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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BEYOND THE COMMONALITY AND EXPRESSION OF OROMO CIVILIZATION: THE MEDIATING
ROLE OF GADA SYSTEM FOR COMMONS MANAGEMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

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ABSTRACT

Natural resource management and documentation of indigenous knowledge as a means to ensure sustainable development is becoming both national and global agenda. The main purpose of the study is to examine the mediating role of indigenous Oromo *Gada* system in commons management of natural resources. In this study, this particular information gap is interrogated by systematically reviewing various literatures on the critical role of *Gada* system in institutionalization of natural resource management from a wealthy available literature. It is a meticulous conceptual analysis. The study revealed that *Gada* system played a significant role for the coexistence of peace, solidarity and unity among Oromo people towards democratization of nature conservation via development of different natural resource management institutions and by enacting different rules and regulations under the Oromo democratic institution: *Gada* system.

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INTRODUCTION

Governance of common pool resources has been a subject of debate relative to the role of state, individuals and collectives. The quest of maximization of the contribution of traditional institution in socio-political, economic and environmental perspectives are undermined in one or another way in developing countries for the sake of imposing a new institution that suits the needs of particular group. However, there is a need to place traditional institutions within the wider frames of governance for resource allocation, adaptation and negotiated solutions. However, "indigenous knowledge has been viewed as primitive, unscientific, irrational, unsystematic, imprecise, and pre-logical" (Kalbessa, 2001). Indeed, the role of traditional institutions for the commonly owned natural resource management has not been given generous attention among scholars, policy makers and government agencies. Human drivers of changes in natural resource management have been subject of intensive study for several decades. In an effort to 'govern the commons' (Dietz, Ostrom, and Stern, 2003 cited in Carlsson and Sandström, 2008), centralized systems are not suitable as a result of complexity of societal problems particularly in natural resource management.

Notwithstanding, institutions are not only organizations but also rules, regulations and positions that determine who gets 'what, when and how' (Denge, 2011). They were considered as a part of nature and acknowledged that their existence depends on it (Mushuku, 2014). Customary institutions are integral to the social safety nets and shared claims over productive assets that characterize pastoralist systems: a cornerstone of pastoralist resilience and risk management. Moreover, it is the way they share responsibility, resolve conflict, lead themselves and adapt to difficulties and comfort for the sustenance of their life. With their interaction with natural environment, Africans developed a variety of natural resource conservation and management strategies and regulation mechanism in the past (Shastri, 2002; Appiah-Opoku, 2007) where *Gada* system is the one. *Gada* system is a constitution of the Oromo society through which the society administered, defended their territory, maintained and developed their economy (Hinew, 2012).

It is also socio-economic, political and religious institution serving as the basis for the creation and institutionalization of a democratic political system, participation in military, political, legal and cultural affairs of Oromo's (Legesse, 1973; Baissa, 1994). They have their own unique views and beliefs to the nature and their surrounding environment. Oromo people particularly Borana pastoralists have a well-established traditional system of range and water management (Dalle

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et al., 2005). They use their indigenous knowledge to categorize landscapes not only in terms of seasons of use, but also in terms of grazing capacity (Oba and Kotile, 2001). The Borana Oromo has been effective over generations in producing animal products while maintaining rangeland resources (Pratt and Gwynne, 1977; Helland, 1997) and maintained genetically diverse stock matching with nature (Coppock, 1994). However, the democratic management of natural resource at grass root level did not get the attention of scholars even though studied in different perspectives. The study is scant (Baissa, 1994; Legesse, 1973; Helland, 1980; Helland, 1998; Keller, 1995; Dalle, 2005; Mergo, 2014) on the mediating role of Gada system in commons management of natural resource management as the socio-cultural, religious and political institutions among Oromo's. Thus, the paper intends to synthesize the role of the Oromo Gada system in commons management of natural resource through rigorous review of literature. Beyond its social, cultural and political role, Gada system is the main pillar for natural resource management and fair distribution of these resources within its broad institutional arrangements for this purpose.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article tries to discuss the mediating role of Gada system for Commons Management of natural resource rather than merely describe it. Conceptual analysis was used as a method of data analysis and interpretation. In order to synthesize literature, firstly multidisciplinary literatures on the role of traditional institutions for commons management of natural resources were reviewed: various literatures on natural resource management that the study reviews belongs to various bodies of knowledge. Therefore, the study reviews journals and books in fields that cover indigenous knowledge and natural resource management. Most of the reviewed books and articles were published in English related to commons management, natural resource management and particularly to Gada system of Governance of nature. And then recognition of patterns in seemingly random information within the results of the first steps by looking for similarities or patterns within the sample and codes the results according to categories of meaning were done.

Additionally, categories with similar meanings and themes and creating independent concepts where each concept has distinctive meanings were synthesized. And finally, the relationship between indigenous institutions and natural resource management were conceptualized in order to describe the relationship among the derived concepts. As a result, detailed description of what was observed and a sense of why that was important was carried out throughout the study. Gada System: A Building Block for Natural Resource Management? Unlimited use of common pool resources continues to be a major cause of biodiversity loss despite the key role traditional leadership plays in enforcing natural resource management rules and strategies (Wilson *et al.*, 2006; Marks, 2009 cited in Nyirenda, 2015). And the tragedy of the commons arises when it is difficult and costly to exclude potential users from common pool resources that yield different benefits (Nyirenda, 2015). Biodiversity loss, deforestation and poverty have long been concerns in developing countries (Weiland and

Dedeurwaerdere, 2010). This may be due to inappropriate legislation, regulation and incentives to promote sustainable governance of natural resources. Besides, under utilization of indigenous knowledge and institutions; their roles in sustainable development were undermined and marginalized. However, Pastoralists have adapted to the uncertainty of the natural environment; flexibility (being mobile) and temporal flexibility (having variable herd sizes and risk management strategies) through their traditional institutions. These institutions govern mobility, resource use and redistribution, and have enabled pastoralist societies to withstand extreme pressures of both their environment and their competitors. Moreover, traditional leadership, beliefs, customs, taboos and folk tales are used as traditional mechanism for scaring people from loss of common property (Warren, 1991).

They are rooted in the community, upward decision making, dynamic, flexible and responsive to societal and environmental change so as to promote sustainability (Dixon and Wood, 2007). Thus, an effective traditional authority system contributes to the mutual co-existence and balance between human being and his environment. Furthermore, a locally developed institution reckoned as an adaptive solution to resource management problems at grass root level even though they are ignored in different conditions. There is evidence that the community can be able to manage common pool resources sustainably using a broad array of institutional arrangements (Ostrom, 1990, Baland and Platteau, 1996, Agrawal, 2002). However, integrated approaches, strong functional network, and participatory traditional leadership are important for successful biodiversity conservation among different actors (Nyirenda, 2015). Likewise, the Borana Oromo Gada system is the oldest and living traditional socio-political, religious, cultural and environmental institutions by which Borana Oromo and other Oromo people used to manage the Common Pool Resources. Borana Oromo has a different institution for different resource: they have institution for the democratic management of waste, pastures and others under Gada system (Angassa and Beyene, 2003; Helland, 1998; Legesse, 1973). Under the Borana Gada system, every aspect of pastoral livelihoods (access to and management of rangeland and water wells, seasonal mobility, conflict management and mutual assistances) are governed by Gada system led by Aba Gada with strong hierarchical structures, kinships and social ties have been central in enforcing the Gada's decisions. The Gada customary codes were thus the backbone of the long standing communal resource use and management systems of the Borana Oromo.

Gada system sanctions different strategies that Borana institutions at all levels adopt to restrict access to parts of the pasture in their jurisdiction. These strategies include calf-reserves, buffers between villages, and wells, the territorial separation of livestock within a herd, and others. Forests were managed flexibly within the general natural resource management framework of the Borana Oromo (Tache and Irwin, 2003). Surprisingly, forests are different things to Borana Oromo people; a dry season grazing reserve, a source of wild food, a place where ritual practices are takes place, and a place of refugee at the times of war. Besides, they use different trees for different purposes particularly for ritual

activities; branches and leaves of certain trees or shrubs collected for Hulluqoo: a ritual conducted for the well being of the people, livestock and the environment (Tachu and Irwin, 2011). According to Kelbessa (2001) different trees have different meanings to Oromo with a great respect for these plant species in every day social, political, religious and environmental aspects of the Oromo people. For instance, Kelbessa revealed that Birbirsa (*Podocarpus gracilior* Jalcatus), Laaftoo, Garbii (*Acacia albida*), Harbuu (*Ficus sur*), Qilxuu; the Oroma flavor (*Ficus vasta*), Ejersa, Mi'eessaa (*Prunus africana*), Gaattiraa (*Juniperus procera*), Hoomii (*Pygeum africanum*), Somboo (*Ekeberigia capensis*), considered as sacred grove (Dakkii trees).

Accordingly Kalbessa quoted,

“Birbirsa is associated with the Gadaa system. The Oromo use Birbirsa as a pillar and put green leaves under it so as to appease or propitiate their Ayyaanaa. It needs to be covered by Jaawwii (red cloth) and a ram should be sacrificed under it. Laaftoo is not a callous tree; it is rather simple and soft. Harbuu is chosen for it has a kind of breast that produces milk, and has fruits. Similarly, Qilxuu has breast and capable of producing milk. Ejersa is one of the respected Bokkuu trees. It is forbidden to cut Dakkii trees. The inhabitants in any way could not utilize them. The Oromo sacrifice domestic animals under Dakkii trees to maintain peace and to avoid diseases. Dakkii trees have also another advantage—the Oromo climb these trees and control the movement of enemies from a distance.”(2001).

Moreover, Gada and other Oromo rituals are performed under oadaa (Sycamore tree); the site is protected in a fully natural state (Hinew, 2012; Kalbessa, 2001; Hann *et al.*, 2008; Legesse, 1973; Jalata, 2010). Besides the ritual activities, the sycamore tree (odaa) is a place where political, religious and social gatherings undertaken and serving as the symbol of Oromo identity. The myth claims Odaa had been a tree under which Waaqaa (God) re-established his relation and revealed the laws; domicile of natural spirit and scarification were mainly for rain, fertility and success in socio-economic, political and religious matters of Oromo (Hinew, 2012).

Both Gada system and nature are interdependent in spite of independent movement of Gada system and natural resource management. Despite ritual practices, socio-economic, political and military role of Gada governance for nature conservation, Gada leaders sometimes dependent of the natural resource management institutions for the proper functioning of the system and to have a direct access to the community at grass root level (Legesse, 1973) because the daily operation of range land management and well administration have very significant contribution in the life of Borana Oromo. Decentralization of Commons Management of Natural Resource Management in Gada System: A Gada Model Natural resource management among Borana Oromo is based on democratic system of Gada system (developed in strict association with the natural resources for pastoral livelihoods): democratic selection of leadership; training through ritual activity; formation of law; participatory and transparent decision making in different assemblies. Having defined

administrative units at different level helps the traditional communities in decentralization of governance, equitable access to resources, and development of solidarity among people. In addition to range resource management, Borana Oromo has unique administrative and social units at different level ranging from lowest social unit-Olla (neighbor) to the highest Pan Borana Assembly –Gumi Gayo in order to manage the Range land (Figure 1).

Grazing management is tightly controlled by customary Gada system and other institutions for natural resource management under Gada system with the setting of aside pasture buffer zones, preserving water resources, protecting trees, and ensuring that pasture self-seeds before it is grazed. Several natural resource management institutions under the Borana Gada system are conceptualized in the Figure 1 below. Decentralized governance is superior to centralized governance regarding the improvement of the quality of public management and the responsiveness to people's needs. There are eight (8) natural resource institutions particularly to Water and range land management under Gada system of Borana summarized under Figure 1 below. Each of level of organization corresponds to a level of organization from micro to macro level of Borana organization (Abbaa warraa at micro level and Gumi Gayo at macro level).

At the top of the natural resource management under Gada system of Borana Oromo is Gumi Gayo (Pan Oromo Legislative Assembly) which reviews the directions for good governance of Entire Borana Society and law maker. Gumi Gayo is vested with the powers of legislature, undertakes law reforms, reiterates old laws and enacts new ones convened by high-ranking Gada officials; the assembly serves as a dominant authority uniting the Borana into a political and social entity (Wako, 1997). Additionally, via the appointee and election of pan Oromo legislative assembly, Aba Gada is responsible to coordinate and manage the institutions for range land management and access to water besides its main function in Gada democratic Governance. Abbaa Herreegaa (well administration) is responsible for management of wells appointed by Abba Gada (Hann *et al.*, 2008; Legesse, 1973; Watson, 2003). Jaarsa Ardaa (encampment Elders) composed of several elders' encampments (ollaa) is responsible for the management of encampments. Additionally, Jaarsa Dheedaa (additional assemblies of elders for grazing) is responsible for coordination of the access of cattle to shared seasonal grazing areas. On the other hand, Jaarsa Maddaa (special assemblies of Elders for nearby well) is responsible for the coordination of each well with the use of adjacent pasture and assembly during emergency at clan level/local.

At micro level, another institution :Abbaa Ollaa(head of encampment) is a smallest level of settlement usually 30 to 100 Abbaa warraa's; composed of head of households is responsible for the affairs of encampment at its initial stage and decides when and where to move cattle (Watson, 2001). Besides, Jaallabaa (messengers) and conveners (Abbaa Qe'ee) are responsible body for emergency for ad hoc meeting for solutions to problems. More over there is Jaarsa Hayyuu (counselor) who are responsible for mediation between institutions appointed by special clans; an individual who hold

ritual authority to judge (Hann *et al.*, 2008; Watson, 2003). Well Complexes of Borana are in fact, a central feature of their collective life. Indeed, the critical link between the Gada leadership and clans appear to be the well, or rather the man who is known as the owner of the father of well. Abba Gada in power solicits the cooperation and assistance of numerous Abba Elaa (father of Well) in an effort to get maximum participation of clan in Gada activity (Legesse, 1973). Well administration and Gada system has a two way relationship with one can affect the other: a means for Gada leader to coordinate and control the clans at clan level and the well administrator supports the democratic good governance of the Gada leaders for their direct contact with the clan. As a result, well strengthen the democratic governance in Gada system by serving as a link between Gada leadership and clan. Aba Gada uses well officer as an intermediary in pursuing offenders who are unwilling to submit to the authority of Gada councils whenever a need arises. However, Legesse wrote “the excavation of well is a ritual act with the far reaching historical implication of making Borana fertile predicted upon cyclical historical antecedents” (Legesse, 1973).

based on the current and past events of the nature. *Gada* grades have different name in different place in Oromo while each *Gada* grade has very unique features. For instance according to Kelbessa (2001), the five *Gada* grades called *Roobalee*, *Birmajii*, *Horataa*, *Michillee* and *Duuloo* around Ambo respectively. The first *Gada* grade, *Roobalee* is believed to have heavy rainfall and it is characterized by a time when people plant many trees; it is full of happiness and prosperity.

In the second *Gada* grade (*Birmajii*), there are many singers which believed to be economically not terrible. However, animals are believed to breed well in *Horataa* (the third *Gada* grade). It is full of happiness. The fourth Grade (*Michillee*) is believed to be a friend of war when Individuals fight and kill one another. Consecutively, the last *Gada* grade, *Duuloo*, is full of war and famine called by another name n "*bututtuu*"--tatter. In spite of the last two grades (*Michillee* and *Duuloo*), under *Horataa* and *Roobalee* the natural environment is protected and plantation of tree is common along the availability of sufficient amount of rain.

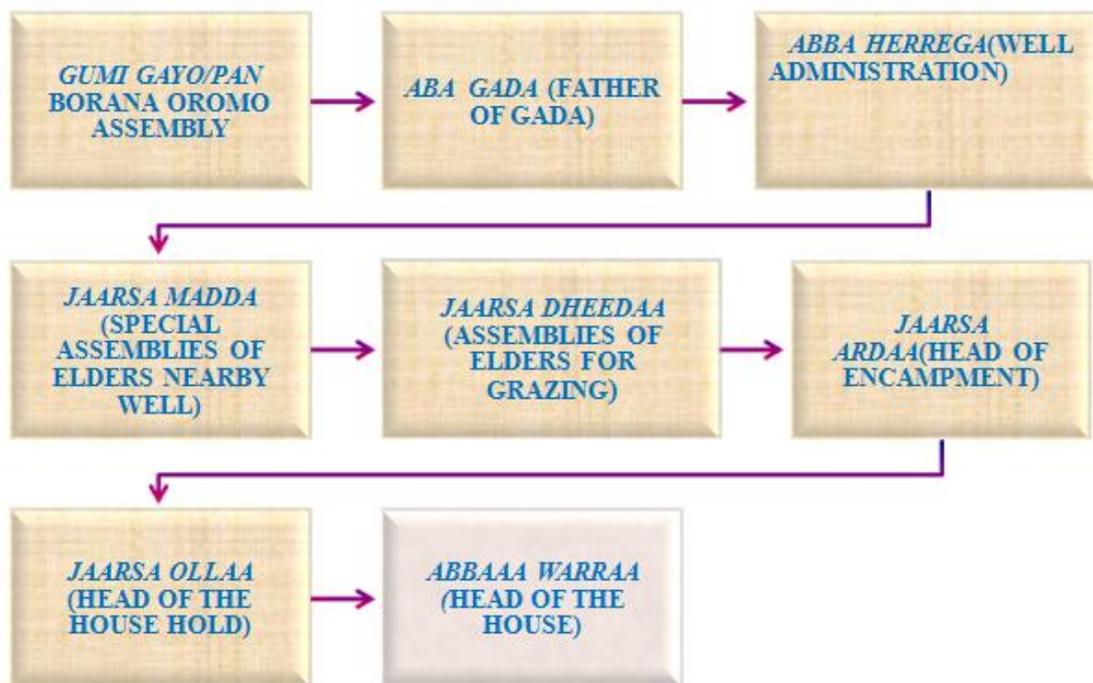


Figure 1. Natural Resource institutions and their hierarchy under Borana Oromo Gada system

All individual and household water rights are deemed legitimate only within the *culture of Borana*. This gives the water code a tribal identity and an ownership. The *Herreegaa* system has strong elements of community mobilization and involvement, making it truly participatory. Water resources and pasture are owned by those people developed it with an obligation to share water during the development of the well (Watson, 2003) where sharing of access to water and pasture is considered as an ethical obligation and seen as an ‘insurance’ for the future which will be returned during the time of stress among Borana (Pavanello and Levine, 2011). Furthermore, Oromo pastoralists have a unique management of water resources. *Gada* system is not the only way for natural resource management but also the way they predict their future

Moreover, Borana has a land reserved for abnormal dry seasons where the decision is made by *Dheedaa council*, and herd diversification to reduce the impact of drought on the entire herd (Angassa and Beyene, 2003). Moreover, there are there special meetings for efficient coordination of natural resource management and distribution: *Kora Dheedaa* (annual meetings to plan the re-partitioning of the rainy season pastures); *Kora Deebanu* (the clan based convocation after a drought for the rehabilitation of deprived clan mates) and at macro level *Gumi Gayo*: the pan Borana assembly for the revision of rules and regulations every eight years (Hann *et al.*, 2008). They used the limited availability of permanent water at the traditional deep wells in the central area as a key variable in determining the rules for the utilization of surrounding

pastures. Through flexible natural resource use strategies and stratified herd management they matched the livestock with the available grazing and water resources times of abundance and scarcity (Homann, 2008). For scarce resource particularly water resource, the discussion for its distribution, watering schedules, labor requirements and maintenance of wells, is determined by well council and it is the legitimate expression of Borana jurisprudence (Helland, 1998). Besides fair distribution of resources, traditional institutions are the way to strengthen the society's intimate connection to the natural environment driven by their beliefs, behaviors and cultures for sustainable natural resource management (Rist *et al.*, 2003). Despite little attention by government, indigenous institutions play a crucial role in shaping community identity, values and norms in the sustainable exploitation of natural resources. *Moreover,*

"The defining features of Borana range management institutions are indigenous knowledge, equitable access, and decentralization of governance, principles of subsidiary, distributive and redistributive mechanisms and environmental sustainability"

(Doyo : 2009). Oromo people have long relied on a particularly strong body of institutions, *Gada*, to guide social organization, livelihoods and the management of natural resources and conflict (Desalegn *et al.*, 2007; Watson, 2001) and have a strong culture of planning around the use of natural resources (Pavanello and Levine, 2011) which can be supported by Oromo proverbs quoted in (Pavanello and Levine, 2011) "Before you load the camel, you have to plan for what it can bear" (*'Waan lafatatti falan, gaalatti fehan'*).

The management of common pool resources is presented as a collective action dilemma; the users of natural resources may not manage it effectively without rules that force individuals for conservation choices (Olson, 1965; Hardin, 1968). Consequently, some authors argued that the most common solutions to common dilemma are through the state (via regulations) or through the market (by allocating property rights). However, a large amount of evidence (Dietz *et al.*, 2003; Gibson *et al.*, 2002) opposed these solutions for its incapable of preventing the over-use of natural resources. Perhaps, the lack of this kind of participation in making and implementing statutory laws is what makes them largely unacceptable by various segments of populations (Marani, 2012). In spite of statutory laws, traditional institutions and mechanisms have a significant contribution to biodiversity contribution via indigenous knowledge system and sustainable participatory conflict management system on the usage of natural resources.

Despite the tragedy of commons (Harding, 1968), prisoners dilemma of strategic Choice (Wagner, 1983) and Logic of Collective action (Olson, 1971), *Gada* Model contributed by Oromo people can be a solution if a sufficient attention is given to the system effectiveness and decentralization process. Before centuries, Oromo people had applied even the solutions to problems described as "a free rider problem" (Ostron, 1965) by grouping people at different level ('small group of small group') starting from the family at micro level to the highest

pan Oromo assembly (*Gumi Gayo*) in the progress of commons management of nature.

Commons Management and *Gada* system among Borana Oromo

"Men journey together with a view to particular advantage and by way of providing some particular thing needed for the purposes of life, andseems to have come together originally, and to continue in existence, for the sake of the *general* advantages it brings." (Aristotle cited in Olson, 2002). Communities with an important intense interconnectivity between its members are better equipped to generate and sustain collective action (Six *et al.*, 2015). During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when various peoples were fighting over economic resources in the Horn of Africa, the Oromo were effectively organized under the *Gada* institution for both offensive and defensive wars (Asafa, 2010). Indeed, Borana range land presents an exceptionally efficient and well managed dry land areas (Garse, 1999; Watson, 2001; Scoones, 1994) due to the indigenous knowledge of Borana, richness of natural resources, the wealth of Borana institutions and their capacity to regulate access to resources (Watson, 2001). And the strong interaction among multiple institutions; effective channel of communication; check and balance and transparency within *Gada* system is the secret achievement within the centuries.

Gada system as a democratic system of governance started before the European and American democracy (Holcomb, 1991). Furthermore, heritage plays a role of diplomatic relationship between human and non human actors who are engaged in practices of conserving and attending to the past in the present while assembling the future (Harrison, 2015). And Harrison argued that heritage and other social, political and environmental issues are interconnected in fundamental and complex ways. Indeed, traditional institutions are important in mobilization and regulation of resources in order to maintain long term use (Uphoff, 1992; Mowo *et al.*, 2013) and sustainable use of natural resources are determined by the strength of local institutions for rational management (William, 1995). Moreover, traditional practices are important in responding to ecosystem dynamics, managing environmental variability and to secure a flow of biological resources (Colding *et al.*, 2003).

Water, Forest, and Pasture are a common property among Borana Oromo (Tache and Irwin, 2003). The ethos of common property resource management and communal ownership is deep rooted among the Borana Oromo. Land, the ultimate provider and source of livelihoods, is the property of the whole society, and is collectively owned, defended and managed. Major resources (such as particular water sources) do belong to given clans; however, they are accessible to non-clan affiliates as well, worked out through webs of arrangements stemming from social structures and kinship organizations. The concept of common property ('we' and 'Our') predominantly characterizes the Borana conversations which indicate the philosophy of collective resource ownership (Helland, 1982; Coppock, 1994). For instance, the collective ownership of resources can be expressed in terms of well ownership with in

a clan i.e. The Borana have an elaborate well centered system of clan association through which other (associated) clans can claim right of access to wells other than their own. It defines not only those who are entitled to access certain wells, but also the order of priority for watering animals among those with entitlement. Well are not the only economic resources of Borana Oromo but also the central institutions by which the society is organized and moreover it is a symbolic representation of Borana (Tache, 2010).

Moreover, management of water as a common property resource in Borana remains relatively intact up to today (Tache and Irwin, 2011). For Borana natural resources are common property in spite of an specific provisions based on the principles of exclusion/inclusion for the assurance of balanced and sustainable use of natural resources called the 'law of pasture and water'; *Seera Marraa Bisaanii* (Bassi and Tache, 2003). Additionally, Harrison (2015) argued that "cultural" heritages are connected with "natural" heritage concerns; "the environment" comes to be seen as a "social" issue as much as it does a "natural" one. Nonetheless, heritage has simultaneously, through its infiltration of almost every part of our lives, become an important language by which people globally attribute value and express a sense of care for special objects, places, and practices. As a result, the common attributes and values attached to the environment via their daily interaction, affiliation they had to these resources; spiritual attachment they had with it and traditional institutions in relation developed in line with nature are the common attributes that makes the *Gada* system successful in range land and water resource management in addition to other natural resources.

Conclusion

A community that has inherited a substantial stock of customary laws will generate more voluntary cooperation. Being a socio-cultural, economic, political and military institution for Oromo throughout the centuries, *Gada* system plays a significant role in mediating the society and natural resources in a variety of ways. One of the ways in which *Gada* system mediate the Oromo people and nature is, the system's dependency on nature where ritual activities takes place, a place of refuge at the time of war, a source of food, and by being the identity to the Oromo people (For instance, *Oda* tree is a symbol of Oromo people which is visible on their flag). On the other hand, *Gada* system developed a variety of democratized and decentralized institutions under its control for the sake of managing resources and solving conflicts. Moreover, the *Aba Gada's* used those traditional natural resource management institutions to have a control of the community and served as a channel of communication in their daily life between *Aba Gada* and the community at grass root level. As a result, *Gada* system is a mediator for natural resource management commonly owned by Oromo People.

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