
Introduction

A Long-Term Study of an African Democratic Institution

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1 Key Elements of the Political History of the Oromo

Although this book is motivated by the principle of restitution, the story of *gadaa* provides a unique and well-documented case of the endogenous revaluation of customary institutions, which has occurred independently of international law on Indigenous peoples. It offers outstanding potential as a mechanism for protecting the common resources of local communities and peoples in Ethiopia. This case deserves full global and comparative attention, and it is therefore considered beneficial to provide a concise contextual overview for non-specialist readers, even at the risk of oversimplifying complex and controversial issues. Ethiopia is a multi-ethnic and multi-national state. Trustworthy evaluations have identified over 80 languages, spoken by groups with a wide range of demographic sizes, yet each is linked to identifiable and clearly defined territorial areas.

The country is also known for its ancient tradition of writing in a South Arabian script associated with the Ge'ez language, which was probably spoken in ancient Axum. This script was inscribed on artefacts found at archaeological sites and on coins during a period from the 1st to the 7th century BC. Ge'ez belongs to the group of Semitic languages of Ethiopia. Likely starting from the 4th century AD, Coptic-Egyptian monasticism was present in the Ethiopian highlands. The Church adopted and transmitted Ge'ez as a liturgical language. Over time, the Ge'ez script was adapted for Tigrinya and Amharic, the two main Semitic languages spoken today in the northern and central parts of the Ethiopian highlands, respectively. These areas, characterised by archaeological monuments and churches and ancient state formations, have historically been referred to as Abyssinia. This term does not correspond to modern Ethiopia. The name 'Ethiopia' has been used since ancient Greek times for broad and indeterminate areas of sub-Saharan Africa and was only applied to the modern Ethiopian empire from the 19th century, concurrently built with the establishment of European colonial empires in the region.

Due to the characteristics described, in Europe, Abyssinia was regarded as a distinct region within sub-Saharan Africa, yet those same features engendered a pronounced ethnic hierarchy.

Indeed, only the Amharic and Tigrinya-speaking groups could claim the Christian tradition and the symbolic connection to ancient civilisations. This allowed them to establish diplomatic relations and alliances with the burgeoning colonial powers. Other ethnic components of the region were linked to Islam and the Arabic script, while the majority of ethnic or national groups in present-day Ethiopia remained marginalised as illiterate, passive subjects of the colonial and imperial construction process, yet politically independent until the colonial era.

The ethnic hierarchies established with the formation of the modern Ethiopian empire have significantly influenced scholarly production and narratives on the diverse peoples of Ethiopia even throughout the 20th century. This asymmetry has been depicted by Gemetchu Megerssa and Aneesa Kassam in terms of a "Euro-Abyssinian colonising structure" (Megerssa 1993; Megerssa, Kassam 2019, ch. 1).

In the field of historical studies, written sources, produced in the Abyssinian context, carried a biased view of events, and very negative representations of both the Islamic and Oromo components (Jalata 1996; Ta'a 2004). The strong dominance of Abyssinian intellectuals in Addis Ababa University prevented the adoption of the new historical methodologies based on oral sources, which since the 1960s in other parts of Africa had enabled the recovery of the history of the various peoples with an oral culture (Vansina 1985; Triulzi 1977). Equally absent was archaeological research designed to supplement the absence of written sources, focused on the recent past and sites

of low visual or symbolic impact. The classical approach of research on monumental sites has continued to be privileged.

Despite lacking a writing tradition, the Oromo are the largest nation in Eastern Africa. They speak a language from the Eastern Cushitic group. They are mainly concentrated in central, western, eastern, and southern Ethiopia, with extensions into the Kenyan lowlands and north-central Ethiopia. In the absence of solid archaeological research, the ancient history of the Oromo remains contentious. For Abyssinian historians, the challenge was to explain how, at the dawn of the colonial period in the early 19th century, there was such an extensive and compact presence of Oromo across large parts of the highlands, which were supposed to be the territory of a strong and long-established state formation. The mainstream reconstruction of the ancient history of the Oromo is based on Ge'ez sources and can be described as Euro-Amhara-centric. The Oromo – then called 'Galla' by Abyssinians – are depicted as 'hordes' that, from the 16th century, began invading from the south and southeast the Christian areas of the central and then western Ethiopian highlands, where the Christian kingdoms had been severely weakened by prolonged wars with the Adal Sultanate. These sources cite two elements to explain the military success of the Oromo and the dilemma of the Christian defeat: the use of formidable cavalry and the military mobilisation capacity achieved through the *gadaa* system.

This reconstruction has been contested by Oromo historians and intellectuals. Utilising various combinations of historical methods, including oral sources, toponymy, and written sources in Arabic, they concur with the view that the Oromo were already present on the highlands several centuries before the 16th, but had been displaced at various stages by the Abyssinian expansion. From this perspective, the military efficacy of the *gadaa* institution, as reported in Ge'ez sources, would be the result of a reorganisation, or re-foundation, occurring in the 16th century to reclaim lost territories, where, however, the population already spoke Oromo or other non-Semitic languages (Bulcha 2011; Hassan 2015).

Several variants can be identified about the reconquest model. One of these refers to the existence of a single *gadaa* centre for all the Oromo, at least at the time of the 16th century expansion or reconquest (Melbaa 1980, 1999; Jalata 1993; Baissa 2004; Jalata 2012). It was only from the end of the 17th century, with the fragmentation due to the vastness of the territories, that several *gadaa* centres were established. A second perspective is provided by the anthropologists Megerssa and Kassam, who concur with several other sources in designating North Ethiopia as the ancestral land of the Oromo people. They portray the ancient Oromo as constituting a 'proto-federal' state, where legitimacy is derived from the *Abbaa Muudaa* ('Father of the Pilgrimage'), a hereditary figure who acts as the guardian of the

'cardinal laws'. The *Abbaa Muudaa's* residence, *Yaa'a Bal'oo*, serves as the political-religious centre of the entire Oromo polity (Megerssa, Kassam 2019, 56). "Self-governing" territorial groups take on the implementation of these cardinal laws, through "a series of nested assemblies that fall under the institution of the Gadaa and its law-making conventions" (Megerssa, Kassam 2019, 55). A ritual pilgrimage to the religious leader, which includes the delivery of a 'tribute', marks the connection to the religious centre. This pilgrimage symbolises inclusion in the Peace of the Oromo. Megerssa and Kassam suggest that the location of the ritual centre has changed several times. They propose that its establishment near Lake Tana and the Blue Nile dates back to the 6th century AD. Between the 6th and 10th centuries, the Christians' early expansion forced the Oromo to move it to the sacred spring of Finfinne (within the current capital city of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa), only for them to be displaced again around the 12th century due to Christian and Muslim military pressures. After a hiatus, they re-established it in the southeast at *Odaa Robaa*, and then, from the mid-1450s, at *Maddaa Walaabuu*, where it stayed until Menelik II's 19th-century conquest (Megerssa, Kassam 2019, 56, 252). According to the two anthropologists the Oromo have also repeatedly redesigned the territorial sections, each with its own *gadaa* organisation, in response to contingencies, engaging in "processes of fission and fusion, assimilation of other Cushitic-speaking groups, and forming alliances with non-Cushitic groups" (Megerssa, Kassam 2019, 54). According to the authors, before annexation to the Ethiopian empire, the Oromo were organised into five *gadaa* territorial groups (*gadaa shanan*, the 'five *gadaa*'), rotating the responsibility "of hosting and protecting the political-religious centre" among different sections at each change of *jaatama* (Megerssa, Kassam 2019, 221).

Megerssa and Kassam make large use of Oromo oral sources, drawing time references from the Oromo's complex system of time and history reckoning. Chikage Oba-Smith (2016) suggests that the cyclical conception of time among the Oromo provides an outstanding mnemonic device for transmitting historical events, going far beyond the period previously considered reasonable for deeming the content of oral historical traditions as reliable. Gufu Oba, Waktole Tiki and TerjeTvedt have successfully compared the content of oral history based on the *gadaa* periodisation with environmental proxy indicators for East Africa over the last 600 years (Oba, Tiki, Tvedt 2013; Oba 2017, 125-36; Oba 2024, 33-4, 53-8).

The eight-year *gadaa* period serves as the basic unit of historical record, corresponding to the time a specific generational class undertakes the responsibilities associated with the *gadaa* grade, consisting of conducting rituals and fulfilling other duties for the wellbeing of the whole community. Currently, among the Guji, the Karrayyuu, the Borana, and the Gabra Oromo the generational class's main leader

is called *abbaa gadaa*, literally the ‘father’ of the *gadaa* period. Oral historians remember each *gadaa* period by the name of the *abbaa gadaa* in charge. At birth, each individual joins the fifth generational class after his father’s, resulting in the formation of five lines of generational classes, known as *gogeessa*, rotating one after the other in the *gadaa* grade, every eight years. The same patriline regains power after five *gadaa* periods, making a 40-year historical cycle. The generational classes also follow seven cyclical names, *maqaabaasa*. A *maqaabaasa* name returns to power after seven *gadaa* periods or 56 years. These two cycles combine to mark the return of the same patriline to power with the same *maqaabaasa* name after the 40-year *gogeessa* cycle has elapsed seven times, equating to 280 years (Legesse 1973). Moreover, Megerssa and Kassam identify the *jaatama* cycle, consisting of nine repetitions of the 40-year *gogeessa* cycle, totalling 360 years. This corresponds to an historical era, whose transition is marked by social and political crises (Megerssa, Kassam 2019, 155).

Megerssa and Kassam diverge from previous interpretations by emphasising the *abbaa muudaa* as the unifying symbol across the entire Oromo polity, in contrast to the *abbaa gadaa* (Megerssa, Kassam 2019, 220), or the *abbaa bokkuu* (father of the ‘sceptre’), as this leader is known in other Oromo territorial sections of the Oromo. This distinction is noteworthy since the model appears to have been replicated on a smaller scale after the annexation of the Oromo into the Ethiopian modern empire and the inherent collapse of the long-distance Oromo pilgrimage. Among the contemporary Guji and Borana Oromo in southern Ethiopia, the *muudaa* (pilgrimage) to the *qaalluu* (hereditary dignitaries) is still practised.¹ The Guji maintain three *gadaa* centres, each with its officers elected to oversee different territorial divisions, under the guidance of a single *qaalluu* (Hinnant 1978; Berisso 2004). In each *gadaa* period, the three *abbaa gadaa* embark on an internal pilgrimage (*muudaa*) to the *qaalluu* (Van De Loo 1991, 53-61). As discussed in Chapters 1.5 and 6.2 of this book, the Borana present a slight variation, operating a single *gadaa* system that spans the entire territory, with two main *qaalluu*, one for each Borana moiety. The *abbaa gadaa* are three to accommodate relative autonomy by two of the clans that share the same territory as the other Borana. During every *gadaa* period, the Borana’s three *abbaa gadaa*, alongside other officials from the *gadaa* centre, undertake the internal *muudaa* to their respective moiety’s *qaalluu*. These pilgrimages have historically symbolised inclusion into the *Nagaa Booranaa* (Peace of the Borana), extended to non-Oromo groups, fostering alliances (Schlee 2007).

¹ On occasion of the ritual pilgrimages the *qaalluu* is called *abbaa muudaa*.

1.1 The Construction of Modern Ethiopia

Irrespective of its more ancient phases, modern Ethiopia has emerged from a military expansion undertaken by Menelik II in the second half of the 19th century. This expansion occurred concurrently with the construction of European colonial empires in Africa (Holcomb, Ibssa 1990). By the early 19th century, Abyssinia was divided into several small kingdoms whose rulers (*negus*) competed for the title of *Negus Neghesti* (King of Kings). This title symbolically sought to re-establish Abyssinia's continuity with the ancient kingdom of Axum. The rivalry was particularly intense between the Tigrinya monarchs in the north and the Amhara monarchs further south.

The transformations that swept across the African continent during the 19th century were profound, affecting the region extensively. By the early part of the century, small Oromo kingdoms had begun to emerge in the region surrounding the Gibe River, situated to the southwest of the Ethiopian Highlands. These kingdoms replaced the traditional *gadaa* system within these delimited territories (H. Lewis 1965; Gemedda 1996).

Menelik II, the Amhara king of Shewa since 1866, was highly effective in acquiring significant quantities of firearms through the traditional practice of engaging in the slave trade, but also by establishing diplomatic relations with various regional powers, including the Italians (Bulcha 1988). The latter were hoping to exploit internal Abyssinian rivalry for their colonial aspirations in the Tigrean-dominated areas. Following his coronation, Menelik II leveraged the advantage provided by the availability of firearms to secure the support of Oromo kings and Oromo leaders in the western and southwestern highlands, including some former *gadaa* leaders (Gemedda 1996; Bassi, Gemerssa 2008; Ta'a 2004). Through a strategy of alliances and conquest, he gained control over large portions of the highland territories inhabited by the Oromo. The combination of material and human resources mobilised in these new territories (Tegenu 1996), alongside modern military support from the French and Russians, was crucial in countering Italian colonial ambitions in Ethiopia and in defeating them at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. The Battle of Adwa and the claim to an ancient tradition of literacy and Christianity earned Menelik II full recognition among the European colonial powers to govern a sovereign state in Africa. Thanks to the powerful army assembled for the Battle of Adwa, he was able to initiate military campaigns that, in the last years of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th, allowed him to expand into the southwest, east, and south of the country, and to negotiate the borders of the new imperial formation with other expanding European powers.

1.2 Domestic Colonialism and the Decline of *Gadaa*

The construction of modern Ethiopia is thus closely linked to the broader process of European colonial expansion. However, it is primarily the ethnic hierarchies that characterised imperial Ethiopia that have retrospectively led Ethiopian intellectuals in the diaspora to adopt the concept of ‘domestic’, ‘internal’, ‘dependent’, ‘feudal’, or ‘settler’ colonialism by (Bulcha 1988; Holcomb, Ibssa 1990; Jalata 1991; Jalata 1993; Zitelmann 2009, 281). The territorial expansion was accompanied by the imposition of a system of land expropriation and the relegation of local peasants to servile conditions, known as *gabbar*. This rearrangement particularly impacted the most fertile agricultural regions, namely the Oromo-speaking highlands. Until then, the *gadaa* institution had served principally as a governance system for natural resources, regulating land access among the various segments of the Oromo (H. Lewis 1965, 29; Blackhurst 1978, 255-7).² The usurpation of land control from the Oromo rendered the institution obsolete. It is perhaps this process that, more than the overt prohibition of the system – which indeed occurred in certain Oromo areas – was the main cause for the decline of the *gadaa* institution in the Oromo highlands throughout the 20th century (Holcomb, Ibssa 1990, 114-16).

A second aspect, also related to the process of internal colonisation, is religious conversion. Since *gadaa* is an institution linked with worldviews, cosmology, and life cycle rituals, it is closely connected to the religious sphere. In the western and central highlands, inhabited by the Macha and Tulama Oromo respectively, the synergistic policy between state and church in imperial Ethiopia favoured conversion to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. Conversely, among the Arsi Oromo of the eastern highlands and the pastoral zones to the southeast, resistance against the imperial state facilitated a predominance of Islamic conversion (Gnamo 2014). Nonetheless, scholars have highlighted the religious pluralism of contemporary Oromos, that is, their ability to convert while still retaining certain elements of the traditional religion, also in response to the need to maintain the Oromo identity in changing social and political settings (Tablino 1996; Aguilar 1996; Aguilar 2009). In many areas of the Oromo-inhabited highlands, the *gadaa* institution has indeed survived as a residual ritual practice, often clandestine (Bassi, Megerssa 2008).

In the more arid, pastoral, and agro-pastoral zones, the extraction of resources by the Ethiopian state mainly took the indirect form of cattle taxation (Oba 2013) rather than the reorganisation of land relations. In such areas, both land expropriation and the phenomenon

² See also ch. 8.5 in this book.

of conversion were less significant. This is why Oromo groups like the Borana in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya, the Karrayu living west of Addis Ababa in Abadir and Merti area in the Awash Valley (Gebre 2001), an area that forms an arid niche in the highlands, and also the Gabra of southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya (Tablino 1999; Torry 1978) have maintained the effectiveness of the *gadaa* system, with relevance in both governance of natural resource and life cycle rituals. In areas characterised by a mixed agro-pastoral economy, such as among the Guji Oromo, the *gabbar* system was partially implemented (Berisso 2004, 18), with partial effects on the maintenance of the institution, fully operational in the ritual field but less effective in politics (Hinnant 1978; Berisso 2004, 14, 23).

1.3 Ethno-National Conflicts in the Second Half of the 20th Century

Imperial Ethiopia adopted the symbols of the ethnic group that built the empire, primarily the Amhara language and a political culture founded on the dynastic principle, enforced through a strong centralism. Peripheral elites from the Cushitic-speaking regions³ could be co-opted into the ruling groups, but only on the condition of completely abandoning their own identity, a process known in the country as Amharisation (Bulcha 1988, 1994), taken to the extent of having to adopt Amhara names instead of Oromo ones. Until 1991, it was not possible to speak Oromo in schools and administrative offices.

Already at the beginning of the 1960s, ethno-national claims began to emerge. Based on their different colonial history, Eritreans initiated the war for independence with the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF). In the 1970s, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) became the dominant force and remained militarily active. The irredentist movement of Ethiopian Somalis also began in the 1960s, with some involvement of Muslim Oromo.

In the same decade, the Western Oromo were rather involved in a peaceful struggle for identity. From the beginning of the 1960s, the Macha-Tulama Association started to organise mass meetings in the Oromo language, complaining about the exploitation of the peasants and campaigning for Oromo literacy and Oromo culture. In 1966 the association was banned; more than a hundred of its members were arrested and two leaders were sentenced to death (Bulcha 1994, 105-6).

³ The Oromo, the Somali and the Afar are the three largest Cushitic speaking nationalities in Ethiopia.

The widespread dissatisfaction in the country with the huge inequalities and the issue of land grabbed from the peoples annexed to the Empire manifested itself in the student movement, especially in terms of Marxist ideology. The 1974 revolution led to the removal of Emperor Haile Selassie and, with it, the end of the imperial phase and the establishment of the socialist and military junta of the Derg. The Derg nationalised land but maintained strong centralism and the policy of Amharisation, thus perpetuating pre-existing ethnic hierarchies (Bulcha 1994, 107-8; Berisso 2004, 21).

In 1977 and 1978, Somali irredentism escalated into a war between Ethiopia and Somalia, soon accompanied by various other ethnic-based armed movements. In Tigray, the ethno-national struggle was initially started by the Tigray Liberation Front (TLF), followed by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in the 1980s. Among the Oromo, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was founded in 1974. By the 1980s the OLF had become the most significant Oromo political organisation. In the Somali region, from the 1980s, the Ogaaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) emerged as a force capable of supplanting the movements more directly tied to the influence of the Somali state.

The 1980s witnessed significant growth in ethno-national organisations engaged in armed conflict. Some of them were capable of controlling territories for extended periods. These conflicts, at least until their latest stages, transcended the Cold War's binary logic. Active against the socialist Derg junta, these movements drew ideological inspiration from the student movement that preceded the revolution, which was predominantly Marxist. Operationally, they were inspired by Mao Tse Tung's peasant-based insurgency – a tactic well-suited to Ethiopia's predominantly agrarian context.

1.4 The Oromo Diaspora and the Celebration of *Gadaa* as a Political Symbol

Already from the 1970s, the Ethiopian government's harsh repression of any form of identity expression had forced thousands of Oromos to migrate. In Western countries, especially in Northern Europe, the USA, and Canada, Oromo refugees gained access to educational opportunities, and some were employed in the academic system and by research centres.

During the 1970s and 1980s, various Oromo associations were established by the diaspora, students, academicians, and individuals active in the humanitarian and political fields. The Union of Oromo Students in Europe (TBOA), the Union of Oromo in North America (UONA), the Oromo Studies Association (OSA), the Oromo Relief Association (ORA), the Oromia Support Group (OSG), and the Oromo

Liberation Front (OLF) were among the largest ones (Holcomb 1999; Bulcha 2002). This rich associational life served as a forum for reflection and debate, thereby nurturing political identity and national awareness. On the whole, the diaspora associations formed the core or heart of the national movement, within which organisations with political objectives related to the liberation struggle in Ethiopia operated. For example, from the outset, the OLF operated with a distinction between the political wing based in the diaspora, where public dialogue was possible, and a military wing active in Ethiopia, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA). Ethnographic research conducted by Thomas Zitelmann (1994) highlights the importance of the diaspora for this organisation, both based in Western countries and countries bordering Ethiopia.

Among academic associations, the OSA (Oromo Studies Association) has been central to the development of a 'decolonising' academic discourse on the Oromo (Jalata 1996). Through the organisation of regular international conferences and the publication of the *Journal of Oromo Studies* in 1993 (Hassen 2019), the OSA has been instrumental in shaping a distinct academic field. Indeed, studies in the humanities in those years have remained highly polarised between 'Ethiopian Studies' and 'Oromo Studies', the latter being built around the OSA, especially in the United States. The *Journal of Oromo Studies* was censored in Ethiopia. Until the development of digital media, it was very difficult for Oromo scholars in Ethiopia to follow the debates promoted by the OSA (Ta'a 2004, 8-9). International scholars also tended to gravitate towards one field or the other, as they struggled to find spaces to propose countertheses in the opposite camp.

The diaspora's promotion of national consciousness had two recurrent themes. The first, echoing the demands of the Macha-Tulama Association, is the dignity of the Oromo language, underpinned by the goal of achieving widespread literacy for the Oromo. The diaspora adopted a transcription system called *qubee*, based on the phonological characteristics of the Oromo language (Gamta 1993; Demie 1995). The use of the Latin script rather than the Ethiopian script placed it in clear ideological opposition to the Amhara cultural domination (Zitelmann 2009, 275; Tegegne 2022). Oromo, transcribed into *qubee*, became the language of communication between the various organisations in the diaspora, and OLA fighters were required to be literate in *qubee* (Bulcha 1994, 110).

The second theme concerns the assertion of a distinct political culture, democratic rather than autocratic. From this point of view, from the 1980s the *gadaa* institution, with its features of distributed and circular power, started serving as a collective symbol for the Oromo movement (Baxter 1978; Zitelmann 2009, 283). Zitelmann describes it as a *mythomoteur* for the emerging Oromo nation. Although this is a central concept of primordialism in studies of ethnicity, Zitelmann

uses it in a constructivist way, in terms of ‘reinvented tradition’ for the role *gadaa* as a political symbol played in the political process of those years (Zitelmann 2009, 283; Zitelmann 1997). As Asefa Jalata points out,

Some core Oromo nationalist scholars advocate that without refining and restoring elements of the original Oromo political culture of *gadaa*, the Oromo society cannot fully develop Oromummaa, which is absolutely necessary to achieve national self-determination, statehood, and democratic governance (Jalata 2012, 144)⁴

The author goes on by recalling Bonnie Holcomb’s observations at the 1993 OSA Conference:

Gadaa represented an ideological basis for the expression of Oromo nationalism. This expression empowered the Oromo to resist oppression, become self-conscious as a nation in the twentieth century in the face of intense subjugation [...]. *Gadaa* represents a repository, a storehouse of concepts, values, beliefs and practices that are accessible to all Oromo. (Holcomb 2013, unpublished, quoted in Jalata 2012, 144)

Various scholars have emphasised the democratic nature of the *gadaa* institution. A pivotal role in outlining *gadaa* as a paradigmatic case of ‘African democracy’ is owed to a presentation by Asmarom Legesse at the 1978 OSA conference, entitled “Oromo Democracy”. In this paper, the author anticipates themes later developed in the book *Oromo Democracy: An Indigenous African Political System* (Legesse 2000). Drawing on the analysis of the institution as practised by the Borana Oromo (Legesse 1973), he identifies several democratic principles that show analogies with modern democracy and can be applied to the modern state.

Volume 2 of the 1994 *Journal of Oromo Ethiopian Studies* is very useful for an understanding of the place of these elements in the history of the movement. The two articles by the Oromo scholar Lemmu Baissa and the American anthropologist Herbert Lewis (Baissa 1994; H. Lewis 1994) highlight the importance of *gadaa* in terms of political culture. The first article considers the political values embedded in this institution as ‘building blocks’ for the creation of a democratic system of government (Baissa 1994, 47). Lewis’s article is interesting because, like Holcomb, he acknowledges the presence of such values throughout Oromo country, even in the highlands where *gadaa* had lost its political effectiveness, both in the Gibe Oromo states and

⁴ On the concept of *Oromummaa* see also Megerssa (1966).

elsewhere after the annexation to Ethiopia (H. Lewis 1994). It is interesting to note that all these scholars, writing at the time when such concepts were being developed within the Oromo movement, theorised the adoption of *gadaa* not as a method of governance but as a source of inspiration for the democratic government that the Oromo national movement aspired to.

1.5 The 1991 Paradigm Change

In 1991, the EPLF, the TPLF, the OLF, and the ONLF succeeded in overthrowing the socialist Derg regime. In the same year, they convened a peace conference in Addis Ababa, with the participation of most opposition forces active in the country against the Derg. They established the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) and adopted the Transitional Charter of Ethiopia. This Charter laid the groundwork for the multi-national Ethiopian constitution, adopted in 1994. The introduction of a multi-party electoral system, the recognition of key human and political rights, and the acknowledgement of the country's ethnic and national identities and cultural freedoms up to self-determination represented a true paradigm shift, at least at the level of the political theory governing the country. In practice, the EPLF pursued Eritrean political secession, successfully achieved by a referendum in 1993. Conversely, the Tigrayans of the TPLF devised a strategy to assume centralist control of federal Ethiopia, despite constitutional reforms. They had already formed the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a new federated and multilingual political formation, with representatives from the major linguistic groups of the country, selected for their loyalty to the Chairman of TPLF Meles Zenawi. From the outset, and until the death of Meles Zenawi in 2012, the TPLF maintained strong control over the entire EPRDF. The Oromo component was represented by the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), later renamed the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP).

After a brief but highly effective period of free campaigning in the Oromia region, in the 1992 snap elections, the OLF demonstrated its electoral strength in the most populous region of the federation. In the meantime, agreements had allowed the TPLF to disarm a large number of the OLA fighters. After the snap elections, the TPLF's army began a phase of harsh political repression against OLF militants and supporters. Some sources report the arrest of tens of thousands of people and thousands of deaths in detention between 1992 and 1994 due to torture, malnutrition, and disease (Pollack 1996; Hassen 2002; Jalata 2013, p. 291). Consequently, the OLF was forced to quit the TGE and resume clandestine political activity. It was replaced in

the Oromia region by the OPDO, which, though formally federated, was in effect controlled by the TPLF.

The maintenance of constitutional formality was required by the government to secure international support. Therefore, the presence of other parties was required. Other Oromo parties were allowed to form and compete in the elections, but their leaders and supporters faced repression as soon as they became electorally competitive. Thanks to international community pressure, the 2005 elections were considered by international observers to be the first relatively free elections, at least in the preparatory phases and during the ballot. Unfortunately, they ended with violent repression that led to the killing of more than a hundred protesters in Addis Ababa, the arrest of tens of thousands of opposition party supporters, and the imprisonment of opposition political party leaders.

Despite the adoption of a democratic, federal and multi-party constitution, conditions of political centralism and serious abuse of democratic rights have continued. However, multilingualism and the recognition of culture and identity were implemented. The nationalist themes promoted by the diaspora in previous decades became public policy. The administrative space of the country was divided into regional states based on linguistic criteria. For the southwestern region, which is characterised by the presence of many linguistic groups that are not demographically large enough to legitimise the regional state status, the correspondence between administrative space and identity was sought at the lower administrative levels. Even in the large and linguistically homogeneous regional states, lower administrative divisions gradually coincided with sub-national identities. As enshrined in the constitution, the Ethiopia of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples came into existence. Oromo, with its *qubee* script, became one of the country's three recognised national languages. It was used in schools and universities through the Oromia National Regional State and also as an administrative language in the same region.

In Ethiopia, however, the repression of leaders, activists and supporters of political organisations within and outside the constitutional spectrum remained severe and domestic opposition grew. In the country's changing political landscape, the OLF's strategic line became less straightforward. At the level of objectives, members were faced with the dilemma of whether to pursue the old goal of secession from Ethiopia or, given the changed constitutional context, to focus on the implementation of effective democracy within a federal Ethiopia. Strategically, the options ranged from using the new institutional spaces to influence Ethiopian politics, at least at the regional level, to remaining underground or re-entering the electoral fray by accepting compromises. Meanwhile, Ethiopian intelligence had become much more effective, complemented by the Ethiopian

government's effective international action, aimed at controlling internal opposition operating across borders. Under these conditions, the OLF lost its unity and effectiveness but continued to be the symbol of Oromo resistance.

1.6 The Post-Meles Phase

Following the death of the Chairman of EPRDF and Prime Minister of Ethiopia Meles Zenawi in 2012, the ruling EPRDF began to lose its internal cohesion. In the absence of a strong leader, the coalition's subjugated nationalities demanded their turn to lead, but in a context where diverging ideologies resonated. Alongside the TPLF's federalist and developmentalist ideology, which was democratic in form but not in substance, there was a nostalgic ultra-nationalism that sought a return to Amharic as the official language throughout the country and the restoration of a political model based on centralism. These latter positions found much consensus among the old elites in the Amhara Regional State and among the Amhara minorities in other regional states of Ethiopia, a group that had been severely disadvantaged by the 1991 paradigm shift. Among the Oromo and members of other regional states, there was also a position shared with some constitutional opposition parties and sections of the OLF, namely the prospect of realising a genuine national-federalist democracy.

In 2012, Hailemariam Desalegn became Chairman of the EPRDF and Prime Minister of Ethiopia. Previously, he had been Chairman of the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM), one of the regional parties affiliated to the EPRDF, and President of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region. He attempted to govern in continuity with his predecessor, but from 2015 onwards, he faced a wave of popular protests in the Oromia region, which erupted in response to the announcement of the Addis Ababa Master Plan in 2014. Addis Ababa is a self-governing city in the heart of the Oromia National Regional State. The Master Plan envisaged its expansion.

In the post-Meles period, new forms of popular opposition emerged. The OLF, with its strategy of armed struggle based in less controlled rural areas, no longer seemed to be the protagonist of Oromo resistance, although it remained active with the OLA in some rural and border areas. Instead, the protest movement shifted to urban centres, involving mainly youths and students, but increasingly the middle class and traders. It should be noted that schooling in Ethiopia has expanded enormously since 1992, especially in rural and peripheral areas. But more importantly, the global modes of communication have changed. In particular, the use of social media has enabled direct communication between students in Ethiopia and the

diaspora. In those years, long periods of internet service disruption were common, apparently a strategy to block the flow of communication. It is relatively easy to see in the Oromo youths' protest the dynamics of the Arab Springs, but in Ethiopia, the protest was part of half a century's history of organised demands. The movement of Oromo students is called *Qeerroo*, an unusual term which refers to the internal terminology of the *gadaa* institution. It is the appellation used for young people who are still prevented from marrying, given the military responsibilities assigned to this age class and the inherent risk of losing their lives. Applying Freirean critical pedagogy, Dereje Tadesse Birbirso links the features and success of this youth movement to the values of the *gadaa* system (Birbirso 2019).⁵

The *Qeerroo* movement gained respect for the courage of the students, who maintained active but peaceful resistance despite the violence of the repression. Public demonstrations represented an unprecedented challenge in Ethiopia, the results of which could have been channelled either through the electoral strengthening of Oromo parties within the constitutional spectrum, including the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) and the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), or through individual youth choosing to join the ranks of the OLA fighters.

The extremely high number of deaths and tens of thousands of arrests, which were also reported in the global media, provoked a spiral of resentment that first involved large sections of the Oromo population and then spread to other regional states. In 2016, Hailemariam Desalegn removed obstacles to repressive practices by imposing a state of emergency, which was also functional in postponing the national elections. Merera Gudina, the leader of the OFC, was among those arrested. In 2019, the protest also took the organised form of a general strike, called by the OFC and other opposition organisations.

Under popular pressure, the EPRDF was forced to accommodate the demands and claims of the Oromo, symbolically achieved through the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as Chairman of the EPRDF and Prime Minister of Ethiopia in 2018, replacing the resigning Hailemariam Desalegn. Abiy Ahmed was a politician from the OPDO, previously serving as the Deputy President of the Oromia National Regional State.

Internationally, the new prime minister quickly signed a final peace agreement with Eritrea. Domestically, he entered negotiations with the OLF and other armed opposition organisations active in other Ethiopian regional states, offering their fighters the chance to reintegrate into society despite their previous status as members of a

⁵ See also the short article by Najat Hamza published in the *QEERROO. The National Youth Movement for Freedom and Democracy* website, <https://qeerroo.org/xalayaaleters/who-is-qeerroo-what-is-qeerroo/>.

designated terrorist organisation, on condition that they surrender their weapons. It is reported that elders and the *abbaa gadaa* mediated in the negotiations (Nicolas 2021, 172). Abiy Ahmed soon released tens of thousands of political prisoners. In October 2019 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for this series of initiatives. In the same year, he dissolved the EPRDF and created the Prosperity Party (PP) in its place.

In 2018 and 2019, it seemed that Ethiopia had reached the final stage of the 1991 paradigm shift, namely, the effective implementation of conditions that respect political freedoms and human rights. In 2019, the OSA (Oromo Studies Association) was able to organise its main annual conference in Addis Ababa for the first time, with extraordinary participation of scholars, both Ethiopian and from the diaspora, in a festive atmosphere, characterised by open intellectual engagement and freedom from the self-censorship that both Oromo and international scholars had internalised in previous decades. Several intellectuals and political refugees in Europe, the US, and Canada were able to return to Ethiopia to participate in the negotiations and preparations for what were expected to be free and fair elections. Among them were Jawar Mohammed, founder of the Oromia Media Network (OMN) in the US, who was very popular with the *Qeerroo* movement, and some influential OLF leaders in the diaspora.

As with other Arab Springs, events did not unfold as hoped. Having lost control over the EPRDF and the country, the TPLF did not accept the transition from the EPRDF to the Prosperity Party. Retreating to its strongholds in Tigray, in 2020 the TPLF launched an armed resistance and a violent conflict against the Ethiopian army and the ultra-nationalist Fano militias in the Amhara Regional State.

In the Oromia region, negotiations with the OLF mainly involved politicians and fighters based in Eritrea, while the OLA operating inside the country expressed concerns about the absence of international observers at the negotiations. Aware of the 1992 experience, this faction refused to disarm and established the OLF-OLA High Command in 2021, excluding other political components of the OLF.⁶ Among other things, it declared its commitment to peace by invoking the traditional value of *nagaa*,⁷ which is extensively discussed in Chapters 2.2 and 3 of this volume, as one of the traditional values associated with the *gadaa* system.⁸ In 2020, the murder of singer Hach-

⁶ International journalistic sources report that, as of March 2024, negotiations with the Prime Minister are still ongoing.

⁷ Website of the OLF-OLA High Command, <https://www.olf-olahq.org>.

⁸ Much of the scholarly discussion of *nagaa*, as discussed later in this volume, has focused on the Borana Oromo. The relevance of the concept at the Oromo scale is now confirmed by Mergerssa and Kassam, who refer to the *nagaa Oromoo* (2019, 226). They define it as “a principle of peace, harmony and universal order that operates in the world”

alu Hundessa, a popular figure in the *Qeerroo* movement, sparked street violence in the Oromia region. Just before the 2021 elections, these events triggered a new wave of severe political repression, including the arrest of thousands of people and several key leaders of Oromo opposition parties, including Jawar Mohammed. In the end, the OLF's negotiating faction did not contest the elections with its organisational name. However, some of its leaders were co-opted by the Prosperity Party. The OFC also withdrew from the elections.

Following a peace agreement in November 2022, the conflict in Tigray became less destructive, but, from 2023, armed conflict erupted in the Amhara Regional State, where the FANO militia had remained militarily active.

The Prosperity Party, which has a large parliamentary majority, seems committed to building a new political centralism grounded in Abiy Ahmed's political philosophy of *Medemer*. *Medemer* is an Amharic term meaning 'adding' or 'coming together'. It encapsulates the idea of building bridges or 'synergies' for the common goods of development and prosperity, overcoming ethnic divisions. Oromo opposition parties are concerned about what appears to be a regressive policy on the use of the Oromo language and *Qubee* script in schools in the Oromia National Regional State. They are also concerned about the process of amending the 2004 constitution. The preparatory study for this change has been entrusted to the Policy Studies Institute (PSI), a government think-tank, to curb ethnonationalism (PSI 2022). The opposition fears that the results of the process could undermine the gains achieved in cultural rights and administrative autonomy.

2 The Revitalisation of the *Gadaa* Institution

The paradigm shift of 1991 set the stage for the revitalisation of the *gadaa* institution. This process is particularly relevant in the highlands, where the institution had lost its operational capacity. Three sets of factors can explain this. The first is the culturalist and identity political rhetoric of the EPRDF, which was fundamental in enabling the TPLF to secure Oromo support and thus replace the Amhara elites at the helm of the country. The second, as has been observed, is that these same themes are the motivational cornerstone of the Oromo opposition, both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary. The third is a combination of more tangible elements, namely the adoption

(2019, 111). Debelo and Jirata further describe the concept as found among the Guji Oromo, qualifying it as "a fundamental epistemological notion that situates peace within their worldview and relationship with God" and as "a harmony between humans, non-human beings and the supernatural power" (Debelo, Jirata 2018, 226).

of Oromo as the university language in Oromia, the federal Ethiopian policy of strengthening the system of peripheral universities, and the proliferation of centres and research initiatives on *gadaa*.

Regarding the first two factors, the issue of the restoration of *gadaa* has become a common yet contested ground between the government – particularly its ODPO/ODP component – and the opposition (Nicolas 2021, 166). Notably, Negaso Gidada, who served as President of Ethiopia from 1995 to 2001, was previously a member of the OLF while in the German diaspora (Zitelmann 2009, 281-2).⁹ He had a clear understanding of the symbolic significance of *gadaa*, and in 1996, he attended the customary general assembly organised every eight years by the Borana Oromo. Even the Macha-Tulama Association was initially rehabilitated, only to be banned again in 2004 following the arrest of its leaders and sympathisers, who were accused of having close ties to the OLF (Jalata 2013).

The competitive dynamics between the government and the opposition over traditional symbolism are illustrated in detail by Serawit Bekele Debele's account of the revival of the *Irreecha* festival (Bekele 2019). Since 1991, the *Irreecha* celebration has become the strongest expression of the Oromo national identity. Strictly speaking, the ceremony is part of the traditional *Waaqeffanaa* religion,¹⁰ but it is closely linked to the role played in the rituals by the leaders of the revived *gadaa* of the Tulama Oromo, in the area west of Addis Ababa.

Three recent studies have outlined the use of the same *gadaa* symbolism by both the Oromo movement of the 1960s and the OLF on the one hand, and the post-1991 Oromia National Regional State on the other (Gemechu 2014, 50; Nicolas 2021; Gemechu, Mekonnen 2022). The iconic *gadaa* elements include:

- the *odaa*, the sycamore tree that is central in many rituals and in whose shade the *gadaa* gatherings took place; the *odaa* was incorporated into both the Oromia Regional State and that of the OLF flags;
- the three colours black, red and white, emblem of the *gadaa*, on the flag of both the Oromia Regional State;
- the use of the expression *Caffee Oromia* to refer to the regional parliament in the constitution of the Oromia Regional State; *Caffee* is the term used by the highland Oromo to refer to the customary general assembly, equivalent to the *Gumii* of the southern Oromo;
- the incorporation of *gadaa* symbolism in the architectural figures of new constructions of high symbolic relevance, including

⁹ See ch. 7.6 in this book.

¹⁰ The *Waaqeffanaa* religion is also in full revival, both in Ethiopia and globally among the Oromo diaspora (Erko 2019).

the OPDO Convention Hall and the building built to host the Parliament of the Oromia Regional State;

- the adoption of the term *galma*, the rural ritual huts of the traditional religion, to refer to the modern constructions provided by the government in urban centres as a base for the revitalised *gadaa*.

The three studies agree in situating these trends within the broader global and African postcolonial and re-traditionalisation discourse. However, both also raise some critical considerations. Concerning the revitalisation of the *gadaa* institution, Dejene Gemechu Chala and Jira Mekonnen Choroke report the concern expressed by several Oromo interviewees about the effective accommodation of the philosophical and functional aspects of the institution, beyond the mere formal and aesthetic adoption of its symbols (Gemechu, Mekonnen 2022, 13). Through a long-term review of the revival process of the *gadaa* of the Tulama Oromo, Andrea Nicolas outlines how the progressive incorporation of the revived *gadaa* into the party's politics transforms the institution itself, changing its internal rules, working modalities and functions (Nicolas 2021).

The 2016 inclusion of the "Gada system" in the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity as "an indigenous democratic socio-political system of the Oromo"¹¹ probably constitutes the highlight of this transition. Undoubtedly, this recognition would have been unthinkable before 1991. However, as is always the case with *patrimonialisation*, the process itself entails a change in the social and cultural value of the recognised heritage. In the case of the *gadaa*, the Ethiopian Ministry of Culture and Tourism established the competence over the customary institution, exercised through the Oromiyaa Culture and Tourism Bureau (OCTB) (Nicolas 2021, 153-4). The availability of public funds has given the OPDO/ODP a significant advantage over the opposition in controlling the ongoing process of revitalising the *gadaa* institution. Indeed, the OCTB has been very active in supporting, financing, and patronising the institution in both the Oromo highlands and lowlands. In pastoralist Oromo areas where the *gadaa* institution has remained operational as a customary governance institution, *gadaa* leaders have been systematically involved in addressing inter-ethnic conflict, to the extent that a substantial body of literature has already been produced on *gadaa* as an effective case of indigenous mechanisms for peacebuilding and for African Solutions (AfSol) to security problems (Scott-Villiers et al. 2011; Gemechu 2014; Mamo 2017; Debisa 2022; Wako 2023). Concerning

¹¹ UNESCO website, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/gada-system-an-indigenous-democratic-socio-political-system-of-the-oromo-01164>.

Oromo highlands, Nicolas highlights the character of deliberate social engineering that has characterised the revival of the Tulama Oromo *gadaa*. She also notes the impact of moving the *gadaa* decision-making venues from open-air gatherings in the countryside to government-built *galma* in the administrative centres, resulting in its bureaucratisation, with the introduction of new staff and attempts to change the electoral process from one based on lineage representation to one based on administrative divisions, with the possibility of promoting pro-government candidates (Nicolas 2021, 174, 175).

Concerning the national situation, Nicolas devotes a great deal of attention to the establishment in 2015 of the 'Council of Oromo Abbaa *Gadaa*', with the support of the OCTB. This is a single organisation which unites all the previously autonomous *gadaa* centres under a common leadership (Nicolas 2021, 161, 162). The Abbaa *Gadaa*'s Council is linked to local and regional rituals and gatherings, which are still mainly conducted according to customary rules. However, according to Nicolas, the new superimposed centralised structure is "a mirror image of the state party organisation". These combined changes imply that the *gadaa* institution and the government no longer "rely on completely different concepts of authority" and that *gadaa* no longer functions as a system parallel to and independent of the government. She suggests that *gadaa* is becoming a "third" form of institution, neither customary nor entirely modern, over which traditional authorities are gradually losing control (Nicolas 2021, 174). This conclusion is not far from the views expressed by several Oromo reported in Gemechu and Mekonnen's study (2022, 14), that *gadaa* leaders have become vulnerable to co-optation and that it would be better for the *gadaa* leaders to stay away from party politics. Similarly, concerning the revival of the Ilu Oromo *gadaa*, Lemessa Wakgari complains that the system has not been reconstituted as in the past, that elections follow the state model rather than customary rules, and that the failure of the community to sustain the institution has made it dependent on the state budget (Wakgari 2019).

Despite the intense collaboration, it appears that no formal steps have been taken to institutionalise or formalise the relationship between the government organisations and the *gadaa* (Dinagde 2019; Aga 2022). This reduces the protection of the customary sector and makes it vulnerable to the interests of state actors, who, according to Nicolas, see the *gadaa* for "its role as a national icon, as a media-focused embodiment of the Oromo nation' rather than for the decision-making tasks of *gadaa* leaders" (Nicolas 2021, 174).

It is worth noting that the establishment of a national *gadaa* coordination reflects the historical view that refers to the existence of a single *gadaa* centre for all the Oromo, prevalent within the Oromo diaspora movement, as opposed to the one that recognises *gadaa* for its regional governance, complementary to the centralistic and

legitimising role of the *abbaa muudaa* institution. This difference has profound implications in terms of modelling the inclusion of *gadaa* governance in current settings.

3 Content of the Volume

This volume contains articles, essays and policy recommendations written over a long period, some of which are difficult to access. I have decided to bring them together for a more coherent and sequential reading against the backdrop of the recent political history of the Oromo.

I have chosen to present the writings in their original form, even at the risk of repeating certain concepts, for two reasons. The first is that each contribution relates to the historical moment in which it was produced and the circumstances of the ethnographic research. The second reason is that the researcher's perspectives have changed over time, both because of institutional changes in Ethiopian politics and because of the normal progression of the acquisition of knowledge and experience. This introductory chapter and the introduction to the various parts of the volume provide the space where I have been able to offer insights into a recontextualised reading of the various writings.

The reprints contained in this book have undergone some changes, including the adoption of uniform Oromo spelling, the conversion of some papers from American to British spelling,¹² the adoption of a coherent citation system, the consistent numbering of tables, maps and figures throughout the book, a unified bibliography, and minor textual editing.¹³

Part 1, "*Gadaa* as an ongoing institution", is devoted to describing the *gadaa* institution from the context where it has remained fully operative through the 19th and 20th centuries, until the present. It collects articles and essays on *gadaa* as practised among the Borana Oromo in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This ethnographic approach was made possible by the practice of maintaining conditions of co-presence and, at the same time, a clear separation between the customary domain and the competencies of the Ethiopian state. Although this situation was mutually recognised by customary leaders and government officials, the modalities of interaction were entirely informal.

¹² For the textual changes and improvement of English style, the author made use of artificial intelligence systems, including ChatGPT, DeepL, and Grammarly.

¹³ For quotations, I recommend referring to the original publication, if accessible.

As noted in the republished papers, there are valuable ethnographies on this subject from earlier in the 20th century, including the now classic work by Asmarom Legesse (1973), but the issue tends to be somewhat underestimated in the current debate about the revival of the *gadaa* institution and its incorporation into contemporary governance. The Borana are, in fact, the Oromo section that has best preserved the full functionality of the *gadaa* institution, even after their annexation to the Ethiopian Empire and up to the present day. For this reason, it has served as a model for revitalisation in the Oromo highlands, as in the case of the Tulama Oromo reported by Nicolas (2021, 154, 160).

Part 2, “Territorial Crisis and Inter-Ethnic Conflict”, serves as a bridge between Parts 1 and 3, bringing together two essays that illustrate the transition from a state of separation to one of inclusion of the Borana *gadaa* in contemporary governance. These essays outline the history of top-down engagement with customary institutions in Borana and beyond, in the fields of national and international development, biodiversity conservation and, especially, politics and inter-ethnic conflict.

The essays focus on an issue that continues to be a major point of reference in the political debate at the federal level in Ethiopia, with implications for future constitutional choices: the emergence of inter-ethnic conflicts and episodes of ethnic cleansing coinciding with the introduction of multinational federalism and the redefinition of administrative spaces and boundaries. These events have been rhetorically used as evidence of the potentially divisive nature of the 1994 constitution and the need for a new constitutional reform. The two essays republished here report on different stages of research conducted in the Borana Oromo region at the very time when this issue was emerging. They examine the complex interplay between the refugee crisis triggered by the Somali state crisis, the ruling party’s political manipulation of both internationally supported migration policies and electoral processes, and the interests of the region’s different ethnic groups competing for scarce natural resources.

The severe territorial crisis faced by the Borana as a result of this delicate historical transition has prompted *gadaa* leaders to break their isolation from the political dynamics of the Ethiopian state and engage in the national political arena.

The data presented in these papers paint a scenario that raises serious concerns about the practice of engaging or co-opting customary leaders without an institutional interface mechanism. On the one hand, customary leaders should be institutionally committed to the well-being of their communities, including the protection of their territorial rights. Despite the high level of trust people have in the ability of their customary leaders to restore peaceful inter-ethnic relations, as documented in several recent studies (Scott-Villiers et al.

2011; Gemechu 2014; Mamo 2017; Debisa 2022; Wako 2023), it is difficult to imagine customary leaders working for general peace when competing communities ally with government authorities for territorial gains at the expense of their neighbours, unless the conflict has become so destructive that an orderly life is no longer possible for anyone. Indeed, it was precisely at this advanced stage of regional interethnic conflict that the Borana *gadaa* leaders took the initiative to restore peace, drawing upon the historically collaborative relations between the ethnic groups of the region and leveraging the reconciliatory nature of customary juridical practices (Scott-Villiers et al. 2011; Chs. 3, 6.9, 7.7 and 8.2.2 in this book). On the other hand, government authorities may make territorial concessions for strategic or electoral gain. What I am describing is a situation where, contrary to international best practice in the protection of indigenous and tribal peoples' rights, the interface between statutory and customary institutions has not been formalised in any way. It is a situation in which the mandates and accountability mechanisms of each of the actors involved are undefined and each is free to pursue its opportunistic interests, either on a personal level or on behalf of the group it represents.

The research presented in Part 2 provides the background for the policy recommendations presented in Part 3 of this volume, "*Gadaa* in Contemporary Governance", where attention shifts from the Borana and their region to the broader Oromo and Ethiopian context. In this part, the discussion of *gadaa* and other customary institutions is placed in the context of the broader issue of political and minority rights in the country, on the assumption that reliance on customary institutions alone cannot be seen as a solution to the problems faced by Ethiopia's minorities, nor do they offer a viable democratic model that can serve as an alternative to full respect for internationally recognised human rights. The 'direct' democracy offered by these institutions needs to be placed within a broader, formalised framework of governance by ensuring the political independence of customary components and strong procedural power over plans and initiatives that may affect the well-being of rural communities.

In the Epilogue, "In Praise of Oral Creativity", I re-propose the ethno-astronomical study that highlights the unique method employed by the Borana Oromo to empirically determine the insertion of an intercalary month to maintain the correspondence between the lunar year and the seasons in the traditional calendar. In the introduction, I propose a possible astronomical foundation for the eight-year periodisation of the *gadaa* institution, as well as the Oromo conception of history.

4 Modalities of Integration of *Gadaa* in Current Governance

In the process of revitalising the *gadaa* institution and integrating it into current governance, we are faced with the paradox that, although it has been systematically invoked by both the government and the opposition, no formal steps have been taken to institutionalise it within the overall governance framework of the Oromia Regional State (Dinagde 2019). The analysis of the ongoing processes must, therefore, focus on the various modes of integration that are currently taking place or being theorised. In this regard, it is useful to consider first and foremost that we are dealing with two types of processes that are related but ontologically very different from each other.

In pastoral areas, where *gadaa* has continued to operate as a parallel institution to the state administrative structure, customary leaders have been involved mainly on a personal level or through cooption. This is the subject of parts 1 and 2 of this volume. In the predominantly agricultural Oromo areas, where the *gadaa* institution had survived only as a residual ritual practice in the 20th century, we have witnessed since 1991 a social engineering operation for its revival, which the government has gradually taken control of through funding through the Oromiyaa Culture and Tourism Bureau. This is the subject of this introductory chapter and Part 3 of the volume.

It is clear that while in the pastoralist areas, we can speak of an institution that has its autonomy in the selection and training of customary leaders and the internal decision-making processes of the rural community, in the latter case such elements are somehow incorporated into the state structure or strongly influenced by it, thereby reducing the potential for building an institutional framework that can counterbalance government decisions on policies affecting the territories of the different Oromo sections.

As discussed in Part 2, *abbaa gadaa* from different Oromo pastoralist groups had begun to meet as early as 2003 as part of government and internationally supported initiatives to support pastoralism and to engage in inter-ethnic conflict resolution. However, it was not until the establishment of the Council of Oromo Abbaa Gadaa in 2005 (Nicolas 2021) that the two processes were directly linked. On the one hand, this has facilitated a more direct transfer of knowledge about *gadaa* across different Oromo areas. On the other hand, it also allows for the extension of government influence over the *gadaa* leaders in the pastoralist areas.

On the occasion of various events organised both by the European diaspora and within the specialised research centres developed in

Oromia after 1991,¹⁴ I have had the opportunity to reflect on the ongoing processes and have outlined the following four different scenarios for the inclusion of the *gadaa* institution in contemporary governance:

1. Designing new constitutional solutions based on the *gadaa* institution;
2. Co-option and informal engagement of *gadaa* leaders.
3. Regulating the interface between the state and national and international development actors on the one hand, and *gadaa* governance elements on the other.
4. Endogenous development of new *gadaa* structures at local and national levels.

The first scenario is more theoretical than actual. It is firmly rooted in the portrayal of *gadaa* as a symbol of Oromo democracy and the vision of the diaspora intellectuals of the 1970s discussed in this introductory chapter and Part 3. This is still a productive line of thought. Starting with the contributions of Legesse already discussed, several scholars continue to work on the identification of criteria to be translated into constitutional form, with particular reference to the constitution of the Oromya Regional State (Dinagde 2019; Amid 2019).

The second scenario refers to various forms of cooperation between customary leaders and state officials without institutionalised regulation. This has taken place in Borana territory and among neighbouring Oromo pastoralist groups, such as the Gabra and Guji. This engagement can involve both development planning and the political sphere. The dynamics of these interactions are critically examined in Part 2 of this volume, where some of the assumptions underlying the engagement of development agencies with customary institutions, and their use in addressing inter-ethnic conflict, are challenged. In Chapter 7, I attempt to discuss how applying the notion of ‘direct democracy’ or the metaphor of customary institutions as a ‘bridge’ between decision-makers and local communities not only fails to construct alternative channels of representation in an uncondusive political environment (Lister 2004, Hagmann 2005, Watson 2001; Gemechu 2014) but may also result in unpredictable

14 I owe special thanks to the organisers of the London International Oromo Culture & History Workshop, “Exploring Oromo Cultural History: Critical Multi-disciplinary Enquiries”, held on 4th July 2009, and the organisers of the 2nd International Conference of the Institute of Oromo Studies (IOS) at Jimma University, which took place on 1st and 2nd June 2017. During the first event, I presented a PowerPoint on the theme “*Gadaa* and modernity: Some thought about principles and practices across governance domains”. This initial elaboration was discussed again during the second event, as part of a PowerPoint presentation on “*Gadaa* and Governance of Natural Resources: Reflections Over the Yaaballo Statement on the Borana Conserved Landscape”. On June 7th 2017, I had the opportunity to present the same topic during an invited lecture at Bule Hora University. I extend my thanks to Boku Tache and the Director of the programme for this opportunity.

outcomes. As highlighted in the conclusion of Chapter 7, the core challenge lies in integrating the state and customary governance systems while ensuring that the accountability and balancing mechanisms of each are preserved.

The third scenario, also hypothetical, would be a desirable evolution of the second. As suggested in the policy recommendations of Chapter 9, it would involve the establishment of precise procedural rules of engagement with the traditional governance apparatus, modelled on international law on indigenous and tribal peoples. This would ensure the exercise of the right to self-determination in areas deemed essential to quality of life. For this to be effective, the state must constitutionally grant the customary system significant negotiating powers (Dinagde 2019), an aspect expressed in international law by the principle of free, prior and informed consent, which must be obtained for any initiative that could harm the territory and living conditions of the Indigenous community. It is useful to recall the fundamental value of *gadaa* as an institution that links the social and political realm with the cosmological dimension, a theme that recurs throughout the various parts of this volume and in the Epilogue. This connection places customary leaders in charge of the fundamental elements essential to the flow and renewal of life - land, water, air, plants, and animals (Tache, Irwin 2003; Debele 2018). These elements, which could be considered part of the theoretical framework of the commons, form the material foundation for the sustenance of rural communities and are encapsulated in Western terminology by the concept of the 'environment'.

To provide an effective counterweight to national and international policies, customary institutions must be truly independent of state and party structures and dynamics. Recent studies conducted among the Guji (Lelisa 2018), the Arsi (Teso, Hamado, Chalenka 2016), the Borana (Dinagde 2019; Biratu, Kosa 2020) and other Oromo groups show that *gadaa* continues to function as an institution that promotes social solidarity, integration and dialogue among the different components of the rural community, enabling people to engage in highly participatory and egalitarian local governance. It is therefore crucial that the interface between statutory and customary institutions is not based on the consent of individual customary leaders - which would not be very different from scenario 1 - but that it involves the customary institution in a broader sense, including customary decision-making procedures.

Scenario 3 involves the full restoration of the capacity for localised territorial governance implicit in the model of Oromo history proposed by Megerssa and Kassam (2019). This model envisages a single ceremonial centre associated with the *Abbaa Muuda* for the entire Oromo polity, alongside various territorial groups self-governing through localised *gadaa* centres. Negotiations should therefore

take place at the local level, with territorial divisions corresponding to the jurisdictions of existing *gadaa* centres. This process can be more effectively implemented among Oromo groups with pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihoods, such as the Borana, Gabra, Guji and Karrayu, who have maintained the functionality of the *gadaa* system as an institution closely linked to each social component of the rural community.

The implementation of an institutional solution as proposed in Scenario 3 is complex and requires the support of dedicated research programmes. These programmes must ensure the full involvement of customary leaders, technical assistance from international experts on indigenous rights, and space for public debate. Such programmes can be effectively based on the specialised research centres that have been established in the universities of the Oromia Regional State since 1991.

The fourth scenario reflects the current situation in the agricultural areas of Oromia. It is compatible with, and complementary to, Scenario 3, as revitalisation could potentially restore institutional forms inspired by customary models for use in localised consultative processes. However, this scenario may also incorporate a second component aligned with the unitarist vision of the *gadaa* system, which is based on the historical reconstruction that sees the entire Oromo polity as being 'governed' through a single *gadaa* centre. The establishment of the Council of the Oromo Abbaa Gadaa appears to support this model.

It is worth noting that while the early proponents of the relevance of *gadaa* in modern politics viewed it as a source of inspiration for political principles and values that could be incorporated into a constitution, contemporary theoretical frameworks associated with post-colonial studies and African re-traditionalisation (Gemechu 2014; Nicolas 2021; Gemechu, Mekonnen 2022, 13; Buur, Kyed 2007) may lead to a radicalisation of the portrayal of the *gadaa* as a form of African democracy that offers a direct alternative to the Western model of democracy. Consequently, it can be used rhetorically to circumvent the discourse on political and human rights that has traditionally accompanied the development of Western notions of democracy.

