



## Symbolic Interpretation of Korma Qalaa (Bull slaughtering) at *Odaa Doolaa* Ritual of Guji Gada system

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### ABSTRACT

*This article analyzes the symbolic interpretation of Korma Qalaa (Bull slaughtering) performed at Odaa Doolaa Ritual of Guji Gadaa system, with the aim of documenting the meanings that the Guji people attach to the performance. Through ethnographic research design, the data were generated using methods such as participant observation, key informant interview and focus group discussion. The study depicted that korma qalaa embodies core Guji values underpinning their religion, and values serving as foundation for Social and Political Harmony in Guji Gadaa system. Further, korma qalaa portrays how the Guji reaffirm cattle as sacred sustainers of life and identity, linking herd prosperity to cultural renewal, invoking economic prosperity, spiritual connection, social status, communal well-being, and stability for cultural continuity. In general, korma qalaa is the crucial bind the religions and cultural life of the Guji people*

*Key concept: Symbolic practice, ritual, culture and Guji Gada system*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Human life consists of a series of symbolic communications that enables them to weave a meaningful world around them. Etim (2019) ascertains that as a symbolic being; man is considered to be a rational being with the innate capacity to create and interpret symbols. This is to mean, human beings are capacitated to formulate and interpret, among other things, their languages, rituals and cultures. This reality indicates that everything in our lives including our language, our relationships, our material culture and the environment are symbolically constructed. Accordingly, Aksana (2009) agrees with this that human beings are able to sustain their existence, in the objectively experienced and contextually understood symbolic world, where communication among them is openly perceived and meanings are discovered through the study of symbols. Symbols—encompassing gestures, objects, and language—are the foundation of human interaction, and act as conventional signs representing real or imaginary concepts, and their interpretation is culturally informed (Sigdel, 2018). Zaidel (2020) further describes symbols as polysemic elements of culture, arising from both natural and nurtured human experiences. They manifest in language, ritual expression, cultural interpretation, art, and belief (Geertz, 1973, cited in Sigdel, 2018).

This study specifically analyzes the symbols within the rituals of the Guji Gadaa system. Rituals in Guji Gada system constitute symbolic practices and are vital for initiating leaders, resolving conflicts, communicating with spiritual forces, and reinforcing social norms (Hinnant, 1977). The rich symbolic practices in the rituals of the Guji Gadaa system, which transmit cultural values to

both community members and outsiders, have motivated the research on which this article is based.

Hinnant (1977) described the Guji Gadaa as an institution organizing social, political, and cultural life through age-sets and generation-sets, each with defined ritual statuses. After every eight years, a son and his father move one age-grade forward. The age grades are dabballe, qarree xixiqa, qarree gurgudda, kuusaa, raaba, doorii, gadaa, baatuu, yuubaa, yuuba guda, jaarsa and jaarsa qululu. The generation set in the Guji-Oromo Gada system encompasses five groups; namely, Robale, Halchisa, Harmuufa, and Dhalanna. In the Guji Gada system, members progress through profound rituals every eight-year to next grades, assuming new rights and duties at each stage. Leadership and ritual responsibilities rest with the Abba Gadaa and his officials during their term where subsequent "Yuba" grades hold influential ritual roles, essential for blessing ceremonies (Jamjam, 2011). Previous research (e.g., Legesse, 1973; Hinnant, 1977; Van de Loo, 1991; Berisso, 2018; Jirata, 2020;) has established the Gada system as a profound indigenous civilization, a model of African democracy, and a complex socio-political institution involving age-grades (the Luba system) and generational grades (the Balli system) with vibrant inter-age grade rituals of transition. While these studies detail the system's structure, function, and history, they have not largely looked the symbolic meanings embedded in its performances and rituals.

The Gada system features diverse Jilas (ceremonies) involving critical symbolic performances: oral traditions including qexala, lallaba, and eebbisa, rituals such as bifa, korma qalaa, buna qalaa, and materials such as Kalacha and Bokku (Jirata, 2013; 2020; Jemjem, 2020). Of these ritualistic practices and materials, this article presents and discusses the ritual of Korma Qalaa as an integral element of the Gada performances at Odaa Doolaa. The article argues that Korma Qalaa is a symbolic representation of values, beliefs and norms, underlying the nature-culture interdependences embedded in the Gada system.

Accordingly, this article aims at documenting and interpreting the symbolic meanings of Korma Qalaa performances and rituals observed at the Odaa Doolaa Gada Jilas (cultural ceremonies). With its focuses on the Guji-Oromo Gada system, this article presents the symbolic interpretation of the Korma Qalaa *Ritual* and discuss the meanings that the Guji people attach to this practice. Doing so, it will contribute to the development of research-based knowledge on the Gada systems and will advance the scholarship on Oromo indigenous knowledge systems.

## **2. SOCIAL CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY**

The Guji are part of the wider Oromo nation who speak Afaan Oromoo (one of the widely spoken languages in Ethiopia (Tadese. 2000). They are identified as people who have sustained the ancestral Oromo traditions as they practice the relatively original Oromo culture (Hinnant, 1977; Van de Loo, 1991; Berisso, 1995;). Guji were incorporated into the Ethiopian Empire in 1896 by Menilik II (1889-1913) (Tadese B., 2000) The Guji-Oromo inhabit the southern part of Ethiopia, predominantly in the present-day Guji zones of the Oromia regional state, with significant number of their population living in different zones and districts in neighboring regions.

Forty-seven years ago, the American anthropologist John Hinnant observed this territorial division of Guji as it is the confederation of several independent but closely related people. According to him each of these people, called gosa, having its territory and its own political leadership in the form of an Abbaagadaa and his assistants (yaa'a). In each Gosa there are several clans. Based on the early study of Heberland (1963:272-74) Hinnant specifies the distribution of the Gosa. Accordingly, the Alabdu Guji, which occupy the north western corner of Guji bordering on lake Abaya are divided in to two Gosa, Halo and Wesitu. The rest of the territory is occupied by the Mati, Uruga and Hoku gosa. Detached from the main Guji territory are two gosa, the selo[shelo] and Otu, which are deep within the territory of the Sidamo people (Hinnant, 1977). This

geographic distribution persists today. The Guji coexist with neighboring groups like the Gedeo, Arsi, Bale, Sidamo, and Borena (Debsu, D., 2009).

Guji spirituality centers on Waaqaa, the creator deity believed to ensure societal well-being and political stability. This belief system involves numerous rituals performed both to maintain peaceful existence and to manage the political order (Hinnant, 1977; Van de Loo, 1991). Specific rituals include Malxuu (Puffing) and Hulluuqaa (Mulugeta Jaleta G., 2017). Like all Oromo subgroups, the Guji were historically organized under the unique, ancient democratic Gadaa system (Hinnant, 1977; Van de Loo, 1991; Jemjem U., 2020), predating Ethiopian Emperor Menelik's expansion. Remarkably, among the Guji, the Gadaa system and its associated rituals have been preserved with significant integrity. It continues to function as the fundamental institution regulating their social, political, cultural, and economic life.

Among the major rituals taking place in each term of a Gadaa council is the power transferring (balli Kenna) ceremony. In connection with this there is continuous journey that is taken by the Gadaa council (Yaa'aa) from and to Me'ee bokkoo (the current day power transferring place for the three Guji 'haganaa'). This is the pilgrimage done by the council (ya'aa) with each of the Gadaa term. Of course, they do not only travel but after moving certain distance they settle at a particular sacred place (Arda Jila) where they stay for the considerable period of the time. This is followed by next journey and subsequent settlement at next Arda Jila. After sharing some of the sacred places, each of the three 'haganaa' (Uraga, Mattii, and Hookkuu) takes its own way of journey within its geographic setting and the yaa conducts various rituals at each of the Ardaa Jila (Van de Loo, 1991). One of my key respondents told me the importance of the journey like this:

*The three Gada, Gada of Uraagaa, of Maatti, and of Hookkuu moves within and around Guji land with the objective of safeguarding the Guji people. By performing different falaa -sacrifice- at respective -ardaa jilaa-sacred places, each of the ya'aa keep the coming bad omen, diseases and any other danger away from Guji. Therefore, there are different kinds of rituals performed within the time of sacred journey."*

Among various rituals conducted within the sacred journey is Ritual of Odaa Doolaa, on which this article has focused. The study took ethnographic research design with its focus on ritualistic and ceremonial practices performed at Odaa Doolaa as part of the Guji Gada ceremony.

The empirical data in this paper were drawn from ethnographic fieldwork carried out among Guji people on the occasion of Odaa doolaa ritual of year 2017 E.C. and then after key informants' interview. The ethnographic fieldwork activities included participant observation, key informant interviews and focus group discussion.

## **2.1. Participant Observation**

I conducted the participant observation at odaa doolaa ritual held at the sacred place in the center of Adola town. In my observation I explored practices and rituals performed as parts of the Gada ceremony that took place at Odaa Doolaa. I participated in the ceremony and observed the rituals and practices from the emic position. During the observation, I focused on practices and rituals of Korma Qalaa and documented what the people do, say, feel and wear during this ritual. Put in other words, in the participant observation, I focused on the visual, auditory, and tactile elements of the ritual and documented every step and procedure of the Korma Qalaa ritual. I watched what was taking place, listen to what was said, observed the collective and individual practices and asked participants in between. By actively engaging in the ritual, I paid strong attention to develop a deeper understanding of the korma Qalaa and meanings embedded in the practice. While doing the observation, I took photo and video recordings.

### 2.1.1. Key Informant Interview

Following the participant observations, I did the key informant interview to have clarity about what I observed and to dig out new information that led me to explore interpretation. Respondents which I selected by using purposive sampling for this purpose included 3 yubas and one batu who were the knowledgeable culture bearers, one knowledgeable community member and one expert from Culture and Tourism office. Especially the culture bearers I selected were those individuals who led and took part in the execution of the Korma Qalaa ritual. After I secured familiarity with the selected participants, I conducted semi structured interviews with the mentioned informants. The key informant interviews were done to generate information that helped me to understand the symbolic meanings of the Korma Qalaa ritual.

### 2.1.3. Focus Group Discussion

I conducted a focus group discussion in which 6 'yaa'aa' members, participated and discussed the Korma Qalaa rituals and its diverse meanings. The focus group discussion helped me to reaffirm the data I collected through the participant observation and key informant interviews. The discussion provided me with the time to explore the collective meanings attached to korma qalaa ritual.

### 2.1.4. Methods of data Analysis

Based on social constructivist and interpretive theories, I have analyzed the qualitative data collected through the above methods majorly by using thick ethnography. The analysis of data began while collecting it, for, at that time I used to see the procedure and asked the participants in between to obtain interpretation by participants and observers. Therefore, the meaning was collected from explanation of members of performed rituals, key respondents and focus group participants.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Korma Qalaa at *Odaa Doola* in Guji Gada System

The *Odaa Doolaa* ritual is a central religious and cultural practice performed at *Odaa Dola Ardaa Jilaa*, its sacred place of origin. The ritual traditionally involves all three phratries converging from their temporary villages (qacha) called *Daraartuu*- the place near to Adola town in East Guji zone of Oromia region. Abbaa Samaro, a yuba (ritual expert) and consultant, emphasized its cyclical nature: "This is the ritual in which all three phratries perform dhibayyuu and korma qalaa once every 8 years after receiving *baallii* (power) at Me'e Boko. Uraagaa begins, *Maattii* follows, and Hookkuu concludes." However, the 2017 E.C. observance deviated from this strict order. While *Maattii* and Hookkuu were present, Uraagaa was absent and performed the ritual separately on the other day.

This specific ritual contains observable symbolic elements and behaviors, and I'm interested in how the symbolic activity of korma qalaa (bull slaughter) is interpreted. According to what I saw during the event and what the attendees corroborated, the animal offered for sacrifice is a black bull. Consequently, A Hookkuu volunteer brought the sacrificial bull there, and it was black save for a tiny white patch under its belly, next to its testicles. The yuba of a Phratry cuts the throat as the Abbaagadaa of that Phratry performs the sacrifice. I saw that the Yuba from Hookkuu cut the throat and Matti Abbaagadaa of Hookkuu performed the sacrifice at the *Odaa doola*.

Korma Qalaa (bull sacrifice) is one of the crucial divination and ritual practices of the Guji Gada system. My interviewee, Jilo Adula, who is the batu (the man with the age grade next to the Gada),

clarified that even they can slaughter a goat ram, regarding it as kormaa (bull), if a bull is not afforded.

My interviewee, Aba Samaro too underscores how the korma qalaa is vital in the system as:

*If yaa do not do bull slaughtering then it is not considered as yaa. If a yaa do not detect the sacred place and do not do the bull slaughtering up on it, then it calls danger to Guji. Such a yaa lacks a strong foundation*

As one prominent ritual practice, Korma Qalaa (bull sacrifice) embodies the depth of Guji spirituality. As Van de Loo (1991, cited in Jirata, 2013) observed, animal sacrifices establish "vital interconnectedness between Waqa-deity- and the Guji men and women, between the living and the dead, between marriage partners, or between a household and its livestock. Hence this practice is far more than a simple offering; In addition to spiritual interest, *korma qalaa* is a foundation of social and political harmony in Guji Gadaa system.

Further it is a cultural occasion where Guji demonstrates deep reverence for cattle through performing medhicha. Through this practice korma qalaa underscores the Guji's deep veneration for cattle as the foundation of their socio-economic, spiritual, and cultural existence

In the *odaa doola* ritual I observed the Korma qalaa practice as follows. Before the sacrifice, the assembled ya'aa (ritual participants) discussed the procedure. The Hookkuu Abbagadaa sought clarification from the *yubas*, who outlined the steps as: mutual purification, communal repentance, supplication (*hariirtii*), and the bull sacrifice.



*Figure 1 The members while giving and taking forgiveness from and to each other (taken by the researcher at Odaa Doolaa)*

Then as per the procedure, the ya'aa members publicly repented *furfuuraa*(offenses) they had against each other and sought forgiveness from Waaqaa (the supreme deity).

The sacrifice proceeded meticulously. While a few of the participants caught firmly the rope tied the horns of the bull on the tip of its head, the others tried to tie the rear left leg of the bull. But all the *ya'aa* member who were following the procedure shout up on the mistaken person and forced him to tie the right rear leg. Then the front group pulled the ox forward and the rear group pulled back it with the rope tied on the right rear leg so that the bull was controlled and kept in

front of the supplicants. In this manner participants restrained the bull in front of the supplicants. The Abbaagadaa then performed the hariirtii-supplication, moving his palms gently over the bull's back towards its head and tail alternately. Other participants too supplicated turn by turn and the supplication was concluded by the slaughter Abbaagadaa, Gadaa of Hokku. After the supplication prayer (*hariirtii*) was completed, the bull was fallen on the ground with its right side and its throat was cut by *abbaa yuuba* (*Senior yuba*) of Hookkuu. Everybody waited until the bull loses its life, but it was not happened immediately. In between the gada of hokku moistened his fingers by the blood from the veins of the cut throat and painted his forehead with the blood for more than two turns by saying “adda *najabeessi*” (strengthen my fore head)



Figure 2 Abbaagadaa Moistening his forehead with blood/left/and post slaughtering chanting (*qexalaa*)/right/ (taken by the researcher at *Odaa Doolaa*)

After taking substantial time, the bull began to shiver from the rear side for minutes. Finally, the bull passed away. At this time majority of the members rubbed their forehead by blood shed on the ground wishing long life and peace for themselves. Then the ya'aa get collected in front of the carcass and began to sing a performative song called *qexalaa* being with the leaders of the two phratries (Mati and Hookkuu) at a time.

Then a piece of skin, a bit with elongated shape, was cut from part under the belly. Again, the skin of nearly the same size and shape was taken from the leg of the slaughtered bull together with its dewclaws. These were hollowed out, bound together, and hung on the right hand of the Hookkuu Abbaagadaa that grasped succulent grass. This was done for Hokkuu Abbaagadaa because it is who conducted the bull slaughtering.

The ritual transitioned to the blessing and recreational time. The Abbaagadaa and his companions get collected under the young sycamore tree. The persons brought the bull and other materials like milk, honey coffee (*buna qalaa*) and brewery were blessed by the aba gadas and the yubas.



Figure 3 Abbaagadaa blesses the volunteer brought materials for the ritual (take by the researcher at Odaa Doolaa)

Then it came to the evaluation Session. In that time, I saw that the responsible body led the session and the participants forwarded feedbacks. With the leader of yuba, the other yuba began to utter:

*Hariirtiin dansa'a: waaqa dansaa Godbi*

The prayer is good: god, make it good

*Dbiigi dansaa: waaqa dansaa Godbi*

The blood flow is good: god, make it good

Then they come to explain an alarm they noticed. That was the shivering of the bull during the immediate time before losing its soul. It was the potential threat for the peaceful living of Guji people based on the observed happening on the body of the bull. The leading yuba explained the meaning that such energetic shaking of the body of the bull symbolizes the shaking to be happened for the Guji people. Strengthening his talk, the yuba affirmed that there will be something potential to disturb Guji as a whole. Hence, he ordered that, this should be kept away by slaughtering another bull within a time not so much far.

There was another happening called the slaughtering of bull again, i.e., the absence of *bobbaattuu*-the leading vulture. In rituals with such kinds of slaughtering vultures collected to eat west flesh are not seen ignorantly, rather they are the tools indicating whether the ritual is successful or not. According to the one of the participants of the ritual, one of the indicators of successful slaughtering is the presence of the *bobbaattuu*, and this has its identification nature that can be detected by experts.

### 3.2. Symbolic Analysis of korma qalaa in *Odaa Doolaa* Ritual

Korma qalaa depicts the culture and religion of the Guji people. This practice is far more than a simple offering; It is a complex symbolic act with multiple layers of significance. Here are the interpretation, function and values embedded in this particular symbolic practice

### 3.2.1. Korma Qalaa: Portraying the aspect of Guji Religion

**a. Mediation Between the Human and the Divine:** The slaughter serves as a sacred bridge to Waaqaa. It initiates a dialogue where humans express repentance, needs, and gratitude. Waaqaa's response is interpreted through signs revealed in the bull's death – how it falls, the flow of blood, and the condition of its organs (Legesse, 2006). This reinforces the belief in Waaqaa's active involvement in human affairs.

**b. Purification and Atonement:** The ritual begins with confession (*hariirtii*), repenting sins committed by the slaughterer and the community. This symbolizes spiritual cleansing, seeking to restore harmony with Waaqaa and remove impurities that invite misfortune. The bull's blood, representing life force, is central to this purification, washing away transgressions (Jaleta, 2020).

**c. Cosmic Interconnectedness:** The sacrifice strengthens vital bonds: between humans and Waaqaa (affirming dependence); between social groups (reinforcing communal bonds through shared participation); and between humans and nature (symbolizing gratitude for prosperity through the offering of valuable livestock) (Van de Loo, 1991; Jaleta, 2020).

**d. Divination and Prophecy:** Crucially, Korma Qalaa is a profound divinatory mechanism. The bull's body becomes a "living text," its physical reactions meticulously decoded by ritual experts to reveal the future and guide communal decisions:

**Shivering:** Involuntary trembling, especially its intensity, location (e.g., rear vs. front), and duration, is interpreted as an omen. For instance, strong rear shivering foretells widespread calamity, prompting further sacrifices to avert disaster (Field Observation, *Odaa Doolaa*).

**Entrails Examination:** Experts scrutinize the suet, omasum, and small intestine. Smooth membranes suggest good fortune, while discoloration, tangles, or abnormalities predict conflict, disease, or misfortune, acting as a "divinatory map" for future challenges (Key Informant: Abbaa Samaroo; Derita, 2022).

**Duration of Death:** The time taken for the bull to die after its throat is cut is believed to correspond to the longevity of the primary individuals involved (e.g., the Abbaa Gadaa or the bull's provider). A prolonged struggle signifies a long life; a swift death foretells a short life. That is why the supplicant plea during *hariirtii*: "*ka qaluuf toli*" ("May your omen safeguard those who slaughter you") (Field Observation, *Odaa Doolaa*).

As such, the practice of Korma Qalaa among the Guji is a rich, symbolic ritual deeply embedded in their spiritual and cultural worldview. It transcends mere sacrifice, functioning as a prophetic dialogue with the divine where the bull's body serves as the medium through which the unseen future is made visible (Derita, 2022; Gemechu, 1993). This practice encapsulates core Guji values: the necessity of mediation with the supreme being, the importance of purification and ethical living (*Safuu*), the profound interconnectedness of all realms—divine, human, and natural—and the belief that divine will is discernible through the natural world (Bassi, 2005; Lemessa, 2018). It embodies a cosmology where life, death, and human destiny are intimately entwined with ritual practice and natural signs, providing profound meaning, moral guidance, and a means to navigate an uncertain future (Tadesse, 2004; Gemechu, 1993). Despite modern influences, these practices persist, underscoring the resilience of Guji cultural and spiritual identity (Derita, 2022; Bassi, 2005).

### 3.2.2. The Korma Qalaa : Foundation of Social and Political Harmony in Guji Gadaa

The bull slaughtering ritual is central to the legitimacy and stability of the Guji Gadaa system. As articulated by Aba Samaro, a key cultural informant:

*"If yaa does not include bull slaughtering, it is not yaa. Failure to perform the sacrifice at all sacred places endangers Guji. Such a yaa lacks a strong foundation. The turbulence in Guji today challenges the efficacy of yaa because most Abbaagadaas after Aga Tentano [the 72nd Abbaagadaa] neglected these rituals. In contrast, Aga Tentano completed the dibbee qixxeessuu – sacrificing at every required site." This underscores the ritual's role in establishing the spiritual and political authority of the Abbaagadaa (Gadaa leader).*

The closing supplication (Hariirtii) by Hokku Abbaagadaa during the sacrifice too reveals the ritual's deeper purpose in this aspect:

*"Save me from recurrent death and evil; purify Guji; bring goodness to people, the environment, Uruga, Maattii, and Hoku; shield us from inequity; grant peace, satisfaction, and abundance to Gadaa; end war; let peace reign."*

The prayer explicitly ties the ritual to sociopolitical harmony. It seeks:

1. Protection from chaos ("recurrent death," "evil," "inequity"),
2. Prosperity for the land and people ("abundance," "satisfaction"),
3. Balance across spiritual, natural, and communal domains (symbolized by Uruga, Maattii, Hoku).

This verbal ritual reinforces the sacrifice's role in grounding Gadaa's authority in divine sanction.

### 3.2.2.1 Symbolic Significance of the Ritual in this aspect

The bull slaughtering operates on three interconnected symbolic levels:

**a. Sacrificial Power & Foundation:** The bull embodies vitality and strength. Its slaughter represents a transfer of life force to sanctify sacred sites, grounding the Gadaa reign in cosmic order. As cited above, neglecting this "ritual foundation" weakens leadership legitimacy, inviting societal chaos—as observed in post-Aaga Tentano political turbulence.

**b. Mechanism of Social Cohesion:** The ritual acts as a public covenant between the Abbaagadaa, the people, and Waaqaa (the divine). By repenting collectively and seeking purification, leaders unify the community under sacred authority (Bassi, 2005; Hundie, 2021). This mirrors Geertz's "theatre state," where ritual performance sustains political order.

**Durkheim's Collective Effervescence:** Émile Durkheim (The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, 1912) saw rituals as binding communities through shared emotion. The bull sacrifice likely fosters communal solidarity, as participants collectively interpret the omen.

**Victor Turner's Communitas:** Turner's theory of liminality (1969) frames rituals as transformative spaces where social hierarchies dissolve. The shared focus on the bull's death may create a temporary "communitas," reinforcing group identity.

**c. Holistic Equilibrium:** The tripartite blessing (Uruga, Maattii, Hoku) emphasizes balance across ecological, social, and spiritual realms. This threefold framework reflects what Asmarom Legesse (1973) describes as the Oromo cosmological model, wherein social institutions are deeply embedded in spiritual and ecological systems. The ritual thus maintains Guji cosmological equilibrium, preventing decay through sacred reciprocity (Derita, 2022).

Shortly, the bull slaughtering is not merely tradition but a non-negotiable covenant ensuring Gadaa's legitimacy. It binds the Abba Gadaa authority to divine order, transforming ritual neglect into political fragility. As Marco Bassi (2005) notes, such rites unify Guji society against discord, while Bekele Hundie (2021) highlights their role in reinforcing collective identity. This aligns with Baxter's (1978) notion of ritual as a moral economy, where cultural continuity is preserved through

symbolic performance. Despite challenges from modernization and religious shifts, the ritual persists as a cultural anchor—adapting yet retaining its core function as the pillar of Guji harmony (Tesema, 2019; Geda, 2016).

### 3.2.3. Korma Qalaa: Seeking Protection, Guidance, and Divine Presence

Within the Waqeffata religious tradition, the Guji people place profound trust in the protection and guidance of Waaqa, the supreme deity. A key duty of their leader, Aba Gadaa is to intercede for the people through the ritual sacrifice of a bull. As explained by Gamada Bokko, a knowledgeable community informant, *korma Qalaa* serves as a vital method to attract Waaqa's attention to the lives of the people, securing divine protection. Gamada further emphasized that the bull sacrifice functions as an offering of praise and a request for repentance, drawing a parallel to the sacrificial practices commanded by God to the Israelites through Moses in the Old Testament.

The following Aba Gadaa's supplication inherently represents the interests of the entire community. Its core intention is to ensure the Guji remain under Waaqa's vigilant protection, as reflected in the prayer:

*“You black bull, please purify Guji; be good for the people; be good for the environment; be good for Uruga; be good for Maatti; be good for Hokku; keep away the trap of inequity from us; you black bull, keep this Gadaa peaceful; make our Gadaa of satisfaction; make our Gadaa of abundance; make our Gadaa of peace; Guji, be purified.”*

This plea encompasses the need of the sustained and abundant life of all Guji people – adults and children alike – under Waaqa's care. It explicitly includes all communities within the Guji territory (Uruga, Maatti, Hokku), inhabiting the diverse agro-ecological zones from the highlands to the lowlands.

Observations at *Oda Doolaa* revealed a common focus on future well-being. Supplicants frequently implore: *“Mora toli”* (let your membrane be good); *“nusa toli”* (let your omasum be good); and *“dhiiga toli”* (let your blood flow be good). These requests stem from the practice of divination; after the prayers, the bull's internal organs (membrane, omasum) and blood are examined to foretell the future with objective of keeping the future under the focus of the deity.

Some Participants also supplicated as:

*“Sustain our life, keep bad omen away from us, make us abundant, expand our reproduction, you black bull, open Guji's eye; capacitate us to listen to what is going on in the world; keep our children peaceful; keep our adults peaceful; keep our environment peaceful; keep our people.”*

This prayer reinforces the desire for the Guji to live peacefully and abundantly under Waaqa's protection, capable of engaging with the wider world. Crucially, they plea for Waaqa to "open Guji's eye" and enable them to "listen to the world" signify a request for divine wisdom. The community seeks enlightenment to understand their surroundings, fostering innovation for the benefit of both the Guji and others. Therefore, the *korma qalaa* fundamentally serves to invoke Waaqa's help, protection, and care, ensuring the Guji live perpetually within the deity's sight.

#### 3.2.3.1. Layered Symbolic Interpretation:

**a. The Bull as Substituted Harm & Divine Intercession:** The slaughter represents the destruction of malevolent forces. Here the physical elimination of the animal represents the destruction of evil forces threatening the community. The bull's death absorbs misfortune, acting as a ritual scapegoat, akin to practices in the Old Testament in ancient Israel (Leviticus 16: 21–22). The core mechanism here, involves ceremonially transferring communal evils onto a creature that

is then destroyed or banished, in this case onto the bull. This act of placing sins onto the animal exemplifies substituted harm. Simultaneously, it serves as a cosmic signal, a plea for Waaqaa to actively intervene and ensure protection.

**b. Sacrifice as Covenant Renewal & Repentance:** The bull's blood purifies the people and reaffirms their sacred bond with Waaqa. The act is both an offering of praise for past blessings and a means of atonement, seeking forgiveness for communal transgressions. This is echoed in Bartels' Bar (1983) seminal work explicitly describing bull sacrifices as central acts of purification, covenant renewal with Waaqa, and communal atonement for transgressions that polluted the community. The work of Knutsson, Karl Eric (1967) also substantiates this through his Study of the Kallu Institution among the Macha Oromo of Ethiopia for it connects sacrifice directly to concepts of sin and the need for divine forgiveness.

**c. Divination for Future Welfare:** This is done to put future under the watch of the deity. Here, examining the bull's internal organs (membrane, omasum) and blood flow is an act of divination. It provides foresight into the future, allowing the community to prepare or seek further intervention. This can be connected with the work of Bartels, Lambert (1983) and Gemechu Megersa (1996) depicting how qallu inspect the bull's organs along with blood flow patterns, to divine future events, communal well-being, or divine approval. Moreover, Hinnant, John (1977) notes Guji Oromo divination practices during sacrifices, linking organ health to ecological and social forecasts (e.g., predicting rainfall, clan conflicts).

**d. Seeking Wisdom & Cultural Resilience:** Beyond physical protection, prayers explicitly ask for enlightenment ("open Guji's eye," "listen to the world"). This is a plea for Waaqa to grant clarity, wisdom, and adaptability, ensuring Guji traditions thrive and innovate amidst changing circumstances.

**e. Tripartite Unity & Ecological Harmony:** The prayers explicitly encompass all major Guji territories (Uruga, Maatti, Hokkuu) across the ecological gradient (highlands to lowlands). This symbolizes the essential unity of the people, the harmony between different landscapes and clans, and the collective destiny under Waaqa's watch, demanding universal prosperity and exclusion of none. This concept echoes Asmarom Legesse's (1973) foundational work detailing the moiety system (Hooru/Gona, Birmaji/Kallu) and the division of Borana/Oromo lands into paired territories which inherently links specific clans to specific ecological zones (highlands, midlands, lowlands). It can also be connected with Hundie's (2001) view that confirms the Guji utilize and manage resources across the distinct ecological zones (highlands to lowlands) represented by territories like Uruga, Maatti, and Hokkuu where the Guji's seasonal movements and resource management practices embody the ecological harmony referenced in prayers. Invoking these territories in prayer underscores the essential relationship between the people and the entire landscape gradient for their survival and cultural identity.

### 3.2.4. Korma qalaa: The Symbolism of Meedhichaa in Guji Oromo Culture

The Meedhichaa (hanging apiece of skin) is a profound part of korma qalaa practice within the Guji Oromo Odaa Doolaa ceremony, centered on the symbolic act of honoring the Abbaagadaa (ritual leader) who sacrifices a bull. This practice underscores the Guji's deep reverence for cattle as the foundation of their socio-economic, spiritual, and cultural existence. Meedhichaa involves attaching a strip of skin—cut from the belly and legs of the sacrificed bull, with its dewclaw intact—to the right hand of the Abbaagadaa. With his hand the Abbaagadaa grasped succulent grass ahead of the time. The act serves as a collective blessing for the fertility, health, and prosperity of the Guji people's cattle, particularly those of the Abbaagadaa and his fellows who represent the broader community.



Figure 4 Cutting peace of skin from the leg and belly for medhicha (taken by the researcher at Odaa Doolaa)

#### 3.2.4.1. Cattle in Guji Cosmology

As explained by FGD members, cattle permeate every facet of Guji life:

*"Cattle are food; they are money; cattle can back up agriculture; they are indispensable in rituals; cattle are the fame of the Guji. Losing cattle means losing stability and settlement. Cattle ensure women's health and beauty—providing milk after childbirth and cosmetics for adornment. They are central to bride price. Thus, Meedhichaa blesses cattle, praying for human longevity and the peace and reproduction of herds."*

Scholars also affirm this centrality. Jirata (2017) notes cattle symbolize abundance and fertility, around which Guji life revolves materially and symbolically. Historically, pastoralism underpinned their economy (Jirata 2013; Beriso 2004). Cattle signify social status, purify transgressions, ward off evil, and facilitate gifts, bridewealth, and conflict compensation. They are core to Guji identity, marriage alliances, and sacrifices (Van de Loo 1991; Jirata 2013; Jirata & Debelo 2018).

**Symbolism of the Dewclaw:** The retained dewclaw on the ritual skin holds profound meaning. As my key informant Aba Samaro emphasized:

*"The dewclaw—part of the leg that touches the earth—symbolizes settlement. Meedhichaa is also praying for a stable life without losing cattle, blessing both humans and herds with rootedness." Thus, the ritual embodies the Guji aspiration for enduring, settled prosperity through pastoralism.*

**3.2.4.2. Values Underpinning Meedhichaa:** This practice reflects six core Guji values:

**a. Economic Prosperity:** Cattle sustain the Guji economy, providing food, wealth, and agricultural labor. Meedhichaa reinforces this lifeline (Jirata 2017; Beriso 2004).

**b. Spiritual Connection:** The ritual invokes divine blessings for cattle fertility, health, and protection, positioning cattle as mediators with the sacred (Van de Loo 1991).

**c. Social Status & Identity:** Cattle signify prestige and "the fame of the Guji," enabling marriage, conflict resolution, and social ceremonies (Jirata & Debelo 2018).

**d. Communal Well-being:** Meedhichaa benefits all Guji, reflecting collective security against loss—"losing cattle is losing base."

**e. Stability & Settlement:** The dewclaw epitomizes rootedness, affirming pastoralist values of territorial permanence (Jirata 2013).

**f. Cultural Continuity:** The ritual preserves ancestral traditions, cementing cattle's role in Guji identity and cohesion.

Meedhichaa is a microcosm of Guji worldviews, binding economic survival, spiritual devotion, social hierarchy, communal resilience, and cultural heritage. Through this act, the Guji reaffirm cattle as sacred sustainers of life and identity—where the prosperity of herds signifies the renewal of the people themselves.

### 3.3 Conclusion

The sacred journey undertaken by the Guji gada council is intrinsically linked to specific geographic sites where their rituals are performed. Beyond governance, the Gada councils of Uraagaa, Maatti, and Hokkuu embark on this sacred journey to safeguard the Guji community and ensure a stable foundation for their administration. Among the key rituals conducted during this journey is the Odaa Doola ritual. This ceremony, like others on the journey, aims to protect the Guji people under the deity's care, fostering harmony with the creator (Waaqa) and creature, thereby ensuring fertility and economic abundance.

A central and highly symbolic practice within the Odaa Doola ritual is korma qalaa (bull slaughtering). This act is crucial binding the religious and cultural life of the Guji people. Based on a deep analysis of participant perspectives and the supplications offered by the Abba Gada and council members, this article identifies the core symbolic meanings conveyed by korma qalaa, revealing fundamental Guji values:

Far more than sacrifice, this practice acts as a prophetic dialogue with the divine (Waaqa), using the bull's body to interpret the future and embody core Guji values: divine mediation, purification, ethical living, and the interconnectedness of all realms. Crucially, it functions as a non-negotiable covenant legitimizing the **Gadaa system, binding the Abbaagadaa** authority to divine order and acting as sacrificial power for communal foundation, social cohesion, and holistic equilibrium. The accompanying supplications seek abundant life for all Guji people across their diverse territory. The bull itself embodies complex concepts—substituted harm, covenant renewal, divination, wisdom-seeking, and tripartite unity—tying together economic survival, spiritual devotion, social structure, resilience, and heritage. Through korma qalaa and its associated Medhicha practice, the Guji reaffirm cattle as sacred sustainers of life and identity, linking herd prosperity to cultural renewal and invoking economic prosperity, spiritual connection, social status, communal well-being, and stability for cultural continuity.

Despite modern challenges, this ritual persists as an enduring cultural anchor and pillar of Guji harmony. Then, it is good if it is added to the broader archive of knowledge and included in curriculum to share the knowledge for the generation at grass root level.

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