



## Sustaining Indigenous Governance: The Role of Gujii Women in the Continuity of the Gujii Gadaa System

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### Abstract

*Indigenous governance systems in Africa have historically provided comprehensive frameworks for social organization, leadership, conflict resolution, and cultural continuity. Among these systems, the Gadaa system of the Oromo people represents a highly developed socio-political institution grounded in democratic principles, grade governance, accountability, and collective responsibility. Despite its significance and global recognition, scholarly attention has largely emphasized male leadership roles, resulting in the marginalization and under representation of women's contributions to the continuity and functioning of the system. This study addresses this gap by examining the roles of women in sustaining the Gadaa system and the indigenous legal and institutional mechanisms that protect and empower them. Among the Gujii Oromo who are one of the major Oromo moieties where the Gadaa system is a living institution. The main objective of the study is to analyze women's roles in governance, ritual practice, generational continuity, and social regulation within the Gadaa system. Specifically, the study investigates women's shared responsibility in leadership, their participation across Gadaa grades, their exclusive roles through indigenous institutions such as Haadha Bantooyyee, and the legal protections accorded to them from birth to death. The study employs a qualitative research approach using ethnographic methods. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with elders, women leaders, and key informants, participant observation of rituals and social practices, and analysis of oral traditions and customary laws. The data were thematically analyzed to capture indigenous meanings and institutional structures. The findings reveal that women are indispensable to the continuity of the Gujii Gadaa system. Leadership is exercised through marital partnership, ritual legitimacy depends on women's participation, and women's institutions play critical roles in public health, moral regulation, and cultural transmission. The study concludes that the Gujii Gadaa system embodies a complementary model of gender relations rooted in balance, mutual responsibility, and collective well-being. The study recommends greater scholarly recognition of women's indigenous governance roles, legal protection and documentation of women's institutions, and the integration of indigenous gender-balanced governance principles into contemporary policy and cultural preservation initiatives.*

**Keywords:** Gujii Gadaa system; women's roles; indigenous governance; gender complementarity; Haadha Bantooyyee; cultural continuity.

## **Introduction**

The Oromo Gadaa system is an indigenous democratic governance system developed by the Oromo people, structured around age-sets and generational classes that rotate political, judicial, military, and ritual authority every eight years (Legesse, 1973). It is founded on core principles of collective leadership, rule of law (*seera*), accountability, equality, and public participation, ensuring peaceful transfer of power and social cohesion. Beyond governance, Gadaa regulates social organization, conflict resolution, cultural norms, and moral values, making it a holistic socio-political institution that has sustained Oromo society for centuries and is internationally recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Legesse, 1973; Baxter, 1982; UNESCO, 2018).

Women play indispensable roles in the Oromo Gadaa system by participating in governance through parallel and complementary institutions that balance male political authority. Although men occupy formal Gadaa leadership positions, women exercise collective power through institutions such as Haadha Siqqee, and Haadha Bollaa, and other women-led councils that are embedded in Oromo indigenous law and moral philosophy. These institutions grant women socially recognized authority to influence decision making, uphold ethical standards, and ensure social justice, demonstrating that the Gadaa system is structurally inclusive rather than exclusively male dominated (Legesse, 2006; Baxter, 1994).

One of the most significant roles of women in the Gadaa system is the protection of women's rights and dignity. Through the Siqqee institution, women collectively resist domestic abuse, social injustice, and violations of customary law. When women's rights are infringed upon, they mobilize publicly and symbolically, compelling male elders and Gadaa leaders to address grievances and enforce corrective measures. This collective mechanism affirms that violations against women are not private matters but offenses against the moral and social order of Oromo society (Kumsa, 1997; Legesse, 1973).

Several researchers who studied the Gujii Gadaa system, including Hinnant (1977), Van de Loo (1991), and Kumsa (1997), have largely denied or underestimated the roles of women within the institution. For instance, although Van de Loo documented both men's and women's ritual songs performed during rites of passage and ceremonial events, and analyzed symbols used by men during grade

transitions, he nevertheless concluded that Gadaa is an exclusively male institution in which women do not participate. Such interpretations appear to reflect a limited understanding of women's lived participation and a perspective shaped by Western governance frameworks. In practice, however, within the Gujii Gadaa system, no ritual or cultural ceremony is conducted without the active involvement of women. Moreover, a man is forbidden to approach sacred sites or perform ritual duties in the absence of his wife. This demonstrates that women play indispensable roles in the continuity, legitimacy, and functioning of the Gujii Gadaa system.

Thus, within the Gujii Oromo society, the Gadaa system is sustained not only by formal male leadership structures but also by the indispensable roles played by women. Women contribute to the continuity of the system through marriage-based partnership in leadership, reproduction of generations, ritual participation, moral guidance, cultural preservation, and institutional engagement. Institutions such as Haadha Bantooyee and rituals such as the woxaa ceremony demonstrate that women possess autonomous spaces for leadership, healing, social regulation, and freedom of expression.

Despite the centrality of women in sustaining the Gujii Gadaa system, existing scholarly works have largely focused on male-centered leadership roles, grades, and political institutions, giving limited attention to women's contributions and indigenous women-led institutions. As a result, women's governance roles, ritual authority, and legal protections within the Gujii Gadaa system remain under-documented and insufficiently analyzed.

Although the Gujii Gadaa system has been widely acknowledged as a democratic and egalitarian indigenous governance system, scholarly narratives often marginalize or oversimplify the roles of women. Many studies portray women as passive beneficiaries rather than active agents of governance, continuity, and cultural reproduction. This male-centered analytical bias has resulted in an incomplete understanding of how the Gujii Gadaa system functions and survives over generations.

Furthermore, rapid socio-cultural change driven by religious influence, state governance structures, modernization, and declining indigenous practices has weakened women-centered institutions such as the Woxaa ceremony and the Haadha Bantooyee system. The erosion of these institutions threatens not only women's spaces of expression and authority but also the ethical, ritual, and social foundations of the Gujii Gadaa system itself.

There is therefore a critical need for an in-depth, culturally grounded study that documents and analyzes women's roles, responsibilities, legal protections, and institutional contributions within the Gujii Gadaa system. Without such documentation, valuable indigenous knowledge risks disappearing, and policy and academic discourses will continue to overlook women's central role in sustaining indigenous governance systems.

The main objective of this study is to examine the roles of women in the continuity and sustainability of the Gujii Gadaa system. Specifically, it examines the Gadaa conception of responsibility as a shared partnership between men and women, analyzes women's participation across Gadaa grades and governance parties (*baallii/fincaan*), investigates women's roles in generational continuity through marriage and childbirth, examines the contribution of women to the preservation of Gujii Gadaa rituals and cultural ceremonies, assesses the advisory roles of senior women (*Qadaddittii*) in transmitting moral and ritual knowledge, analyzes the indigenous legal protections and care accorded to women at different stages of life, examines the structure, functions, and significance of the *Haadha Bantooyyee* institution, explores the social, cultural, and symbolic meanings of the *woxaa* ceremony, and assesses contemporary challenges affecting women's institutions within the Gujii Gadaa system.

## Methods

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in social anthropology and indigenous knowledge studies. A qualitative approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of meanings, values, practices, and lived experiences related to women's roles within the Gujii Gadaa system.

As a research design, the research adopts a descriptive and ethnographic design. The ethnographic approach enables the researcher to document indigenous institutions, rituals, laws, and oral traditions as understood and practiced by the Gujii community (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Creswell, 2013). The descriptive design allows for systematic presentation and interpretation of women's roles, institutions, and cultural practices.

Data for this study were collected using qualitative methods, primarily through in-depth interviews conducted with Gadaa leaders, *Haadha Bantii* (the head of the *Haadha Bantooyyee* institution, responsible for treating patients with skin cancer and organizing the *woxaa* ceremony at the *dbeedaa* administrative level), *Haadha Qubee* (appointed by *Haadha Bantii* to provide treatment at the *reeraa* administrative level), Hayyuu, *Qadaddittii* (the ritual advisor women), elders, and culturally

knowledgeable community members. As key informants, the researcher purposively selected individuals with specialized knowledge of Gadaa laws, women's institutions, rituals, and oral history.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with women and men from different Gadaa grades to capture collective perspectives. As secondary sources of data review of 74<sup>th</sup> Gumii Bokkoo proclamations documentary film, previous studies, and archival materials were used.

### **Sampling System**

The researcher employed purposive (judgmental) sampling to select participants who possess rich and relevant knowledge about the Gujii Gadaa system and women's institutions. Gadaa officials include, 3 Gadaas, 3 Hayyuus, 3 Fagas, 3 Jaldhaabas, 2 Waamura, and 3 Torbiis. Women leaders includes, 3 Haadha Bantii, 2 Haadha Qubees, 4 elder women (Qadaddittii), clan elders and ritual specialists. Snowball sampling was also used to identify additional key informants through referrals from initial participants.

Data analysis followed a thematic qualitative analysis approach. The process involved: transcribing interviews and oral narratives, translating Afaan Oromo data into English while preserving cultural meaning, coding data into thematic categories, identifying recurring patterns, concepts, and relationships, interpreting findings within the framework of Gadaa philosophy, gender complementarity, and indigenous governance theory. The analysis integrates participants' narratives with existing literature to provide a contextualized and culturally grounded interpretation of women's roles in the Gujii Gadaa system.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Gadaa Overview**

The Oromo Gadaa system is an indigenous governance system developed and practiced by the Oromo people for centuries. It is organized around age-mate (*hariyyaa*) and generational classes (*luba*), through which political authority, leadership responsibilities, and social obligations are transferred every eight years in a fixed and orderly cycle. This rotation of power ensures continuity, shared responsibility, and intergenerational balance in governance (Legesse, 1973; Legesse, 2000).

At its core, Gadaa is founded on democratic principles such as collective leadership, rule of law, accountability, equality, and popular participation. Leaders, including the Abbaa Gadaa, are elected and governed by customary laws, and their performance is evaluated by councils such as the *Gumii*, which serve as legislative and judicial assemblies (Baxter, 1982; Legesse, 2000).

Beyond political administration, the Gadaa system regulates social organization, conflict resolution, moral conduct, and cultural values. It provides indigenous mechanisms for justice, peacebuilding, and reconciliation, emphasizing consensus, dialogue, and restorative practices. Women participate through complementary institutions that safeguard rights, social harmony, and ethical order (Hassen, 1994; Legesse, 1973).

Overall, the Gadaa system represents a holistic socio-political, legal, and cultural institution that sustained Oromo society long before the emergence of modern state structures. Its enduring relevance and democratic character led to its recognition by UNESCO in 2018 as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, highlighting its global significance as an indigenous model of democracy and governance (UNESCO, 2018).

Many researchers argue that the Gadaa system is a male-dominated institution that excludes women from participation, duties, and responsibilities. However, empirical evidence from practice shows that women actively share equal participation and responsibilities with men. In the Gujii Gadaa system, husbands and wives jointly assume leadership roles and serve the community in complementary ways. This paper therefore examines and identifies the diverse roles of women within the Gujii Gadaa system.

### **Developmental Stage of Women in the Gadaa System**

In Gadaa philosophy, responsibility is not an individual privilege but a shared moral obligation grounded in social completeness, ethical maturity, and cooperation. Leadership is conceived as a partnership between husband and wife rather than a solitary authority exercised by men (FDG, 2025). Governance begins at the family level, which is considered the smallest administrative unit in the Gujii Gadaa system. Consequently, a person who cannot properly manage a family is regarded as unqualified to manage public affairs (YMG, 2024).

Marriage is therefore a prerequisite for public responsibility. In the Gujii Gadaa system, officials promoted from the Kuusa grade to the Raaba grade are required to marry before assuming leadership duties. Any individual who lacks a wife or fails to manage his family properly is disqualified from administrative roles. Even if selected for leadership at an earlier stage, such a person may be removed upon promotion if he does not meet this requirement.

According to Gadaa thought, no man can serve the community independently without a wife. Prior to marriage, participation in public affairs is viewed merely as training rather than full responsibility. This principle applies equally to women: before marriage, women are not permitted to perform public rituals, offer blessings, or assume social responsibilities on behalf of the community.

Once married, however, husband and wife jointly assume full social responsibility. When a man becomes Abbaa Yaa'aa (father of the council), his wife simultaneously becomes Haadha Bolla. In the Gujii Gadaa system bolla means, Gadaa council. Therefore, haadha bolla means mother of the Gadaa council. Consequently, in the Gujii Gadaa system, spouses jointly hold the same governance position. Among the Gujii, the Gadaa council is known as Yaa'a, and leadership is symbolically and practically sustained by both spouses. If the Haadha Bolla dies while her husband remains in office, the Abbaa Gadaa must remarry immediately in order to continue his leadership. This practice demonstrates the inseparability of male and female roles in governance.

The term *Haadha Bolla*, meaning “Mother of the mystical power (*baaganaa*),” derives from *bolla*, one of the twenty-eight days of the Gujii Oromo lunar calendar, marking the ritual day when the Gadaa council receives incense (*qunbii*) from the principal *Qaalluu*. Among the Gujii Oromo, the wife of the *Abbaa Gadaa* is respectfully called *Haadha Bolla*, symbolizing her sacred authority and equal, complementary leadership role within the Gadaa governance system.

Thus, within the Gujii Gadaa system, men and women are considered complete and socially responsible only when united in marriage. All services rendered to the community administrative, ritual, or moral are recognized as joint acts. Marriage is therefore not merely a social institution but also a moral and administrative qualification. The continuity of the Gujii Gadaa system ultimately depends on this complementary partnership, in which women sustain the ethical, cultural, and spiritual foundations of leadership while men carry formal administrative authority.

## **Roles of Women in the Gadaa System**

Scholars who studied the Gadaa system have argued that women have no roles or participation within the Gadaa institution. For example, Hinnant (1977) stated that women neither participate in nor have roles within the Gujii Gadaa system. However, such an argument does not accurately reflect the reality of the Gujii Gadaa system. In fact, without the participation of women, the activities of the Gujii Gadaa system would be unimaginable. Gujii women play significant roles in various ways, and their participation is essential for the functioning and continuity of the Gujii Gadaa system.

Gadaa should be studied within the Oromoo worldview. When examined from the Oromoo worldview, the continuity of the Gadaa system without the participation and roles of women would be inconceivable.

Among the scholars who studied the Gadaa system, Legesse (1973) is one of the most prominent. In his study, Legesse portrayed the Gadaa system as a male-dominated political institution in which women did not actively participate. Besides, he portrayed, Gadaa is a patriarchal system that excluded women from politico-military structures. He particularly argued that women were neither members of the grade system nor the generation-set system and therefore had no direct role in Gadaa governance. However, during the conduct of his research, Legesse did not examine in depth the roles and contributions of women within the Gadaa system. His analysis was largely framed through a Western-centered worldview, focusing on formal political structures while overlooking the broader social and cultural foundations of Gadaa governance. In reality, without the roles and participation of women, the continuity, stability, and sustainability of the Gadaa system would be unimaginable. Consequently, Legesse's interpretation, which marginalizes women's contributions, fails to fully capture the holistic and indigenous nature of the Gadaa system and calls for a more inclusive and contextual reassessment.

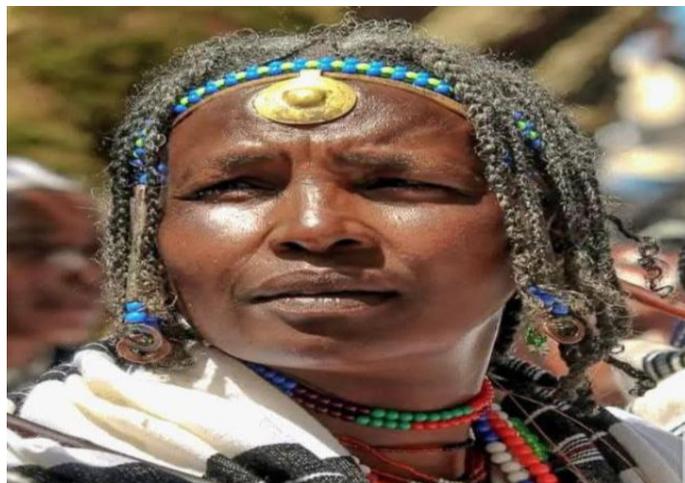
In practical, women play indispensable roles in sustaining the Gujii Gadaa system. Without their active participation, the system could not survive. Through involvement in governance structures, generational reproduction, ritual practices, cultural ceremonies, and advisory functions, women enable the Gadaa system to overcome internal and external challenges and maintain continuity.

Their roles include participation as Gadaa members, ensuring generational continuity through childbirth, preserving rituals and cultural ceremonies, and mentoring junior women through guidance

and instruction. The Gadaa system structures human life into successive grades, each involving education, training, social obligations, and moral responsibilities. These stages apply equally to both men and women.

When a father performs the *maqbaasaa* (naming) rite of passage ceremony for sons to promote to next grade, the mother performs the *maqbaasaa* (naming) rite of passage for daughters to promote to next grade. When a husband performs the *banti haadataa* (shave edge ring) rite of passage to promote to Raaba grade, also, his wife performs the *midboo dhawiisaa* (she ties copper at her forehead) rite of passage to promote to Raaba grade. When a husband performs the *woddeessa muraa* (woddwssaa cut) rite of passage to promote to Doorii grade, his wife performs the *qajimaa muriisaa* (cut Qajimaa tree) rite of passage to promote to Doorii grade (Jamjam, 2011). When a husband performs the circumcision and ear-piercing rites of passage, his wife performs the *guutimalaa* rite of passage. Accordingly, Gujii women participate in all Gadaa grades alongside their male counterparts.

For example, married women perform the *Midboo dhawiisaa* rite of passage to be promoted to the Raaba grade, during which they prepare *midboo* material that symbolize their formal membership in the Raaba grade. The copper metal displayed on the forehead of Raaba women is called *midboo*. It is a symbolic marker of Raaba women within the Gujii Gadaa system.



*Figure 1 Raaba woman wear Midboo at her forehead*

Similarly, women perform the *Qajimaa Muriisaa* rite of passage and wear *Guutuu* material on their head that symbolize their formal membership in the Doorii grade or member of Doorii generation.



*Figure 2 Doorii woman tied guutuu on her head*

In the same way, women perform the *Guutimala* rite of passage and wear *Guutimalaa* material that symbolize their formal membership in the Gadaa grade.



*Figure 3 Gadaa woman tied Guutimala on her head*

Girls and boys jointly pass through early grades such as Guduruu and Dabballee, participating in rites of passage together. As they advance through Qarree Duubaa, Qarree Duraa, and Kuusa, both genders continue to perform ceremonies collectively. At the completion of the Kuusa grade, girls marry and move into their husband's grade, where they continue participating in rituals and rite ceremonies throughout adulthood (Dejene N Baisa, 2009).

Marriage marks women's transition into full membership within their husband's Gadaa grade. From that Gadaa stage onward, women perform rituals, rites, and cultural ceremonies equally with men until both retire from the Gadaa system together.

The Gujii Gadaa system consists of five ruling parties which are called Muudana, Halchiisa, Dhallana, Harmuufa, and Roobalee; each governing for an eight-year term and transferring power peacefully. Every Gujii person, male and female, is a member of one of these parties.

Before marriage, women belong to their father's party, and after marriage, they become members of their husband's party. In both contexts, women share responsibilities and perform significant ceremonial and political roles. For example, when a man becomes *Abbaa Murtii* (party leader), his wife assumes the title of *Haadha Ambaa*, and when he becomes *Abbaa Gadaa*, she correspondingly becomes *Haadha Bollaa*. This demonstrates the parallel, complementary, and institutionalized positions of women within the Gadaa political organization.

In the Gujii Gadaa system, when the *Abbaa Murtii* (party leader) of the Doorii assumes power, he immediately receives the title of *Abbaa Gadaa*, and his wife likewise assumes the title of *Haadha Bollaa*. The term *Haadha Bollaa*, meaning "Mother of the mystical power (haaganaa)," derives from *bollaa*, one of the twenty-eight days of the Gujii Oromo lunar calendar, which designates the day on which the Gadaa council receives incense (*qunbi*) from the principal *Qaalluu*. Among the Gujii Oromo, the wife of the *Abbaa Gadaa* is respectfully addressed as *Haadha Bollaa* rather than by her personal name, symbolizing her sacred and institutional role as the mother of the *haaganaa* (*yaa'a*). This practice underscores the equal status, complementary authority, and shared responsibilities of the *Abbaa Gadaa* and his wife within the Gujii Gadaa governance system (WB, 2025).

Women are central to the continuation of generations. Through childbirth, they ensure the reproduction of society and the transmission of responsibility from one generation to the next. The Gadaa governance system is fundamentally based on a generational and lineage-based governance institution; therefore, without women, generational succession and governance continuity would be impossible.

Women actively participate in all major rites of passage and ritual ceremonies alongside men. These include naming ceremonies, initiation rites, marriage-related rituals, leadership transition ceremonies, and retirement rites. Gadaa rituals cannot be performed in the absence of women, and men without wives are prohibited from conducting rituals such as blessings, sacrificial ritual, or coffee ritual, except for the lower generational grades, such as Dabballee, Qarree Duubaa, Qarree Duraa, and Kuusa, in which fathers perform rites of passage on behalf of their children until they marry.

This rule applies not only applied at the officials of the Gadaa level but throughout Gujii society. Women's participation is thus essential to the legitimacy and effectiveness of Gadaa rituals and cultural practices.

Gadaa system is guided by the principle of seniority, whereby senior generations mentor junior ones. Senior women, known as Qadaddittii, advise junior women during rituals and ceremonies, while senior men (qadaddicha) guide junior men. Through instruction, correction, and moral guidance, women ensure the accurate transmission of ritual knowledge and cultural values across generations.

### **Protection of Women in the Gujii Gadaa System**

The Gujii Gadaa system accords special protection to women, recognizing them as the foundation of family, lineage, and generational continuity. This protection is institutionalized through laws proclaimed by the Gumii Bokkoo (General Assembly) every eight years.

Special attention is provided at all stages of a woman's life: before marriage, during marriage, and after marriage. This includes education and skill training, protection of dignity and bodily integrity, support during illness, childbirth, marital conflict, widowhood, and death. These measures ensure women's security, honor, and well-being within the community (75<sup>th</sup> Gumii Bokkoo Assembly declaration). The declarations presented under below topics.

The women are indispensable to the continuity of the Gujii Gadaa system. Their roles extend beyond reproduction to encompass governance, ritual leadership, ethical guidance, and cultural preservation. The Gujii Gadaa system survives and functions through the complementary partnership of men and women, reflecting a deeply rooted philosophy of balance, mutual responsibility, and collective well-being.

The Gujii Gadaa system provides continuous and comprehensive attention to women from birth to death. This is because women are the foundation of society, reproduction, lineage, and the continuity of the Gadaa system itself. Without the active participation of women, the survival and transmission of the Gadaa system would be inconceivable. Consequently, the Gujii Gadaa system accords women special protection and care at every stage of their lives, such as pre-marriage, during marriage and after marriage.

### **Childhood (girls)**

In the Gujii Gadaa system, special attention is given to girls before marriage. Before marriage, a girl is carefully nurtured and disciplined by her family so that she may grow into a good wife and responsible mother (Taddesse, 1983). Girls are thoroughly trained and guided to acquire essential feminine skills through practice and instruction. These include making different types of household utensils, understanding proper house construction, tanning hides, chopping firewood, fetching water, and other domestic and economic activities. This training helps girls become skilled and competent women (*dubartii halaqaa*).

Before marriage, the primary responsibility for teaching, training, and disciplining a girl lies with her mother. For this reason, the Gujii say, “*dubri kan haadhaati; ilmi kan abbaati*” which means, A daughter belongs to her mother; a son belongs to his father. Meaning that the upbringing and training of girls is the mother’s duty. The Gumii Bökkoo proclaims laws concerning unmarried girls every eight years.

These proclamations include the following rules and customs:

*Intala dubraa qaama isii hin qabanuu santi seera!*

*Yoo qaama isii qaban murtiin goromsaa santi seera!*

*Intalti dubraa yoo nama isii qabe himatte ragaa hin gaafatanuu santi seera!*

*Müidbaa isiiirra gabe qofa ilaalanii nama isiin himatterratti murteessanii santi seera!*

*Intala dubraa namaaf hin ergisanuu santi seera!*

*Yoo namaaf ergisanii inni fuudbe seeri hin gaafatuu santi seera!*

*Intalti kan haadhaatii santi aadaa!*

*Haati intala ni gorsiti, ni barsiistii santi aadaa!*

*Intalti dubraa Ficee mataa irratti hidbattii santi aadaa!*

*Ficeen mallattoo durbummaatii santi aadaa!*

*Intalti dubraa hin qayyattuu santi aadaa! (75<sup>th</sup> Gumii Bokkoo Assembly, 2024).*

This proclamation to be translated as;

It is forbidden by law to touch the body of an unmarried girl; that is law!

Anyone who touches her body is punished by law with a fine of a heifer; that is law!

If an unmarried girl reports that someone touched her, she is not required to provide witnesses; that is law.

Judgement is passed based solely on the harm done to her and her testimony against the accused; that is law!

It is forbidden to send an unmarried girl on errands for others; that is law!

If a judgment girl is sent on an errand and harm occurs, the person who took her bears responsibility, and the law does not excuse them; that is law!

A daughter belongs to her mother; that is custom!

Mothers advise, teach, and guide their daughters; that is custom!

An unmarried girl wears Ficee on her head; that is custom!

Ficee is a symbol of virginity; that is custom!

An unmarried girl must not fumigate her body with perfume and smear with makeup; that is custom!

According to this proclamation attention given to unmarried girls under the Gujji Gadaa system concerns their safety and protection. Girls are prohibited from walking alone in places or at times considered unsafe. They are not allowed to move alone at night or to travel alone to distant places. When travel is necessary, they must go with brother companions. Families do not send girls alone to

perform errands or assistance for others. Girls are also forbidden from walking with unrelated males, and they are not allowed to sleep in houses other than those of their family or close relatives.

According to Gujii Gadaa law, if a girl is temporarily given to relatives for upbringing and she reaches puberty (*abuyyaa baaste*), she must be returned to her biological family. This ensures that her family continues to provide education, training, advice, and moral discipline until marriage.

Virginity is highly valued in Gujii culture. According to Gujii Gadaa law, girls must preserve their virginity until marriage (Hinnant, 1977). If a girl loses her virginity before marriage while living in her parents' house, the community condemns her, and her family is socially disgraced.

When reaching puberty, Gujii girls wear a head ornament known as *ficee* or *quttoo*, which symbolizes virginity (Taddesse, 1983). A girl wearing this ornament is recognized as a virgin. If she removes it, people assume she is no longer a virgin. Therefore, it is a public symbol of virginity. A Gujii girl wears it until marriage. On the wedding day, after the groom confirms her virginity, a heifer is given to her, and the *ficee* is removed from her head. Thus, when a girl preserves her virginity until marriage, her family receives recognition and reward *goromsa bantii* to her family. *Goromsa bantii* is a heifer that the bridegroom's family gives to bride's family because of her virginity. If the bride fails to preserve her virginity, the bridegroom's family does not present a heifer to the bride's family. (FDG, 2025).

Another rule states that after a girl reaches puberty, she must not be beaten (Taddesse, 1983). Beating a post-pubescent girl is considered shameful (*bushaa or fokkoo or ceera*). If she commits a mistake, she is advised and counseled rather than punished physically.

Another protective rule states that if a girl claims she has been harmed, she is not required to produce witnesses. Her testimony alone is accepted, and judgment is passed based on her statement and the physical evidence of harm. According to Gujii custom, judgments made in favor of girls are final and cannot be appealed.

Under Gujii Gadaa law, a man who touches a girl is treated as if he has raped her. Anyone who touches her body or even grabs her clothing is punished and fined with a heifer. Among the Gujii (Baisa, 2018) it is said, "*Dubri dhiiraa dhiiri dhiira hin qabu*". Which means, a girl is like a man; man does not touch

man. Thus, unmarried girls are accorded exceptional respect, protection, and care. Gumii Bokkoo declares law of marriage regarding bride as shown below,

*Intalti ni beerumti; santi aadaa!*

*Intala beerumte gosatti namaaf kenna; santi aadaa!*

*Intala beerumte gosa irsaatiif kennani; santi aadaa!*

*Foon keetii lafeen tiyya jedbanii kennaniifi; santi aadaa!*

*Lafee hin cabsin, ija hin baqsin jedbanii kennaniifi; santi aadaa!* (75<sup>th</sup> Gumii Bokkoo Assembly, 2024). It is translated as;

A girl marries at appropriate age; that is custom!

Her clan gives bride to bride groom's clan; that is custom!

A married girl is also given to bride groom's clan; that is custom!

During marriage, the bride father saying, "Her flesh is yours; her bones are mine"; that is custom!

The bride's clan is expected not to break her bones or damage her vital organs such as eyes, ears...; that is custom!

According to Gujii Gadaa law, marriage must take place in the presence of the groom's family and clan, the bride's family and clan, and a third neutral clan known as *balbala torba* (*kontoma*). If a girl marries secretly (*hawadii*), reconciliation must later be conducted publicly in the presence of all these parties.

During the marriage ceremony, the bride's father addresses the groom saying, "I gave you my daughter. Her bones are mine; her flesh is yours. Do not injure her eyes, break her teeth, or break her bones." This statement means that while the husband may benefit from her labor and fertility, he must not cause her physical harm.

Marriage conducted in this public manner ensures that if the husband mistreats his wife, the groom's family and lineage are held responsible for her protection. If the husband's family fails to protect her, responsibility shifts to the husband's lineage, then to her natal family, and finally to the third clan (*balbala torba*). In Gujii culture, when a girl marries, her father declares that he gives her to the groom's clan, not merely to the individual man. This signifies that a woman belongs to the clan institutionally, and her protection is collective.

## **Motherhood**

In Gujii culture, after marriage a woman is referred to as *dubartii*, meaning a married woman. The Gujii Gadaa system proclaims laws concerning the protection and care of married women every eight years at the sacred site of Me'ee Bokkoo. These laws form the foundation through which the Gujii community safeguards women's rights and provides essential care throughout married life. Accordingly, the Gumii Bokkoo (assembly of multitudes) issues legal proclamations every eight years at Me'ee Bokkoo to ensure the protection and welfare of married women, as outlined below:

*Dubartiin yoo irsaan woldhabde maatii isaatti himatti; santi aadaa!*

*Yoo maatiin irsaa fala kennuu didan gosa irsaatti himatti; santi aadaa!*

*Yoo gosa irsaa fala kennuu didan maatii ofiitti himatti; santi aadaa!*

*Dubartiin yoo irsi rukute rifanootti dbeessiti; santi aadaa!*

*Dubartii rifanoo seente hin rukutanu; santi aadaa!*

*Dubartii dbeessitee rifanoo seente rukutuun aad-malee; santi aadaa!*

*Dubartiin ni sokkiti; santi aadaa!*

*Nami dubartiin itti sokkite yeruma sana mana isiitti fidee irsaan wolitti araarsa; santi aadaa! (75<sup>th</sup> Gumii Bokkoo Assembly, 2024).* This is translated as;

If a married woman disagrees with her husband, she reports first to his family; that is custom!

If the husband's family fails to resolve the issue, she reports to his lineage; that is custom!

If the husband's lineage fails, she reports to her own family that is custom!

If her husband beats her, she runs to the alcove (rifanoo) for protection; that is custom!

A woman who enters the alcove must not be beaten; that is custom!

Beating a woman inside the alcove is immoral; that is custom!

A woman may flee from her husband beating; that is custom!

The family with whom she seeks refuge must return her home and reconcile her with her husband; that is custom!

According to this law if a married woman is abused or mistreated, she first reports the issue to her husband's family, especially his brothers, who are obligated to resolve the problem. If they fail, responsibility shifts to the husband's lineage. If the lineage fails, the woman informs her own family, who then negotiate with the husband's family.

If the issue remains unresolved, the woman's lineage imposes a marriage ban on the husband's lineage, prohibiting them from marrying women from her lineage until justice is served. This mechanism strongly discourages abuse and ensures accountability.

As a result of these strict laws, violence against women is rare among the Gujii community, and there is no need for separate women's rights institution. According to key informants, the Gadaa system itself fully protects women's rights, and society actively enforces these laws at the household level (Yuuba Kuraa Bariisoo, 2025).

In terms of property, husband and wife jointly accumulate wealth and make decisions together. According to Gujii custom, the house belongs to the wife, and all property inside the house is hers. The husband may not use household items without her permission. For this reason, Gujii women are called *haadha manaa* (mistress of the house).

There is also a sacred space inside the Gujii indigenous house known as *rifanoo* (alcove). If a husband attempts to beat his wife, she may run into this space. Once she enters the *rifanoo*, the husband is forbidden by Gadaa law from touching her. If he violates this rule, she may report him and have him punished.

When a woman becomes ill, her husband is responsible for taking her to a traditional healer (*cidbeessaa*) for treatment. According to Gadaa law, the husband bears primary responsibility for ensuring that his wife receives appropriate care when she is sick. In his absence, this responsibility is transferred to his brother. The Gadaa system gives special attention to sick women, recognizing their vulnerability and social importance. Accordingly, the Gumii Bokkoo proclaims laws every eight years to protect and ensure proper care for ill women, as outlined below:

*Yoo dubartiin dbukubsatte irsi dafee maatii isiitti bima; santi aadaa!*

*Yoo osoo inni maatii isiitti bin himin dbibee sanaan duute itti gaafatama; santi seera!*

*Dubartii dbibamte irsi dafee yaalchisa; santi aadaa!*

*Yoo isii yaalchisuu dide maatii isaatti himatti; santi seera!*

*Maatiin isarratti tarkaanfii fudhatan; santi seera!*

*Gosaatti isa adaba; santi seera!*

*Isa adabanii korma isaa qalani; santi seera!*

*Niitii dhibamte dafee yaala geessa; santi seera!* (75<sup>th</sup> Gumii Bokkoo Assembly, 2024). This translated as:

If a woman becomes ill, her husband must immediately inform her family; that is custom!

If she dies from illness without her family being informed, the husband is legally responsible; that is law!

The husband must seek treatment for his ill wife without delay; that is custom!

If he fails to do so, the woman reports to his family; that is law!

His family takes legal action against him; that is law!

The lineage members may punish him physically; law!

He may be beaten and required to slaughter a bull as punishment; law!

An ill wife must be taken immediately for medical treatment; that is law!

According to this law, if a woman becomes ill, her husband must immediately inform her family. If he fails to do so and she suffers serious harm or death, he is held legally responsible. This rule ensures that women receive timely care and support.

During the death of a woman, there are specific laws that the husband and his lineage are required to respect and obey. The body of a deceased woman may be buried only with the consent of her natal family or clan. The Gumii Bokkoo proclaims laws concerning the death of women to the community every eight years at the sacred site of Me'ee Bokkoo. These laws are declared as outlined below.

*Yoo niitiin duute irsi dafee maatii isiitti hima; santi seera!*

*Yoo isiin maatii hin qabaatin gosa isiitti hima; santi seera!*

*Heeyama maatii ykn gosa isii gaafatu malee raaffa isii hin amwaalu; santi seera!*

*Reeffa niitii tiyyaa ni amwaaladbaa naaf heeyamaa jedbee maatii ykn gosa isii gaafata; santi aadaa!*

*Soddaan gatii isii naaf kenni jedbee irsa ykn gosa isaa gaafata; santi seera!*

*Irsi, siif kenna jedbee waadaa gala; santi seera!*

*Erga inni waadaa galeen booda soddaan awaaladhu jedhan; santi aadaa! (75<sup>th</sup> Gumii Bokkoo Assembly, 2024).* This declaration translated as;

If a wife dies, the husband must immediately inform her family; that is law!

If she has no immediate family, her clan must be informed; that is law!

Her body must not be buried without the consent of her family or clan; that is law!

The husband formally requests permission, saying, “*Allow me to bury my wife body*”; that is custom!

Her family demands assurance of bride-wealth; that is law!

The husband promises to fulfill the bride-wealth obligation; that is law!

After this promise, burial permission is granted; that is custom!

According to this law if a woman dies, from either illness or violence, the husband must inform her family or clan before burial. Burial cannot take place without their consent. Bride-wealth (valued at six calves symbolically or *jabbii qaraxa*) must be acknowledged, even if it was never physically transferred. According to the Gujii Gadaa law burial without consent violates Gadaa law. During the Gumii Assembly the Gumii promulgates many laws. Among those laws the law of birth is one that declare to treat and protect the right of woman giving birth. The declaration stated as below.

*Irsi niitii ulfaa rukutuun aad-malee; santi aadaa!*

*Yeroo isiin ciniinsuu jalqabdu worra isiitti hima; santi aadaa!*

*Yoo risiin deette korma itti qala; santi aadaa!*

*Dubartiin deette gumaata qabdi; santi aadaa!*

*Firatti gumaata kennaafi; santi aadaa!*

*Ummatatti gumaata kennaafi; santi aadaa! (75<sup>th</sup> Gumii Bokkoo Assembly, 2024).* This declaration translated as;

Beating a pregnant woman is immoral; that is custom!

When labor begins, the husband must inform her family; that is custom!

When she gives birth, bull is slaughtered for her to eat; that is custom!

When a woman gives birth her relatives offer her gifts; that is custom!

Her relatives offer contributions to her; that is custom!

Local peoples also offer contributions to her; that is custom!

During labor or birth the husband must inform the woman's family immediately. Her mother and relatives provide direct care, food, and emotional support. Childbirth is treated as a communal responsibility.

As shown below, when a woman flees marital conflict and seeks refuge with relatives, elders, or clan members, this is called *sokkaa*. The host is responsible for mediating reconciliation. The husband must inform her family and cooperate in resolving the conflict.

*Dubartiin yoo balleessitee irsa sodaatte ni sokkiti; santi aadaa!*

*Dubartii irsa sodaattee gara namaa sokkite ofi bira hin bulchannu; santi aadaa!*

*Dafanii gara irsaa fidanii wolitti araarsan; santi aadaa!*

*Yoo dubartiin irsa dbeessite ykn sokkite dafee worra isiitti hima; santi aadaa!*

*Yoo dubartiin dbeessite ykn sokkite irsi ni barbaada; santi aadaa!*

*Dubartiin sokkitu siiqqoofi kadhee qabdi; santi aadaa!*

*Nami dubartiin itti sokkite rakkoosi isuurra dhaqqabe qoratee hiikee irsaan wolitti araarsee galcha; santi aadaa!* (75<sup>th</sup> Gumii Bokkoo Assembly, 2024). The declaration translated as shown below.

If a woman commits a mistake and fears her husband, she may flee; that is custom!

A woman who flees to another household must not stay there; that is custom!

If a woman flees, her family must be informed; that is custom!

The husband must search for his wife if she flees; that is custom!

A fleeing woman carries symbolic items such as siiqqoo and papoose (kaldhee); that is custom!

The person sheltering her investigates the problem, resolves it, reconciles the couple, and returns her home; that is custom!

## Widowhood

In the Gujii community, when a husband dies, his brother inherits the deceased man's wife through the institution of levirate marriage. According to my informants, this practice serves several purposes: to assume responsibility for the care and upbringing of the deceased man's children, to prevent the transfer of the deceased's property to non-relatives, and to provide marital continuity for the widow. The Gumii Bökkoo proclaims laws governing levirate inheritance marriage every eight years. These laws are declared as outlined below.

*Yoo irsi du'e niitii isaa obboleessa isaatti dhaala; santi seera!*

*Woraana nama du'ee obboleessatti dhaala; santi seera!*

*Cüüco (unaa) nama du'ee obboleessatti dhaala; santi seera!*

*Gonfaa (shorts) nama du'ee obboleessatti dhaala; snti seera!*

*Müloo (death duty) nama du'ee obboleessatti fudhata; santi seera!* (75<sup>th</sup> Gumii Bökkoo Assembly, 2024). This law translated as shown below.

If a husband dies, his wife is inherited by his brother; that is law!

The deceased man's spear is inherited by the brother; that is law!

The milk container (unaa) of the deceased is inherited by the brother; that is law!

The deceased man's weapon (woraana) is inherited by the brother; that is law!

The brother assumes the deceased man's death duty (müloo); that is law!

According to this law if a man dies, his wife may be inherited by his brother under strict conditions. The woman's family must give consent, and responsibility for her protection and bride-wealth obligations must be clearly transferred. Without consent, levirate marriage is prohibited. In general, in Gujii culture, protection and care for women begin at birth and continue until death and burial. The Gadaa system provides a comprehensive indigenous legal framework that ensures dignity, safety, and social security for women throughout their lives.

## **Aged Women**

The Gujii Gadaa assigns aged women exclusive roles that they perform through their own indigenous institutions. These institutions include Haadha Bantooyyee, Haadha Bantii... which are integral component of the Gadaa system and provide women with recognized authority to participate in governance, public service, and uphold social and moral norms.

Among the institutions operating under the Gujii Gadaa governance system, the Haadha Bantooyyee institution is one of the most important. It is a women led institution within the Gujii Gadaa system that provides public health services and also serves as a social space where women freely collaborate, openly express their ideas, and publicly praise or criticize the actions of both men and women.

The Haadha Bantooyyee is an institution that reflects the principles of systems theory, as it consists of interconnected human structures, operational mechanisms arranged from higher to lower levels, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and specific boundaries that determine where and how public services are delivered. In other words, the institution functions to understand and address the dynamic interaction of multiple systems affecting individuals' lives, personal, familial, social, communal, institutional, and societal.

This institution is a women's organization that provides traditional medical treatment for *waanbeefaa/waanbeeraa disease* (cancer) to the community. The exact time of its establishment is unknown. However, according to Gujii oral traditions and the accounts of elders, the institution was founded during the monarchical period of Akkoo Manooyyee, specifically during the reign of Queen Hoyoo Hoyoyyoo.

During the reign of Queen Hoyoo Hoyoyyoo, the woman known as Hoyo, a woman referred to as Haadha Bantooyyee, was appointed to take responsibility for treating cancer disease. Following this appointment, Haadha Bantooyyee established her own organizational structure within the community, proclaimed the laws by which the institution would be governed, and began providing medical treatment to the people. When Gujii women successfully treat cancer disease and complete the healing process, they conclude with the *woxaa ceremony*, during which the following song is sung:

*“Hoyoo Hoyyoyyoo hoo*

*Lalii Lasooyyee hoo*

*Qadhoo Qasooyyee hoo*

*Akkoo Manooyyee hoo*

*Hoyotti nijaaree hoo*

*Hoyotti nuuf dhaamee hoo*

*Dhaabadbee dhaadaa hoo*

*Waan Hoyoo nuuf dhaamte hoo”* (Luuccoo Bexxoo, 2025(key informant)). This translate as;

Hoyoo Hoyyoyyoo, hoo

Lalii Lasooyyee, hoo

Qadhoo Qasooyyee, hoo

Akkoo Manooyyee, hoo

Hoyoo, you created us, hoo

Hoyoo, you appointed us, hoo

I stand firm to praise, hoo

What Hoyoo entrusted to us, hoo.

From this oral tradition, it can be understood that Queen Hoyoo Hoyyoyyoo was the founder of the Haadha Bantooyyee institution and that she entrusted a specific mandate to women. The exact historical period of Queen Hoyoo Hoyyoyyoo’s reign remains unknown. However, studies by Jamjam Uddeessaa (2011), the Guji Zone Culture and Tourism Office (2024), and other sources indicate that this queen ruled the Gujii people in the past.

Therefore, the Haadha Bantooyyee institution is understood as an institution that originated during the monarchical era, later integrated into the Gadaa governance system, and continues to provide community health services while offering women a space to participate freely and express their voices without restriction.

The Haadha Bantooyyee institution has a complex organizational structure. One of its key structures is the human resource structure. The highest leader of the institution is Haadha Bantii. At the top leadership level, the institution has a leadership committee, which is headed by Haadha Bantii herself.

As stated above, the leader of the institution is Haadha Bantii. The authority of Haadha Bantii is acquired through inheritance. A woman becomes Haadha Bantii either by inheriting the role from her family or relatives, or by receiving it through formal transmission from another Haadha Bantii. She possesses a distinctive symbol of identity, known as the *Qubee of Haadha Bantii*. This symbolic ring is worn on the ring finger of her left hand and is made of copper metal. The Qubee never leaves her finger. A Qubee has eight meanders.

Haadha Bantii convenes and leads the leadership committee of the institution. This committee holds primary responsibility for guiding and administering the activities of the Haadha Bantooyyee institution. The duties of Haadha Bantii include: issuing laws and regulations related to the treatment of cancer disease, publicly announcing and providing treatment for disease, performing various rituals, organizing, leading, and conducting the *woxaa* ceremony, and appointing committee members such as Cifiree, Hayyuu, and Torbii (Dhadduu Muulluchaa, 2025 (key informant)).

Haadha Bantii selects seven women known as Cifiree. They are selected from active generation of the Gadaa or from the generation of Raaba and above. Within the Haadha Bantooyyee institution, the Cifiree form a group of seven women who function similarly to bodyguards and work closely with Haadha Bantii. Their responsibilities include: ensuring the personal security of Haadha Bantii, enforcing and maintaining discipline during the *woxaa* ceremony, apprehending women who violate customary rules or ethical standards and presenting them to the council of Hayyuu, enforcing decisions and judgments passed by the council (Nadhii Makkoo, 2025 (key informant)).

Another group within the top leadership committee of the Haadha Bantooyyee institution is the Hayyuu. There are two Hayyuu members, both of whom hold the position of *Hayyuu* within the Gadaa governance system. They are sworn in after performing incense rituals and taking oaths during the Qunbii feeding ceremony at the appropriate Gadaa grade. These Hayyuu are selected from among residents of the *reeraa* (*administrative unit that equivalent to present kebele administrative*) and are officially appointed by Haadha Bantii.

The Hayyuu serve as legal advisors to Haadha Bantii. They interpret, examine, and codify the laws governing the Haadha Bantooyyee institution. They also publicly proclaim these laws to the community. The laws cover: medical practices, medicinal knowledge, ethical principles, treatment

procedures, and cultural values and traditions of Haadha Bantooyee institution. Any violation of these laws is handled and interpreted by the Hayyuu (Boruu Basaayyee, 2025 (key informant)).

Under the top leadership structure is another group called Torbii, composed of seven men. Members of this group are selected by Haadha Bantii from the *dheedaa* (*administrative unit that equivalent to present wareda administrative unit*) community. Haadha Bantii carefully chooses individuals known for good character, knowledge, and physical strength to work with her.

The responsibilities of the Torbii include providing practical support during ceremonies, such as: collecting firewood, fetching water, slaughtering bulls, constructing the *qootii* ritual structure, assisting in various ceremonial activities. The Torbii accompany Haadha Bantii and support her during the performance of different rituals and ceremonies (Liiban Moollichaa, 2025 key informant)).

At the *dheedaa* administrative level, Haadha Bantii oversees health related services. At the *reera* level, there is a lower organizational structure called *qubee*, which operates closer to the community. This level is led by Haadha Qubee. Haadha Qubee provides treatment for cancer disease to members of her *reera* peoples. Haadha Bantii trains Haadha Qubee in medical knowledge and traditional healing practices and formally appoints her to serve the community.

During the appointment of a Haadha Qubee, the selected woman is required to bring two copper finger rings. Haadha Bantii keeps one ring for herself and blesses the other before placing it on the finger of the newly appointed Haadha Qubee. After this ritual, Haadha Bantii publicly announces the woman as the official Haadha Qubee of that *reera*. From then on, community members receive cancer treatment from her.

Members of the Gadaa, Doorii or Raabaa, must be present during the appointment to ensure the legitimacy of the process and to guarantee community access to health services. On this occasion, the *hayyuu* are also present to formally proclaim the laws of the Haadha Bantooyee institution.

After appointment, Haadha Qubee begins treating the disease in her community. If a patient recovers after treatment, Haadha Qubee invites Haadha Bantii from the *dheedaa* level to conduct the *woxaa* ceremony, during which those who have recovered are blessed.

Cancer disease affects both humans and livestock. Among the Gujii, treatment of this disease is exclusively carried out by Haadha Bantii, Haadha Qubee, or women who have inherited or been granted this healing knowledge. In some areas, the disease is referred to as ‘*waan heefaa*, meaning a disease treated only by women, since *Heefa* means “woman” in Gujii Oromoo.

Patients invite Haadha Bantii or Haadha Qubee to their homes for treatment. If a family member or livestock is affected, treatment is similarly conducted at the household. Human patients are treated repeatedly inside the home, while livestock are treated repeatedly at the kraal until recovery. After recovery, a major blessing ceremony, *woxaa* is conducted and led by Haadha Bantii.

Another major responsibility of Haadha Bantii and Haadha Qubee is conducting rituals. The Gujii community performs various rituals at both individual and collective levels. Among the most well-known rituals are *bita gataa* and *erbee ooluu*.

The *bita gataa* ritual is performed to counteract the effects of harmful spirits believed to cause illness or misfortune to humans or livestock. Both men and women may perform this ritual, but when performed by women, it is led by Haadha Bantii or Haadha Qubee.

During the ritual, women of the *reera* carry *siinqqoo*, wear papoose (kadhee), and collect grass from their homesteads, charcoal from fireplaces, materials from house doorframes (*mikikkila*), and items from livestock kraals. These materials are gathered, symbolically passed around family members and livestock, and taken away while chanting “*Farra fagaadhu! Faro hantuu fagaadhu!*” which means, evil, go far away! The collected items are deposited in a remote, inaccessible place, often a gorge commonly known as *balee bitaa*. The *erbee ooluu* ritual is a subtype of *bita gataa* ritual, performed specifically to ward off war and epidemic disease. This ritual is performed exclusively by women and is led by Haadha Bantii or Haadha Qubee.

Women gather carrying *siinqqoo*, wearing papoose, and wrapping animal skins around collected ritual materials. They chant invocations such as: Let disease go away! Let war go away! Remove approaching calamity from us! (*Simbira woroo woraaana hamaa ooli! Dhukkuba hamaa ooli!*).

The bundled items are thrown into a gorge (*balee bitaa*). Women then sit, tie grass behind their backs, and continue chanting to bind and restrain disease and war. Finally, they reverse their papoose garments, symbolizing rejection of misfortune, and return home singing.

Today, many of these rituals have weakened significantly due to religious pressure. However, they are still practiced in areas where *Waaqeffataa* (indigenous Oromo belief) remains strong and at sacred site of the Gadaa council. Overall, Gujii women play a central role in serving their community through the Haadha Bantooyee institution, providing health services, ritual leadership, social regulation, and cultural continuity.

### **The Woxaa Ceremony**

The Woxaa ceremony is a blessing ritual performed after Haadha Bantii successfully treats and heals a person or livestock affected by cancer disease. The ceremony takes place at the home of the person whose illness or whose livestock's illness has been cured. It is organized and led by Haadha Bantii.

The person who has recovered from the disease offers a bull to Haadha Bantii or Haadha Qubee who treated and cured the person or livestock. On the day of the woxaa ceremony, Haadha Bantii invites her committee, women from the local reera, the wider community, and members of the Gadaa, or Doorii or Raabaa. The bull that was offered is slaughtered during the ceremony.

Women who attend the ceremony come carrying their siinqqoo, papoose (*kadboo*), barley, coffee, incense (*qunbii*), and milk. After Haadha Bantii performs a supplication (prayer), the bull is slaughtered collectively. Following this, a *qootii* (ritual structure) is constructed, and the head and residual of the slaughtered bull are placed under it.

The *woxaa* ceremony serves multiple spiritual, social, and cultural purposes: to thank *Waaqa* (God) for healing humans or livestock from cancer disease (*dbibaayyuu ritual*), to conduct supplication and prayer, to allow women to publicly praise and admire their caring and generous lovers (*dbaaduu*), to criticize or ridicule lovers who are neglectful, abusive, or disliked (*arrabsuu*), to publicly announce and display the wealth or property women have received from their lovers, and to shame women who lack social skills or proper conduct through songs.

After the bull is slaughtered, all participants eat the meat. The night is spent eating, drinking, and dancing, and singing. Women sing songs praising lovers who treat them well and openly insulting

those they dislike. Women who appreciate their lovers and have received valuable gifts, such as livestock publicly declare through song the type and number of animals they have received.

At dawn, a thanksgiving ritual (*dbibaayyuu*) is performed. This ritual is conducted by women under the Mokkaaniisaa tree. During the ritual, women bring offerings such as incense (*qunbi*), coffee, milk, barley, and other items, and give thanks to Waaqa at the base of the Mokkaaniisaa tree.

The *woxaa* ceremony is a special ceremony for women, where women's freedom is fully affirmed. During this ceremony, women are allowed to say anything they wish without fear, shame, or punishment. Women who lack skills may be criticized through song. Former lovers who caused harm or conflict are openly insulted, while supportive lovers who provided livestock or other resources are publicly praised.

Women name and sing about the type and number of livestock their lovers gave them. Anything women say or do during the *woxaa* ceremony cannot be questioned by anyone, including their husbands. This protection is a recognized right granted to women, and no customary law applies against them during this time. As a result, the *woxaa* ceremony serves as a unique forum-where women freely express their inner thoughts and exercise complete freedom of speech.

Today, the *woxaa* ceremony exists only as historical memory and is no longer practiced. It declined mainly due to strong pressure from modern religious institutions. However, the traditional healing services provided by Haadha Bantii and Haadha Qubee continue to be practiced to this day, though they have weakened because of pressure from government health offices and religious influences. Among the cultural elements of the *woxaa* ceremony are the songs sung by women during the ritual, which play a crucial role in expressing gratitude, criticism, praise, and social values. During the *woxaa* ceremony, women sing songs to mock, criticize, or insult a lover they are unhappy with or have rejected. The songs are part of social satire and public criticism.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

### Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that women are central to the continuity, legitimacy, and effective functioning of the Gujii Gadaa system. Contrary to interpretations that portray Gadaa governance as exclusively male-dominated, the findings reveal that leadership, responsibility, and moral authority in the Gujii context are fundamentally based on gender complementarity. Governance is exercised through marital partnership, where men and women jointly assume social, political, and ritual responsibilities. Without women's participation, leadership lacks moral completeness and ritual validity.

Women actively participate across Gadaa grades, ensure generational continuity through childbirth and socialization, and safeguard cultural values through ritual practices and moral instruction. Indigenous institutions such as Haadha Bantooyee illustrate women's exclusive authority in public health, social regulation, and cultural expression. Furthermore, the Gujii Gadaa system provides comprehensive legal protections for women at all stages of life, reinforcing dignity, safety, and social justice within the community.

The study concludes that the Gujii Gadaa system represents a holistic indigenous governance model that integrates democratic principles with culturally grounded gender balance. Women's roles are not supplementary but foundational, making them indispensable agents in sustaining the system across generations. Recognizing and documenting these roles is therefore essential for a full and accurate understanding of Gadaa governance and indigenous African political systems more broadly.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Researchers and academic institutions should prioritize systematic documentation of women's roles and institutions within the Gujii Gadaa system, particularly oral traditions and ritual practices that are at risk of disappearance.
2. Government and cultural heritage bodies should formally recognize indigenous women's institutions, such as Haadha Bantooyee, as integral components of traditional governance and community well-being.
3. Cultural preservation initiatives should support the revitalization and transmission of women-centered rituals, ceremonies, and indigenous knowledge systems to younger generations.
4. Contemporary governance frameworks should draw lessons from the Gadaa model of gender complementarity to promote inclusive, community-based leadership and social justice.
5. Educational curricula and public awareness programs should incorporate indigenous perspectives on gender, responsibility, and governance to counter misconceptions about women's marginalization in traditional systems.
6. Further studies should explore comparative analyses between Gujii and other Oromo groups or African indigenous systems to deepen understanding of women's governance roles across cultures.

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## Pictures



*Figure 4 Raaba woman tied Midboo at her forehead*



*Figure 5 Doorii woman tied Guutuu on her head*

*tied Midboo on her forehead*



*Figure 6 Gadaa woman tied Gutimalaa on her head*

Pictures are already in the body of the manuscript, you don't need to repeat them here