumi, 2016; Zelalem & Endalcachew, 2015). These institutions play an important role in conflict resolution, peacebuilding practices, and sustainable peace and order in Oromoo communities. However, over time, the famous culture of Oromoo society, which was challenged by the imperial political regime in the past and has now deteriorated, is again being challenged by contemporary Western ideologies that deviate youth perceptions toward indigenous institution practices, political pressure, and religious outlook.

CONCLUSIONS

The Gujii-Oromoo are one of Ethiopia's societies with indigenous institutions for conflict resolution, justice administration, and peacebuilding. The *Qaalluu* institution is an indigenous institution for settling blood feuds. However, the pattern of conflict and its management between the Gujii-Oromoo and non-Oromoo peoples has changed notably. Despite emerging challenges among different ethnic groups, the *Qaalluu* institution has improved relations among them in the study area and lessened ethnic conflicts, and diverse attempts have been made to address them. This shows that the *Qaalluu* plays an important role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding practices. However, it has received very little attention nationally and regionally. Adequate legal procedures for the *Qaalluu* peacebuilding practices and conflict resolution tools have not yet been developed. The *Qaalluu* peacebuilding practices among the Gujii Oromoo are believed to be a solution to societal

conflicts. Despite its role in resolving conflicts, it has received very little attention from governments and conflict-resolution and peacebuilding institutions today. In Ethiopia, tribal and related conflicts have continued to occur and have caused the loss of property and life. Recently, the *Qaalluu* has been facing challenges in addressing conflicts due to the influence of youth attitudes, religious principles, and political pressure. In light of the study's findings, the federal government and regional governments should consider the functions of the *Qaalluu* to resolve conflicts in communities. It is recommended that the *Qaalluu* conflict resolution and peacebuilding practices among the Gujii Oromoo community and neighboring ethnic groups be ensured to reach the present generation. Therefore, the government should grant formal recognition to the *Qaalluu* to enable it to address disputes at the community level and maintain social equilibrium, since the *Qaalluu* plays an important role in supporting the Gadaa system of Oromoo democracy.

Supplementary Information

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Author's contributions

Tariku Gemedede Bedecha was the primary writer and editor of the manuscript. Gambela Chiri Kune conducted sociocultural research, helped design the interviews, and led the fieldwork. Mekuria Guye Haleke reviewed the manuscript and provided comments.

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The authors declare that they have no known competing interests that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

Ethical Approval

This research adhered to the ethical codes of the International Society of Ethnobiology and the Society of Economic Botany, scientific associations that typically work with indigenous groups and local communities and have developed strict ethical codes over the years to respect the rights of potentially vulnerable societies. The research was conducted with free, prior, and informed consent from elders, local indigenous *Abbaa Gadaas*, and *Abba* Qaalluu.

Availability of data

Not applicable

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