



Full Length Research Paper

Indigenous Systems for a Sustainable Development: Some Issues in the Revitalization of Sikko-Mando Gadaa under Oda Roba, South-Eastern Ethiopia

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Abstract

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This article explores the revitalization of the Sikko-Mando Gadaa system by analyzing historical sources and addressing the challenges faced in renewing the values of the system. The study highlights the system's ability to blend past traditions with new socioeconomic realities, demonstrating both continuity and adaptability. In response to socioeconomic and political changes, modifications were made to the Sikko-Mando Gadaa system, including the decentralization of power to operate more effectively at the clan level while maintaining a strong connection to the central Caffee at Oda Roba. This involved a rule of five gadaa classes sharing authority on an eight-year rotational basis, a practice that was suspended over a century ago. Recent research has recommended indigenous systems, like the Oromo Gadaa System, as a means to address societal challenges and promote sustainable development. The efforts to reinstate the Oromo Gadaa System have gained momentum, supported by its recognition as an intangible heritage of humanity by UNESCO. The Sikko-Mando Gadaa has been undergoing a revival under Oda Roba, with representatives from the Arsi Oromo community since May 2018. However, the revitalization process has faced divergent views within the Arsi Hayyuu community. Therefore, adjustments need to be made considering the specificities, heera and seera, sub-centers, power structure, agnatic and geographic organizations of the Sikko-Mando Gadaa system, aligning them with the existing realities of the Arsi people and the principles of Oromo Gadaa philosophy.



1. Introduction

In Ethiopia, a nation taken for free Africa when most nations in the continent were succumbed under colonial hegemony, the domestic ruling system was little known for extinguishing indigenous systems. The Oromo have had their own political, economic, social and religious institutions known as the *Gadaa* system. It is an indigenous system of social engineering that fascinates social scientists but rendered little attention of the authority until lately. This system evolved through time as the society experienced multifaceted development throughout its history. After the split of the Oromo into subgroups, for instance, each major Oromo groups have made some modification to the *Gadaa* System to adapt to new socioeconomic and political settings (Abebe, 2005: 28). Such amendments seem to have been the fundamental reason for regenerative capacity of the system. As development happened in the life of the Oromo society, new *gadaa* laws (*seera gadaa*) were endorsed by the *Caffee* (central assembly) and declared to the people by the *hayyuu* (scholars). Likewise, the Arsi *Gadaa* has gone through this process during the movement and came to have the following features (Legesse, 2000: 32-33).

The Arsi are the first of all Oromo speaking people to appear in both Christian and Muslim scribes. (Hassen 2015: 101; Braukämper, 2004: 76; Salviac 1901: 39) These sources witness that the Arsi practiced a typical *Gadaa* system, which was a secret of their standing prowess, proud and free until their defeat mainly due to ‘the firearm factor’ in 1886 (Legesse, 2000: 64). Then, their *Gadaa* was banned. Since the termination of the *Gadaa* system, the Arsi people have been subjected to a number of social economic and

cultural crises. Particularly, havocs in the legal system, for a society who did not understand the language of courts, were both harrowing and amount a cultural genocide (Tubiana, 1983: 27). This fact looks to have been jeopardized further by silence and today many people including some scholars do not aware that the Arsi used to practice a typical Sikko-Mando *Gadaa* system. This system was in the process of revitalization and this article addressed some challenges that faced the reinstatement.

2. Research Methodology

This study employed a historical research methodology that involved searching of written and oral sources from archives, libraries and informants. Archival materials were significant on issues like process of formal legal institutions, individuals’ experience of the same, litigations therein. Rich archival materials were obtained from archives of the former Bale Governorate General High Court found in Bale archival centers in Robe and Goba towns. Secondary sources like books, journals, theses and articles, written by historians, sociologists, anthropologists and political scientists among others were collected from libraries in Addis Abba University and the National Archives and Library Agency.

Oral sources were important sources for this study due to a strong tradition of orality in study area. These included eyewitness accounts, genealogical data, oral traditions and narratives of peoples’ collective experience in their interrelationships with the government legal institutions and among themselves through indigenous institutions though not recognized by the state. Oral data used for this study is collected in last decade. Instruments such as interview, in depth interview and focus group discussion were used to obtain oral data from informants identified

either by snowball or purposive or accidental methods in consideration of different socio-economic backgrounds. Experts in history of the area and experts of culture and tourism offices were interviewed purposefully.

Lastly, information obtained from the above sources through the aforementioned tools were organized according to narratives and storylines they bear. Oral tradition with reliable narrative of experience in courts were evaluated with archival data. Primary and secondary evidence were critically corroborated and analyzed. Then various storylines were synthesized and interpreted as the experience of the Arsi in courts and their zeal for indigenous institutions as reads hereunder.

3. Results and Discussion: Key Issues in the Revitalization of Sikko-Mando Gadaa

3.1. An Overview of the Sikko-Mando Gadaa Renewal: Madda Walabu to Oda Roba

By definition “the *Gadaa* System is a system of *gadaa* classes (*lubas*) succeed each other every eight years assuming military, political, social and cultural responsibilities in the Oromo nation” through free, merit based, direct and competitive election. According oral tradition all the Oromo people was said to have practiced and lived under a *Gadaa* system. In the passage of time, however, some groups of the Oromo moved to far lands for settlement and were unable to attend the central *Gadaa* Assembly (*Caffee*). This factor was said to have necessitated changes. Such historical circumstances led to modification to *Gadaa* system among the major Oromo groups without a major change to its general

principles also faced the Arsi Oromo (Legesse, 1973: 8).

According to Arsi elders, the Oromo made their central assembly at Oda Roba and revived the *Gadaa* System (*Haaromsa Gadaa*) in 14th Century. *Hayyuus* (scholar) of the various Oromo branches settled at Arda Tarre (site of queuing communities) in Gindhir District just a few kilometers from Oda Roba (Informants: Adem Tina, 2014; 2018; Amino Eda'o; 2018). Literature concur with this narrative stating the renewal was completed and a *Gadaa Government* of the whole Oromo was successfully established in 1316 and lasted up to 1470s. Multifaceted factors thus led to the discontinuation of this Oromo *gadaa* at Oda Roba. This historical episode is remembered as *Cinna Gadaa*. Afterwards, the Oromo *ayyaantuus* (holy men) were searching for the right place and time and proposed Madda Walabu in Western Bale (OCTB, 2006: 55-56; Hassen, 2015: 102).

Subsequently, representatives all the Oromo had deliberated the process of *Gadaa* renewal at Madda Walabu.¹ The Arsi Oromo were not only one of the major Oromo sub-groups in this *gadaa* renewal but also were the host of the renewal as the site is in their territorial possession. The revival was conducted during the *gadaa* of *Abba Gadaa* Walabu Jilo (Informants: Robe Mamma, 2014; Adem Tina, 2014; 2018). The effective renewal process took some time and Oromo began a counteroffensive campaign to reclaim their territories lost to the expanding Ifat-Adal Muslim Sultanate in the east and to the Christian Kingdom in north and north-west towards the end of 15th Century (Semu, 2020: 50-53; Hassen, 2015:123-25; OCTB, 2006:96). Likewise, the Sikko and Mando

¹. These are two of my most organized informants. See their data in the reference.

clans headed back to *Caffee* Oda Roba re-crafting some modifications to their *gadaa* in the process movement within the Barentuma Confederacy in the 16th Century (Legesse, 2000: 32-33).²

Arsi tradition has it that the return from Madda Walabu into the medieval Bale, where

Gloss

- 1 *“Oromoon Walaabuutti gurra waraanate
Arsiin Dallootti loonitti dalleessee Dallaa falate
Miidhagduutti Gadaa miidhagfate
Kurkurruutti Kukura qalate*
- 5 *Odaa Roobaatti seera tumatee
Baaleetti baallii qoodame*
- them*
- Baalee mataan bahee gadaa quufaan gahee
Kattaa kootoote Mariibootti Marii fixee*
- 9 *Waakkannaatti diina waakkate*

According to this tradition, which cannot give specific time of the movement, at first, (line 1) the Oromo renewed the *gadaa* at the general council of all Oromo groups at Madda Walabu then (line 2) the Arsi chose central Kraal at Dallo (a camp probably for the cattle of whole group) a site in Dallo Manna region. Then (line 3) they had their own separate council at Midhagdu followed by a *buttaa* ceremony at Bareddu Kurkurtu (4). They were moving from the southwest to northeast direction. The establishment of the central kraal or camp and the *buttaa* are unmistakable indicators the beginning of the attack on Bale (5). The return from Madda Walabu to Oda Roba in Gindhir District, which was near a stronghold of the Christian forces in defense of Bali, served them as strategic place and symbol of success for their further expansions. The division of *baallii* (ostrich feather

Oda Roba is located, was preceded by series of assemblies of the Arsi. It involved wars against Christians and Muslims (including Muslim Oromos) in Bali.³ Informants Robe Mamma and Adem Tina stated stages and assemblies attended in the process of the expansion as follows:

English

- Oromo renewed the Gadaa at Walabu
Arsi made cattle fertility ritual at Dallo
improved the Gadaa at Midhagdu
At Kurkurru they slaughtered a thin bull
then made Gadaa laws at Oda Roba
In Bale they shared Gadaa powers among
them
then set out on the top Bale prospering Gadaa
then climbed the cliff and assembled at Maribo
Oromo vowed to the enemy at Wakanna allegiance
symbolizing power) in Bale indicates the de-centralization of power among clans (6) and territorial appropriation among themselves by controlling the whole of Bale (7). Then they descended down the *Kattaa*, cliff of the Wabe River (8) and crossed it at a ford known as Malka Wakkanna literary means the ford where they swore allegiances of fraternity and redefined their enemies after reoccupation of Bale (9). Redefining enemy meant identifying new enemies in addition to those known already ((Informants: Robe Mamma, 2014; Adem Tina 2014; 2018).⁴*

This is in line with Martial De Salviac’s statement that the Oromo had categorized both “Muslims and the Abyssinians have no right to the unction” indicating non-Oromo stand of these groups (Salviac, 1901: 183). Mohammed Hassen cited some of the places in this tradition like Bareddu Kurkurtu and Oda

² The name Arsi *Gadaa* should not be limited to the Arsi Zone but it includes all areas inhabited by Arsi Oromo.

³ The medieval Bali included large area of Bale Zone and parts the present Arsi and the West Arsi zones.

There are traditions of war between Muslims Oromo and the non-Muslim Baarentu over *Sheik* Hussein and Sof Omar shrines.

⁴ The process of describing the enemy is called “*Di-insuu*”.

Roba as important centers of Oromo assemblies (Hassen, 2015: 150).⁵ Ulrich Braukämper added a *caffee* known as Koss located in Bali (Braukämper, 2004: 86). The case in point resulted sustained mobility which in turn emanated from the military prowess of the Arsi Oromo, which is also known as “the warrior” (Hassen, 2015: 151-53).

3.2. Typical Features of the Renewed Sikko-Mando *Gadaa*

Though discussion of the Arsi Oromo *Gadaa* in such limited space of an article is a non-starter, here is a highlight of its typical features. First, Sikko-Mando *Gadaa* was improved in series assemblies on the process of the movement of the society (discussed above) and decided over the right to participation in the system. According to oral tradition, the Arsi *Gadaa* was resized as the Sikko-Mando *Gadaa* implying that it was only the twelve clans descended from Arsi i.e. Mando(yu) and Sikko could participate in it. This implies that siblings of the Mando and Sikko like Manna (the father of Hadiya), who had the right to *Arsoma* tradition (Arsihood), could not claim Sikko-Mando *Gadaa* (Informants: Amino Eda’o, 2017; Robe Mama 2022). It exhibited both changes and continuity before becoming a functional social system (Semu, 2020: 52-54).⁶

The next key feature of the Arsi Oromo *Gadaa* System was that it modified to operate more efficient at clan level in which each clan was autonomous over its internal mat-

ters. Each major clan or coalition of neighboring clans also had its own assembly called *dhadacha* with its own executive council known as *saddeeta* (the eight, hence size of its members) and *shanee* (the five), which was responsible to announce decisions and laws endorsed by the former. Head of the *saddeeta* known as *Abbaa Bokkuu* (*bokkuu* in short) meaning possessor of scepter and his vise is called *hookkaa* both of whom were elected every eight years. As the number of clans increased more sub *gadaa* centers were introduced. As Eike Haberland stated the territory they [Arsi Oromo] occupied was too extensive and they therefore, split up in to a number of *Gadaa* area each with its own often different rules (Haberland, 1963: 784; Abdurahiman, 1991: 12).

Lastly, a typical features of the Sikko-Mando *Gadaa* is that unlike most Oromo groups, the Arsi do not have single chief that preside over the *Gadaa* System. In the case of the Arsi Oromo, there are a number of *gadaa* areas with slightly different rules corresponding to territories of moieties partake in it. In each *gadaa* areas however the *bokkuu* has more power than any other Oromo groups (Haberland, 1963: 783-4). On other hand, there are two robust social institutions that have been used to bind the interrelationship among the descendants of the Arsi and rejuvenate solidarity among its moieties. One of this is known as the *Arsoma tradition*, which is a strong sense of belongingness and brotherhood among all Arsi clans (Semu, 2004: 37). Even there were cases in which non-Oromo groups can be adopted and come to

⁵ Mohammed Hassen stated several sites the Arsi used as their assemblies (*caffee*) during their movement.

⁶ Arsi narrative has it that a man called Arsi, son of Dhuguma Marawa, begot three sons namely Sikko, Mando and Manna in that order. Manna was alleged to have refused to abide by *seera hamba*, rejected *gadaa* rulings and pursued intimidating his siblings.

Thus, he was totally alienated by a process known as *diinsuu*. But his sister was said to have helped him in appealing to *caffee* and the scale of Manna’s punishment was reduced to *ormu* (lit. estrangement). Thus, from that day on Hadiyya has *Arsihood* but not the membership in the Arsi *Gadaa*.

have all rights, duties and privileges that the rest of the Oromo possess (Semu, 2020: 53-55). The second one is known as *Alo Arsi*, which was formerly an element of the *Gadaa* System, but, in time it came to be a set of legal codes that regulate interrelationship of the Arsi Oromo. It is a law of all the Arsi people in Arsiland (Abdurahiman, 1991: 1).⁷ The above typical features of Sikko-Mando *Gadaa* therefore are significant both to understand its similarities and difference from the overall Oromo *Gadaa* System and to take contemporary socioeconomic realities into account in dealing with its reinstatement.

3.3. Members or Classes of the Sikko-Mando *Gadaa*: Agnatic Structure

Among the principal issues that created long debates among the *hayyuus* at Oda Roba in May 2018 was the issue of *gadaa* classes and their order of seniority. The Oromo in general and its Arsi branch in particular has been renowned for its observance of the *Seera*

Hangafa-Mandha (the rule of primogeniture). This law states the duty of the first born son to the status of seniority and enforce it among his siblings according to their seniority and junior order. The same works among the five classes or parties of the *Gadaa* System. In this regard, Terje Østebø writes that the Arsi Oromo practice five *Gadaa*-classes namely *Birmajii*, *Bbultuma*, *Warata*, *Robalee* and *Bahara* (Østebø, 2005a: 27-29).⁸

Oral sources however disagree with this list both in nomenclature and order of seniority. According to key informants Robe Mama and Gutema Negesso, who have been participating in the Sikko-Mando, even names of the Sikko-Mando *Gadaa* classes have their root meanings in the Arsi tradition. This tradition states that each name was derived from a shortened form of particular *milkee* (fortune) that those first members of each class were said to have observed when their respective *Gadaa* was on power as shown in the following extract from the gloss.

Gloss	Implication for the name of the <i>Gadaa</i> class
<i>Biramaduun⁹ beeraaf tolte quufa gabbina</i>	<i>Biramji</i> was fortune of women in marriage and for it to last longer
<i>Bultii fi bultumnii bidaa beeraf tola</i>	<i>Bultuma</i> was fortune of life good for fertility of women
<i>Hormaatni tole loon horee hora obaase</i>	<i>Horata</i> implied cattle fertility and availability of mineral water for their herds
<i>Bahaara beelan ture Beeltuti kurkura qale</i>	<i>Bahara</i> showed recovery from drought and slaughtered tin bull at Kurkurtu in Beeltu?
<i>Robalee gadaan gabbina roobee qubse</i>	<i>Robale</i> showed the availability of rain for their herds

In this gloss expression, words in the beginning of each sentence are modified to the name of *gadaa* class in order as *Birmaji*, *Bultuma*, *Horata*, *Bahara*, and *Robale*. Thus, oral tradition has encoded its detail with how names of the parties were exemplified in the folk narratives. (

Informants: Robe Mamma, 2022; Adem Tina, 2014). Mindaye Abebe also observed

⁷ Arsiland is a term coined by Ulrich Braukämper to denote all the territories inhabited mainly by the Arsi Oromo.

⁸ According to Østebø these *gadaa* classes have order of seniority. The order by informants, *Birmaji*, *Bultuma*, *Horata*, *Bahara* and *Robale* varies on the last two given by Østebø. The third is also Horata, not Warata. In previous western Bale areas such as Dodola,

Kokkossa, Adaba and Nansabo, currently the *gada* is reinstated and on revival.

⁹ *Biramadu*, according to Arsi Oromo accent, means first wife and she is honored due to her ritual symbolic role in *Gadaa* ceremonies alongside the *Abbaa Gadaa* and other top *Gadaa*. Even some offices aren't held without her.

related tradition used in ritual blessing during *gadaa* ceremonies in Bale highlands (Abebe, 2005: 28).

A related point of debate among the *hayyuu* concept was about which clans belongs to which *gadaa* class. This could be answered by the careful genealogical study of Arsi clans. Though there some debate among informants in Bale and Arsi on who is senior from among Sikko and Mando brothers, the general consensus on order of seniority of their *gadaa* class as *Birmaji*, *Bultuma*, *Horata*, *Bahara*, *Robale*. Informants from Arsi claim that Sikko was the first born son of Arsi and this could be justifiable as from the common way of reference to the two brothers in the order of Sikko-Mando. But those informants in Bale argue that it common to refer to brother for junior to brother as Sikko-Mando while the Mando known to be eldest son of Arsi. A convincing solution seems to follow the order of *gadaa* classes because of the interspersed settlement of pattern of clans of the two moieties (Informants: Amino Eda’o, 2018; Lenjiso Roba, 2018).

Hence, all descendants of the Sikko and Mando moieties Arsi(e) had their *gadaa* central assembly at Oda Roba, which was attended by 32 Arsi clans in 1880s before the suspension of their *Gadaa* System as pointed above (Østebø, 2005b: 22). The “Shanan Sikko” (the Five Sikko) gave rise to five clans known, after the names each of their fathers, as Bulala, Wacale, Jawwi, Waji and Ilani. Mando fathered the “Torban Mandoo” (the Seven Mando) clans known after the names of their founders as Rayitu (Rayya), Hawatu, Kajawa, Wanama, Uta, Wayyu and Beltu (Haroji). A person who claims an Arsi identity should link his/her genealogy to one of these twelve clans. The two branches consist of several sub-clans and lineages. For an Arsi person, knowledge of his/her genealogy

helps to determine marriage preference and participate in the *gadaa* system. In Arsi clan structure, names of clans and sub-clans are inherited from personal names of non-matrilateral figures from whom those clans and sub-clans descended. Their total number has increased to about 432 lineages in in the subsequent periods which boasted agnatic structure of Sikko-Mando that settled spatially over five zones. As long as they abide by Sikko-Mando law, *Arsoma* tradition, *alo* Arsi and not restricted by the *caffee*, they can participate in the *gadaa* (Semu, 2020: 54).

3.4. Sub Centers of the Sikko-Mando *Gadaa*: Spatial Structure

Another issue at center of gravity of debate of Sikko-Mando *hayyuus* at Oda Roba in 2018 was about the sub-centers of Sikko-Mando *Gadaa*. From it central assembly at Oda Roba more localized *gadaa* centers at the level of individual clan or in some cases a common council for neighboring clans was opened eventually. Consequently, twenty sub centers (*dhadacha*), which were distributed throughout present Arsi, Bale, East Shawa and West Arsi zones of Oromia region predominantly in habited by the Arsi Oromo. These *dhadacha* (sub centers) in turn included Ya’aa (district councils) and *bayiima* (village councils) that attended a particular *dhadacha* (Informant: Amino Eda’o, 2017; 2018; Meskela, 2002: 10-12).

The system of *gadaa* centers underpin Oromo wisdom in selecting cultural tree species based on knowledge their natural properties. The *Oda* (sycamore tree) for instance was considered “leemoo” (holy) and used as *caffee gadaa* (central assembly) to decree laws and complete *gadaa* rituals (Informant: Ahmed Galato, 2018; Debebe, 2017: 35-

36).¹⁰ Below the *oda* was *dhadacha* (fig tree), where people practiced rule over their local matters based on *seera gadaa* (*gadaa* law) presided by *Afa-yaa'ii* (speaker) (Informants: Adam Tina, 2014; Ahmed Galato, 2018).¹¹ In each *gadaa* sub-centers however

the *bokkuu*, head of the *gadaa*, has more power than any other Oromo groups. This implies that the Arsi *Gadaa* was decentralized over wider geographical area but firmly interconnected at it *Caffee* Oda Roba (Haberland 1963: 783-4).

Table 1: Structure of the Sikko-Mando *Gadaa* and Sub Centers under *Caffee* Oda Roba

No.	Name of the <i>gadaa</i> sub center	Location at present		No. of /Yaa'a/ District Council	No. of vil-lages/B ayima
		Zone	District		
1	<i>Dhadacha</i> Madda Walabu	Bale	Madda Walabu	29	841
2	<i>Dhadacha</i> Sarar	East Bale	Dawwe Sarar	23	529
3	<i>Dhadacha</i> Baredi	Afder (ESNRS)	Barre?	25	625
4	<i>Dhadacha</i> Girda	Afder (ESNRS)	Dolobay?	26	676
5	<i>Dhadacha</i> Gindhir	East Bale	Gindhir	27	729
6	<i>Dhadacha</i> Bareddu	East Bale	Laga Hidha	24	576
7	<i>Dhadacha</i> Kurkurru	East Bale	Beltu/Sawena	28	784
8	<i>Dhadacha</i> Robe	Bale	Sinana	30	900
9	<i>Dhadacha</i> Dayyu	Bale	Dallo Manna	25	625
10	<i>Dhadacha</i> Dumal	Bale	Barbare	26	676
11	<i>Dhadacha</i> Dalloo	Bale	Dallo Mana	29	841
12	<i>Dhadacha</i> Hera fi Sera Qitibe	Arsi	Hetosa	21	441
13	<i>Dhadacha</i> Mara Murti	Arsi	Sude	22	484
14	<i>Dhadacha</i> Malka Eejersa	Arsi	Gololcha	26	676
15	<i>Dhadacha</i> Arba Gugu	Arsi	Asako	18	324
16	<i>Dhadacha</i> Tulluu Canco	Arsi	Sire	29	841
17	<i>Dhadacha</i> Aminya	Arsi	Amigna	21	441
18	<i>Dhadacha</i> Sema Hasasa	West Arsi	Gadab Asasa	22	484
19	<i>Dhadacha</i> Ya'i Lalaba Gilalamo	West Arsi	b/n Kofale and Lemu & Bilbilo	20	400
20	<i>Dhadacha</i> Guto-Goda Rogicha	West Arsi	Shashamanne	23	529
Total				494	12,422

Source: Field survey: 2016-19; (Semu: 2020: Appendix C).

¹⁰ Ahmed Galato stated that *Oda* is a sacred tree revealed its fortunes to *ayyaantu* of the Oromo.

¹¹ Each *gadaa* class declared laws known as *wayyuu saddeettan* (*Waaqa, lafa, abbaa, hadha, soddaa, soddaatii, qaalluu, qaallittii*). Failure to comply with the *wayyooma* will lead to punishment and compensation corresponding to the intention of the act if presented

before judges. For example, a person who insulted or hit his parent will be flogged and compensate in cloths and heifer the first time and killed by throwing off cliff the second time. The *wayyooma* also protects other vital assets and rights such as bull, warhorse, unmarried girl, pregnant woman etc.

3.5. *Heera* and *Seera* of Sikko-Mando *Gadaa*: Legal Structure

Arsi tradition states that descendants of the Arsi are children of a certain Hambato Dayyo, who gave his name to a set of laws. And all clans who lived by these laws were known as “hambana” (lit. we the sons of Hambato). The Arsi *caffee* was said to have declared laws as “seera hambaati muramte” (lit. this is the law of Hambato obey it).¹² Hambato is therefore remembered as law-maker of the Arsi. Hambato Dayyo of the Arsi traditions could therefore be taken as great lawmakers among other Oromo groups such as Mako Billi of the Macca Oromo and Dawwe Gubbo of the Borana Oromo (Legesse, 2000: 209). But this narrative does not specify the father of Dayyo except his membership to the Barentuma confederacy. It was source of many laws and institutions that regulated social interactions within the Arsi and with their neighbors (Semu, 2020: 50; Informants: Robe Mama, 2014; 2022; Ahmed Galato, 2018; Ahmed Mohamed, 2017).¹³

At the *caffee*, the *hayyuu seeraa* or *abbaa seeraa* (law scholar) memorize and reckon traditional “seeraa ganamaa” (earlier laws) and declare new ones for the society. The universal (general) laws enacted by the *Caffee Gadaa* of the Oromo was known as *heera* (constitution). *Heera* was the source of *seera*

(rules) then from *seera* emanates *hooda*. *Hooda* meant moral standards to be shown by *hojii* (actions) and the *hooda* sets limit of these actions. *Adaba* meant obedience of laws in one’s actions. These laws are set of rules that direct how a *sirna* (system) indicted by the term next to the *seera* (law) operates. For example, *seera gadaa* directs how the *sirna gadaa* has to be carried out and similarly *seera gumaa* directs the executive body how to administer the *gumaa* institution (Haile, 2002: 238). Thus, awareness creation on *heera* and *seera* will be a big task in the process of revitalization of the system in vertical and horizontal lines of social interrelations (Ibid).

Despite the suspension of the *gadaa* however the Arsi retained laws, which governed the social life of its society, such as *seera hoodaa* (law of morality), *seera uumaa* (law of nature) and *seera hormaataa* (law of breeding) from their *gadaa* system. Other laws such as *seera rakkoo*¹⁴ (marriage law) and *seera waaqeffannaa*¹⁵ (spiritual law) among others were either modified or replaced by the *shari’a* (Islamic law) (Haile, 2002: 238; Salviac 1901:214). Similarly, institutions such as *jaarsummaa* (elders’ council), *gumaa* (blood price), *fixata* (resolution); *wayyooma* (wellbeing),¹⁶ *moggaasa* (adoption) and *gud-difachaa* (child adoption) were part of the

¹² “Caffee” in *Afan Oromo* means legislative assembly. Its smaller replicas are commonly known as “Yaa’ii (Yaa’aa)” meaning forums and investigative conferences. *Qixxee* as its semantics as stated in Haji (2014: 73).

¹³ Informants state that it is 138 years since Arsi *Gadaa* seized to be practiced officially. But, some continued to practice it in clandestine away from the eyes and ears the imperial and military regimes in west Arsi and Arsi zones. Yet, the influence of Islam was the basic reason for decline of the *gadaa* in eastern Balé long before its conquest.

¹⁴ Getachew stated the Oromo strictly observed marriage law. For instance *seera rakkoo* was law that

guide marriage life in the Oromo society that was appreciated even by Monk Bahrey in the 16th Century.

¹⁵ Salviac gave us details of these laws and the process in which they were decreed to the people.

¹⁶ *Wayyooma* (from *wayyuu*) was a comprehensive institution of social wellbeing that enforces social codes such as *seera*, *hooda* and *adaba*. *Wayyooma* was so basic for social wellbeing that the Oromos usually ask each other “Wayyoo qabduu?” These phrases literary means “have you kept *wayyooma*” respectively. But, *safiuu* (unethical) was/is state of human behavior that violates *hooda*. *Wayyooma* is internal stability that the society seeks to ensure.

gadaa system, which continued to play a vital role in the life of the society in regulating social relations (Informants: Lejiso Roba, 2018; Tusa Deti: 2018; Semu, 2020: 55-56).

3.6. The Interrelation of Indigenous Institutions, Justice and Development

Sustainable development is unthinkable in the absence of justice. Justice pave the way for stability and socioeconomic development. History tells that the termination of Sikko-Mando *Gadaa* has significantly affected justice in the Arsi Oromo more than any other aspect of their past which in turn hampered socioeconomic progress. Crisis caused by suspension of the indigenous legal system was both harrowing and amount a cultural genocide (Tubiana 1983: 27). Informants for instance remember popular saying that shows hardships and agonies of the Arsi Oromo in attending the Imperial High Court in Asalla as “*Abet YäAsällaw Fird Bet*” (*O the mess of the Court of Asalla!*). This was an expression that one used to tell how difficult it was to appear in this court. They stated that it takes long time to appear in front of judges bribing in a series of increasing gifts known as “*däjji mätiñña*”, “*bär mägibiya*” and “*ejji mänisha*”.¹⁷ This was how a society not only known to resolve bloody inter-clan conflicts but also was reputed to change them into opportunities for binding conflicting parties into a lasting kinship have suffered in alien courts (Informants: Robe Mama, 2014; 2022; Adem Tina, 2014; 2018; Ahmed Mohamed, 2017).

As a result of the denial of justice, the Arsi Oromo hade determined to resist the repres-

sive rule aimed at the reinstatement of it culture. Sections of the society in all walks of life have conducted bitter struggles against it in two broad ways. One of these ways was cultural resistance, which underpinned a new cultural orientation among the Arsi Oromo following their conquest by the Imperial Ethiopia and the subsequent imposition of *gäbbar* system with culture of the conquerors. This struggle often took the form of civil disobedience, non-violent protests and mass conversion to Islam by Arsi Oromo who observed *Waaqeffannaa* practices in the form of cultural resistance. This means cultural resistance motivated the non-Muslim Arsi in Gadab and Western Bale to embrace Islam as means of cultural resistance (Østebø, 2005b: 37). It even rejuvenated Islamic sentiments among the Muslim Arsi using Islamic Sufi shrines like *Dirre Sheik* Hussein as the centers of such resistances. For example, written sources allured an effective opposition against the imposition of the *qälad* land measurement (Semu, 2016: 82-84; Østebø, 2020: 230).

The second way of resistance was armed struggle to get rid of the oppressive system. The Arsi Oromo were among peoples of Ethiopia that wage successive armed struggles. The first armed protest was known as “*waraana jaagahiir*” (the *jagahir* war). It was led by Mohamed Gada Qallu, a local spiritual leader of the Oromo in Dallo *Awrajja*, who waged a historic uprising 1942-1944 (Tareke, 1996:130). Oral and written sources unanimously agree that this pioneering struggle in Bale costed a huge human lives and material resources (Informants: Adem Tina; Musa

¹⁷ የባሌ ከፍተኛ ፍርድ ቤት የቀድሞ ፋይሎች: 1935-36 ፍርድ ቤት ክንውን /Archives of the Former Bale High Court, Report on the 1935-35 E.C. (1943-1944) Court Activities. They state that *däji mätiññä* means gift (bribe) to get into home yard of overlord, *bär mägibiya* means

bribe to enter the house and eji mänsha is the gift to shake the hand of the official. They stated that people from Bale also had to attend the High Court in Asalla until the early 1960s.

Roba; Kedir Ibarhim. 2014). This is summarized in a document from the former Ministry of Interior as: “ከ1934 ዓ.ም እስከ 1936 ዓ.ም ድረስ ጃጋሪር በሚል ስያሜ ከደሎ አውራጃ የተነሱ ሽፍቶች በደቡብ ሲዳሞና ባሌ የሰላማዊውን ህዝብ ንብረትና ህይወት እየተዘዋወሩ በማጥፋት በሐገሩ ላይ ከፍተኛ ጉዳት ማድረሳቸው የሚታወስ ነው።” meaning ‘bandits under the name *jagahir*, who originated from Dallo *Awrajja*, have caused serious damages on human lives and properties wondering throughout southern Sidamo and Bale between 1944 and 1944’.¹⁸

The second and the most widely known struggle of the Arsi was known locally as “Waraana-Dhoombiir” (the *Dhombir* war) 1963-1970. This was a more organized struggle led by some para-military Generals such as Wako Gutu in Dallo, Hussein Bunie in Wabe and Kahin Abdi in El-Kere, Kedir Waqo in Harana. The resistance was so worrisome to the government authority that it used maximum power including bomber planes and massive infantry expeditions which however failed to restore government supremacy in the *awrajjas* of Wabe, Dallo and El-Kere until 1970. The rebels were able to control 3/5 of Bale and forced the government to declare the state of emergency in Bale and Borana regions 1966-1969 (Ketsela, 1971:22-23). Oral and written sources claim that more than three-quarters of Bale were under the control of the anti-government forces for over three years until 1970 (Informants: Aliyi Chiri, 2014). This struggle costed a huge resources at regional and national levels (Semu, 2020: 227-35; Tareke, 1996: 156).

Thirdly, the popular uprising in Bale was known as the *Sowra (Jan Adde)* War was a

serious treat Ethiopia’s territorial integrity 1974-1980. It was a culmination of cumulative grievance that forced the justice thirst people of Bale to ally with irredentists from Somalia to wage war against the central government. This war was averted with reversal of Somalia’s aggression inflicting a devastating cost on human lives and material resources. The quest for cultural freedom in Bale continued until the 1990s (Semu, 2020: 274-79).

It therefore evident that Bale province remained unstable for a century, 1891-1991. In line with the absence justice and stability, mobilizing human and material resources for socioeconomic development remained untenable. Thus, though Bale is one of the richest province of the country in terms of natural resources, it remained underdeveloped. The termination of customary legal system therefore had led to a series destructive wars that were opportunity cost of its development. Yet, the experience since 1991 implies value of indigenous wisdom in solving problems and using resources for development (Informant: Adem Tina, 2014; Qabato Fanjaja, 2018).

3.7. Significance of Indigenous Legal Practice: An Overview of the Case of *Gumaa*

A particular necessity for the revitalization of the Sikko-Mando *Gadaa* was the extraordinary value of the *gumaa* and some traditional laws surpassing the modern legal system on use in the country. According to Ahmad Galato, an *Abbaa Gadaa* from Arsi Zone who at the age half *gadaa* cycle successfully resolved 576 *gumaa* cases, *gumaa* successfully resolved cases that formal due process of law

¹⁸ NALAA, FN, 17.1.1.270.07 letter from Let. Colonel Lägässä Wäldä-Mariam, Minister, MOI to Lieutenant General Täfäri Banti, Chairman of Ethiopian Provisional Military Government and Chairman of the

Council of Ministers concerning Waqo Gutu and Issues in Dallo *Awrajja* of Bale Province, (written on *Tikimt* 9, 1968 E.C. pp. 1-4), p. 1.

failed. He stated the court punishes convicts but cannot avoid revenge afterwards. False witness, corruption and weakness of detectives led to mushrooming revenge by incriminated persons even after serving prison sentences (Informant: Ahmed Galato, 2018).

Gumaa, on the other hand, is an innate indigenous legal practice valued to protect all sides. It is both law of blood money and the process of resolving cases through it. The *gumaa* law concerns homicide, robbery, adultery, abduction, burning of house, insult and other crimes that violate laws endorsed by the *Caffee Gadaa*. *Gumaa* usually implies blood money paid to victims by relatives or by the defendant based on values decided by *caffee*, depending up on the condition and intent in which the crime was committed. Investigation of the intention behind a crime needs superb detective skills, knowledge of the customary laws and persuasive oratory to give justice, heal the heart of the victims and restore peace and security in the society (Informant: Ahmed Galato, 2018; Salviac, 1901: 214). Elders assigned to handling a *gumaa* case are selected for these abilities. Informants believe that *Waaqa* create persons with these skills in a society for this purpose. Therefore, elders who are assigned to the task of investigating *gumaa* case are known as “jaarsa gumaa fixu” (elders who resolve *gumaa* case). Their first task is to identify the type of *gumaa*, establish *gumaa* structure, then to recite *gumaa* law of the case and acquire consent of all parties. Thus, *gumaa* is effective and saves resources (Informants: Robe Mama, 2022; Adem Tina, 2018).

3.8. Some Contemporary Issues in the Revitalization of the Sikko-Mando Gadaa

As the *Gadaa* system is known for its adaptability to new socio-cultural development of

the society, the revitalization of Sikko-Mando *Gadaa* need to harmonize its self with Islam. Islam expanded to become religion of the majority of the Arsi Oromo. Islamic law (*Shari'a*) also came to replace much of the previous traditional codes in the society. The *hayyuu* therefore should enact the way how Muslims can comfortably practice the *gadaa* system without compromising their *din* (Islamic faith). In the *Gadaa* system *Waaqefannaa* religion headed by *Abbaa Muudaa* (chief *qaalluu*) used to play symbolic role in the power transfer ceremonies. It was however clear that most of the *gadaa* practices were age-grade based political and cultural duties and responsibilities. So, the spiritual aspect can be separated from socio-cultural and indigenous legal systems most desired from the *gadaa* system at the present. This was a key issue hesitating the notable of the Sikko-Mando to partake in the revitalization of the *gadaa* at Oda Roba in May 2018.

A closer look at Islamic societies of the World also show a boundary between their cultural identity and their *din* which governs their spiritual practice. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, the birth place of Islam, Arab's material and cultural value for camel herding pastoralism accounts for the growth of a number of traditions related to camel raring that flourished to the present. Also, there were similar pre-Christian traditions on practice among the Christian Oromo society. Since *Gadaa* system presently envisioned to be revitalized in Oromia is more of socio-cultural and legal values than its political and spiritual aspects, it can be readjusted to the dominant interest of the Arsi Oromo society. The Arsi *hayyuu* therefore should redesign the Sikko-Mando *Gadaa* as a secular practice (Informants: Gutama Nagesso; Ahmed Mohammed; Amino Eda'o, 2018).

The second issue is the contemporary spatial

settlement structure of the Sikko-Mando and accessibility of *dhadacha* (*gadaa* sub centers). After all, two of the former *dhadachas* are currently located within the Somali Region (see in Table 1), where the Arsi can no longer practice their *gadaa* safely. This requires nomination of new *gadaa* sub centers cognizant of the size of society and average distance for participants to attend it. Besides, the Arsi clans are settled in interspersed pattern with other Arsi clans far from their old center as well as other Oromo groups that live among the Arsi at the present. According to Arsi law, clans lived among the Arsi and accepted Arsi laws like that of *moggaasaa* (adoption) tradition can participate in the *gadaa* with adopting Arsi clan without any restriction. This should also be true for the Arsi Oromo who settled in territories of other Oromo groups. This would boost the social capital of the adopting clans, strengthen unity of the nation and pacify the intrigues that would arise from lack of representation and participation in the system known for its participatory values. The revitalization of the Sikko-Mando therefore requires new *seera* to making the *gadaa* compatible with Islam, contemporary social development of Arsi Oromo society, their settlement pattern, administrative and legal systems (Informants: Tusa Deti; Lenjiso Roba, 2018).

4. Conclusion

The Oromo in general and its Arsi branch in particular were denied of their *Gadaa* System, which was/is a comprehensive socio-economic and politico-cultural institution that governs all aspects of their livelihoods (Levine, 2000). Due to its suspension however sustainable socioeconomic, legal and cultural developments and political stability were far from being achieved in the region. The way out from this situation therefore was to reuse

indigenous systems and knowledge embedded in them. There have been scientific recommendations to revive the systems based on persistent public yearns to it demonstrated by struggles and heavy sacrifices for over 130 years. Particularly, the Arsi Oromo practiced a typical *Gadaa* System, which was a secret of their standing prowess, proud and free until their defeat mainly due to 'the firearm factor' in 1886. Subsequently, their *gadaa* was banned (Legesse 2000: 64). It is therefore apparent that equal to the importance these indigenous institutions, the way how to revitalize it, harmonize it with the contemporary systems and curb challenges it faces, needs thorough investigation and dissemination of findings to which this article committed (Informants: Adam Tina, 2014); Qabato Fanjaja, 2018).

The banishment of the Sikko-Mando *Gadaa* System had hampered the justice system of the Arsi Oromo, a key reason for its current revitalization. It was proved more effective in resolving homicide cases leading to re-venge than the modern legal procedures hampered by false testimonies and subjective judgements. Towards this end, there were some key issues that delayed the labor of its rebirth under Oda Roba in 2018. One was the forgetting of the keystones of its unique features such as its decentralization into twenty *dhadacha*, with further redevising into *yaa'a* and *bayima*, all strongly interconnected under *Caffee* Oda Roba. Next, descendants of the twelve Sikko-Mando were organized both agnatically and spatially to participate in five *gadaa* parties in their order of seniority as *Birmajii*, *Bultuma*, *Hoorata*, *Bahaara* and *Roobalee*. Lastly, *caffee* should secularize *gadaa*, restructure sub centers and inclusive of vital diversities the society. The reviving of the *gadaa* is in line with scientific recommendation for using indigenous institutions,

wisdoms and knowledge to curb crosscutting socio-economic and cultural issues facing the contemporary society. It also has strong social backing augmented by UNESCO's recognition to the *Gadaa* System as heritage of humanity in 2016 (Ibid).

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Key Informants

Adam Tina Jarra (*Ato*); *Age*, 56; *Place of Interview*, Bidire Town; *Date of Interview*, 25-06-2014; Arda Tarre, 10-05-2018; *Information*; rich data on *gadaa* laws enacted at Madda Walabu in the 16 Century, he authored a book on history and culture of Oromo in *Afan Oromo*.

Adam Tobe Yobo (*Haji*); *Age* 75; *Interview Date*, June 22, 2014; *Place of Interview*, Manna Town; *Residence*, Manna Town; *Information*; key data on the struggle with *naftägna* forces in Dallo and Wabe, invisible hands of Somalia in Oromo struggle in Bale, strategies of struggle and impacts.

Ahmed Galato Kawo (*Abba Gadaa*); *Age*, 42; *Place of Interview*, Arda Tarre; *Date of Interview*, 9/5/2018; *Information*; He knows about *gumaa* law of conflict resolution and his experience in resolving over 576 homicide cases. He knows *gadaa* laws and its practices.

Ahmed Mohamed Dheko (*Haji*); *Age*, 80; *Place of Interview*, Asalla; *Date of Interview*, 7/07/2017; *Information*; He knows detailed history of Oromo groups, their distribution and organization particularly the five major Oromo branches in East Africa of which only three, the Borana and Barntuma and some 'Sagaltamman Garbaa' live in Ethiopia. He knows

the *gadaa* of these three groups resemble because of its renewal at a time in the 16th C.

Aliyi Cirri Jarra (Coronel, *Haji*); *Age* 90; *Interview Date*, June 25, 2014; *Place of Interview*, Bidire Town; *Residence*, Bidire Town; *Information*; he remembers struggle against *naftägna* in Madda Walabu and Dallo, invisible hands of Somalia in Oromo struggle in Bale and leadership of the struggle.

Amino Eada'o Ogato (*Ato*); *Age*, 57; *Place of Interview*, Asalla; *Date of Interview*, 7/07/2017; *Information*; He knows about Oromo culture and social history. He studied his M.A. in Fine Arts and culture in the former socialist countries which helped him to know in detail about social organization of the Oromo such as the settlement pattern and *gadaa* practices.

_____. *Age*, 58; *Place of Interview*, Arda Tare (Gindhir District); *Date of Interview* 10/05/2018, *Information*, He narrates Arsi Oromo *Gadaa* centers in Arsi, Bale, West Arsi, and East Shawa Zones of Oromia with the number of clans and lineages attending each of them with procedures of *gadaa* rituals and duties of leaders.

Gutama Nagesso, *Abba Gadaa*); *Age* 35; *Place of Interview*, Gindhir Town; *Date of Interview*, 11/5/2018; *Information*; He knows the *gadaa* practice among the Sikko-Mando, its practices and its revived version recently in Arsi Zone, where he participated for 8 years.

Lenjiso Roba Bosone (*Abba Gadaa*); *Age* 47; *Place of Interview* Oda Roba; *Date of Interview* 13/5/2018; *Information*; He knows history of interaction between pastoralists in Eastern lowlands

(Wabe *Awraja*), *Gadaa* practice in the area, the expansion of the Somali in the area, *wayyoma* institution, *maganta*, *gayina*, *guddifacha*, and other customary laws originated from the *Gadaa* System.

Musa Roba Jarso (*Haji*); Age 64; *Interview Date*, June 22, 2014; *Place of Interview*, Manna Town; *Residence*, Manna Town; *Information*; Good data on struggle and he remember wars against näftägna in Dalla and Wabe, Oromo struggle in Somalia, strategies of struggle and impacts.

Qabato Fanjaja, (*Abba Gadaa*), Age 60; Arda Tarre, *Interview Date* 12/5/2018; *Information*; he knows the *gadaa* practice among the Sikko-Mando, its ritual practices and participated in its revived version recently in Arsi Zone.

Robe Mamma Jarra (*Abba-Gada*); Age 70; (first *Interview Date*, July 12, 2014; 25-03-2022; *Place of Interview*, Dodola Town; *Residence*, Dodola Town; *Information*; Very rich data on Arsi *gadaa*, *gumaa*, *gadaa* laws, role, power of *bokkuu*, *haokkaa* and participated in the revived *gadaa* in Dodola and he knows the detail of the *gumaa* process and *gadaa* festivals.

Tusa Deti (*Abba Gadaa*); Age 70; *Place of Interview* Arda Tarre; *Date of Interview*, 9/5/2018; *Information*; He knows resistance of the Arsi to Menelik's campaigns, Anole issue, impacts of the banishment of *gadaa* system, narrate the struggle the Arsi for cultural freedom...

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