2 The Complexity of a Pastoral African Polity: An Introduction to the Council Organisation of the Borana Oromo

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2.1 Structural Ethnocentrism and the Complexity Issue

In many parts of Africa,[1] pastoralists still face the persistence of a cultural bias against their way of life and the related values, which, technically speaking, have no reason to exist. I will attempt to explain such a discriminatory attitude by referring to two different cultural

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matrices that came to interact in the process of forming modern African states.

The first is the normal ethnocentrism by which each people negatively represent their neighbours – or any other people they happen to know – as a way to emphasise the positivity of their own culture. In this sense, African agriculturists may look down upon pastoralists, just as pastoralists may despise agriculturists, while at the same time cooperating and maintaining good reciprocal relations. Before the independence of African states, such a balanced perception of the other did not imply any structural discrimination.

The second component is the evolutionary bias, based on 19th-century Western social theory, whose basic assumptions still survive in common sense. The old-style evolutionary theory implies positioning various peoples and cultures on a linear scale, with opposing concepts such as primitive/civilised people, low/high cultures, and simple/complex societies at its extremes. As elucidated by Franz Boas already at the beginning of the 20th century, its strongest limitation is that each society or culture tends to be positioned on an absolute scale based on a single reference feature. For instance, a technologically simple society is assumed to be simple in all its manifestations and is outright considered inferior to technologically more advanced societies. The extension of the notion of "complexity" from the technological to other social, economic, and cultural fields is usually a mere assumption.

Although unilinear evolutionism has been criticised by several scholars and explicitly rejected by most 20th-century anthropological schools, many of the 'new' non-evolutionary or even anti-evolutionary anthropologists are still caught up in some of the implications of evolutionary thought. For instance, Godfrey and Monica Wilson (1945), in their innovative methodological study, analysed the dynamics of social changes taking place in Central Africa, describing it as basically consisting of increased scale and complexity of society. However, they also qualify the overall process in terms of the passage from primitive relations to civilisation (1945, 2). Different sets of phenomena are thus equated in a typical evolutionary fashion. Godfrey and Monica Wilson were likely compelled to reference the discriminatory primitive/civilised dichotomy to convey their technical findings to a broader audience, utilising a common idiom and appealing to shared notions. However, in doing so, they framed the new findings within the dominant evolutionary mode of thought. Unfortunately, this conceptual frame was not only shared by most Europeans working in or concerned with colonial Africa but it was also assimilated by the emerging Western-educated African elites, who later assumed leadership in independent African states.

The decolonisation process and the growing demand for development led to the emergence of new classificatory oppositions, such as

tradition/modernity, carrying the same derogatory meaning as earlier evolutionary forms.

During the development of modern states, the Western-based evolutionary ideology overlapped with the old ethnocentric attitude. Educated individuals tended to synthesise the two perspectives into a single cognitive and coherent model. The pastoralists found themselves in a challenging position. During both the colonial and postcolonial periods, they had very limited access to modernising institutions, especially to education. Furthermore, the geographical, economic, and political marginalisation of the pastoralists resulted in limited access to new technological resources, new bureaucracies, and prominent political positions in post-colonial states. Simply put, pastoralists were not identified with the modern or, through evolutionary extension of meanings, the 'civilised' or 'complex' sector of the nation. The reciprocal ethnocentrism against pastoralists was thus reformulated and asymmetrically reframed in new evolutionary terms. Consequently, pastoralism was ideologically relegated to the lower stages of development. Despite its highly specialised adaptations to the environment, indicating advanced evolution, it came to be associated with a backward lifestyle.

The reframed ethnocentrism not only affected the cultural sphere but also had a significant impact on socio-political life. Within the new states, relations among various social groups were not symmetrical or balanced anymore. Some groups came to dominate the state institutions.[2] Although government organisations are regulated by written norms and actions should reflect formal policy, decisions are mostly made by individuals involved in government structures, according to their convictions.[3] The ideologies, including a normal or a culturally re-framed ethnocentrism, of the 'institutional men' ultimately become the institutional ideology, even if not formally expressed in any statute, law, norm, policy or constitution. In this context, ethnocentrism can be considered 'structural' because it involves state institutions, with a permanent impact on the state decision process and policy formulation and implementation. This type of dynamics may, perhaps, explain why the development policies of independent states have so often negatively affected the viability of pastoralism.

During my professional experience in Kenya, more than ten years ago, and more recently in Ethiopia, I encountered cultural bias among both European and African decision-makers and development experts. I also observed differences between the two countries. The

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2 Control of state institutions is actually a major cause of the ethnic strife that affects so many African countries.

3 Kertzer (1988, 18) has clarified that an organisation is basically made up of ever-changing people, while the idea of its continuity is only conveyed through symbolic representation.

Kenyan case appears to align with the general process outlined above. In Ethiopia, the cultural bias against pastoralism is just one component, overlapping with a deeper and broader opposing classification of entire ethnic groups on a high/low scale, sometimes regardless of their economic activities. I am referring to the conceptual opposition between the peoples of the northern highlands of the country, an area classified as Christian and characterised by the presence of a millenarian tradition of writing, and the 'illiterate' or 'African' rest of the country (Megerssa 1997). This attitude can probably be attributed to the fact that the 'civilised' component of society is not regarded as the outcome of a recent process of modernisation but is rather considered to be deeply rooted in history. Unfortunately, this perspective is not only shared by many urban dwellers and policy-makers but is also variously expressed in and through some scholarly traditions, including anthropological ones. For instance, during a recent seminar held at Addis Ababa University, a prominent and experienced American anthropologist claimed that he had chosen to conduct his field research in northern Ethiopia rather than in the south because he was interested in 'complex' societies.

In this paper, I shall challenge the evolutionary matrix of such cultural bias by briefly outlining the overall features of the Borana Oromo council organisation, a well-known pastoral people of Southern Ethiopia. The reader will soon realise that we are dealing with a complex political system. I am taking distance from the standard definition of complexity, primarily related to the degree of specialisation found within a more or less arbitrarily defined society. Instead, I rather adopt the basic meaning of the word, indicating distinct yet interconnected elements and principles within a defined field, in our case, the political sphere. I shall re-examine the issues of specialisation and modernisation in the concluding remarks.

2.2   The Borana 'Anomaly'

In *Councils in Action* by Richards and Kuper (1971), a seminal work in the history of political anthropology, Kuper asserts: "Given a simple technology, and more particularly poor means of communication, councils can operate efficiently and on a regular basis only at the level of local communities" (1971, 16). To support this perspective, he draws upon the ethnography of East African pastoral societies, which may seem to lack formal councils. According to Kuper, "in these societies decisions are made in *ad hoc* groups, taken together by men of influence" (1971, 16). This generalisation is likely a result of evolutionary assumptions but is contradicted by Bassi's (1988, 1994 and 1996), Abdullahi Shongolo's (1994) and, less recently, by Baxter (1954) and Asmarom Legesse's (1973) ethnographies of the

Borana. Despite being East African pastoralists with limited technology, they not only organise formal councils and meetings but also employ a highly articulated and structured council organisation.

The Borana 'anomaly' could be attributed to the unique Ethiopian context, a geographical area where diverse peoples, cultures and political philosophies have likely coexisted for thousands of years. Ideas on societal organisation circulated among various peoples, and different political models were easily observable, providing alternative choices.[4] In such a context, the Oromo, of which the Borana constitute a specialised pastoral segment, might have evolved their distinctive polity, ideologically centralised yet egalitarian and democratic, possessing most characteristics of a state but avoiding the undesirable effects of structural inequality.[5] However, the Ethiopian context alone cannot fully explain the Borana Oromo political system. A central feature of the Borana and Oromo polity is the generation class system, a shared institution with many African peoples. Furthermore, I argue that the other dominant feature of the Borana Oromo polity, the council organisation, and its overall political impact, is not as peculiar in the African pre-colonial context as it may initially appear.

2.3 The Assembly Structure of the Borana

The Borana organise several types of assemblies, each with distinctive names, and specific competencies, and involving different kinds of social groups. They can broadly be classified into two broad categories. The first category comprises all assemblies and councils whose participation is determined by ascription based on descent affiliation. This implies that participation in a particular meeting is not a matter of free choice but is determined by the clan or lineage membership of each individual. The ascriptive assemblies are the *kora gosaa*, or clan assembly, various *yaa'a* and the *Gumii Gaayoo*, which is the general assembly of the Borana.

The ascriptive assemblies follow a pyramidal structure, with clan assemblies forming the base, *yaa'a* councils in the middle layer and *Gumii Gaayoo* at the apex of the pyramid. There are no systemic

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4   I believe that the political richness of Ethiopia exactly lies in its ethnic and political articulation and variety.

5   Structural inequality is here taken to mean economic and political differences among individuals and groups produced by the political and legal settings. This definition allows for the existence of differences of wealth between individuals, a fact considered perfectly normal by the Borana themselves. Also, it does not contradict the fact that several Borana institutions produce a complex ritual and cognitive classification of groups not equal to each other (Megerssa 1993).

horizontal linkages: each assembly or council is connected to others through vertical lines. This organisational structure echoes other hierarchies of councils, such as village, district and tribal councils. However, Borana's ascriptive assemblies not only lack territorial reference but also do not adhere to some qualities implied by the term 'hierarchy'. The different layers only partially represent different levels of authority. Instead, each layer corresponds to specific political requirements in a complex vertical functional interrelation. Consequently, no layer can be conceived independently, as each relies on the others. In essence, there is a complementary diversity among different types of ascriptive assemblies, a classic feature of complexity.

a. The second category includes all other assemblies and is further subdivided into the following two groups:
b. various types of meetings for coordinating pastoral activities (table 1);
c. *ad hoc* meetings organised to resolve disputes.

Since Borana families can change their place of residence, and the composition of Borana production units is flexible, participation in these assemblies is not tied to descent affiliation.

2.3.1   Clan Assemblies

The clan assemblies, known as *kora gosaa*, are ideally organised once every year. As the members of each clan live scattered across Borana land, each clan assembly involves people from the entire territory. Participants, who come from distant places, need to be hosted and provided with sustenance for the entire duration of the event, typically lasting from a couple of weeks to a month or more. The logistical burden on the host, in terms of expenses and labour, is substantial. Hence, the clan assembly is usually organised in a different village each year.

The *kora gosaa* is a typical community-in council as defined by Kuper (1971, 14). This implies that all members of the involved community have the right to participate or be represented in the meeting. Decisions reached in the assembly are binding on any member of that descent section and do not apply to members of other clans.

The community involved in each clan assembly is a large one. For this reason, minor family or local meetings are organised for a preliminary discussion of the various issues. In these minor meetings, representation for those who do not physically attend the central assembly is implicitly or explicitly delegated. The same minor meetings are usually reconvened after the central *kora gosaa* to report the decisions taken back to the locality and single families. Thus, an internal assembly structure for each clan assembly emerges, featuring a

flexible combination of territory and descent as elements of internal organisation, differing across clans. Additionally, the descent sections meeting in a single *kora gosaa* may vary over time, involving descent groups at a different level of segmentation, depending on general conditions and needs. For instance, the Karrayyuu, the largest Borana clan, usually assemble along the lines of its constitutive lineages, but sometimes the entire clan converges to the same site, an event called *kora deebanuu*.

Regarding the competence of the clan assembly, it is pertinent to quote Jan Hultin's observation about the Macha Oromo: "In Oromo culture, lineage, land and livestock are represented as an organic whole, as a common vital principle. Descent, resource and property are aspects of the same cognitive domain" (1990, 108). Consequently, the *kora gosaa* serves as the competent forum not only for discussing personal problems or disputes within the family or extended patrilineal unit but also for crucial economic issues. These encompass problems of inheritance, the distribution of reproductive cattle to destitute families, and the organisation of clan contributions for various purposes. This is particularly evident in the case of well digging, which demands substantial investment in money, cattle, or labour. Indeed, it is the responsibility of the clan to provide the material basis for human subsistence, a precondition for the continuity and reproduction of the social group. The clan assembly also selects candidates for the office of *hayyuu* and raises resources needed for their maintenance at various *yaa'a* and to perform the required ceremonies and rituals.

2.3.2 The *Yaa'a*

The term *yaa* is the root for the verb *yaa'a*, meaning 'to go', 'to move/movement', exclusively used in the plural form with the connotation of a collective entity. *Yaa'a* applies to any mobile group whose members co-reside or come/move together to perform ceremonies. It also refers to the permanent mobile villages whose residents are responsible for implementing public rituals critical for the well-being of the Borana community at large. The notion of collective movement corresponds to the ritual circuit or cycle of each major *yaa'a* of the Borana since the *yaa'a* members organise and perform ceremonies in different sites during each *gadaa* period of eight years.

There is one *yaa'a gadaa* related to the *gadaa* generation class system and five *yaa'a qaalluu*, related to the *qaalluu*, who are ritual dignitaries among the Oromo. The *yaa'a gadaa* is subdivided into three villages, each being also referred to by the term *yaa'a*.

The *yaa'a gadaa* is as a whole led by the *abbaa gadaa arbooraa* and by five other *hayyuu aduulaa*. These six officers belong to the

generation class occupying the *gadaa* grade. After the eight-year *gadaa* period elapses, representatives of the next generation class replace them (Pecci 1940; Haberland 1963; Asmaron Legesse 1973; Baxter 1954 and 1978). At the *yaa'a gadaa*, there are also other *hayyuu*, belonging to any generation class, called *hayyuu garbaa* and *hayyuu meedicha*, who are also replaced at every new *gadaa* period. All *hayyuu* are evenly nominated from the major clan and all belong to the *warra bokkuu* ('people of the sceptre') descent sections, representing the majority of the Borana population.[6]

The *yaa'a qaalluu* are the villages of residence for the five *qaalluu* of the Borana, holy dignitaries of divine origin. The title is inherited from father to son. In each *yaa'a qaalluu*, there are four *hayyuu garbaa*, all belonging to the *Wara Qaalluu* ('people of the Qaalluu') descent sections. These *hayyuu* are also replaced at each new eight-year *gadaa* period. They are primarily selected by the *qaalluu* himself, within his respective *wara qaalluu* descent group.

It is evident that only selected officers or hereditary dignitaries participate in the *yaa'a* activities. As such, these villages constitute permanent councils and do not fall under the category of community-in councils. The main activity of the *yaa'a* is to perform rituals. Simultaneously, the *yaa'a gadaa* plays a vital political role in integrating the basic political and corporate units. The *hayyuu*'s common ritual action and residence at the *yaa'a gadaa* symbolise interclan unity and cooperation. By executing *gadaa* rituals, the officers mediate between the human and divine worlds, promoting the *nagaa Booranaa*, the internal peace and harmony of Borana society (Baxter 1965; 1978; 1990). After gaining extensive experience at the *yaa'a*, individuals become conscious of the fundamental political value consisting of promoting collaborative inter-clan relations. When they finish their service at the *yaa'a* and they have learned to prioritise the interests of the Borana community over the immediate clan interests, they are allowed to lead their own clan and clan assembly.

The institutional leadership, composed of the *abbaa gadaa*, *qaalluu*, *hayyuu* and *jaallaba* (personal assistants of the *hayyuu*) is legitimated to take leading political roles, due to shared formative experiences and specialised political training at the *yaa'a*.

2.3.3 The *Gumii Gaayoo*

Every eight years the members of the *yaa'a gadaa* organise the *Gumii Gaayoo*, meaning 'the great gathering at the place called Gaayo'.

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6 In Borana each lineage or clan is either *warra qaalluu* or *warra bokkuu*, a classification which overlaps the standard descent category such as *gosa* (clan), *mana* (lineage), *balbala* (minimal lineage).

This constitutes the general assembly, involving all the Borana. As any male Borana can participate and engage in the decision-making process, the *Gumii Gaayoo* is once again a community-in council. It is regarded as the sole formal legislative body and also functions as the highest court. All judicial cases that have not been resolved at lower levels are addressed and discussed at the *Gumii Gaayoo*.[7]

2.3.4 Other Assemblies

All productive units and residential groups, ranging from villages to *madda* (grazing areas watered from a certain group of wells during the dry season) are organised on an inter-clan basis. These integrated relations of production are achieved through specific sets of norms governing the exploitation of pastoral resources, particularly the use of traditional wells. The formulation of such norms results from the values symbolically expressed through the existence of the *yaa'a gadaa* and the inherent rituals. The verbal elaboration and application of these norms are likely the outcomes of intense debates taking place during various assemblies for coordinating the pastoral activities, as schematically described **[tab. 1]**. The enforcement of these norms is ultimately tied to the existence of the *Gumii Gaayoo*, the inter-clan judicial body.

Table 1 Assemblies for the coordination of pastoral activities

TYPE OS ASSEMBLY	MAIN COMPETENCIES
kora eelaa (assembly for the wells)	well maintenance, co-ordination of well use, access to well
kora dheedaa (assembly for grazing)	regulating access to grazing area
kora dheebuu (assembly of the "thirst")	regulating access to water ponds
kora fardaa (assembly for the horses)	any matter concerning horses

The assemblies for coordinating pastoral activities are regularly organised for coordinating the exploitation of specific natural resources. All productive units utilising or desiring to utilise the resource must participate. Therefore, these assemblies are community-in councils. Since participants usually reside in the same area, there are no specific logistic requirements. These assemblies, except for

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7 See Asmaron Legesse (1973) and Abdullahi Shongolo (1994) for a fuller account of the *Gumii Gaayoo* assembly.

kora fardaa which may involve people from distant places, typically last only a few hours.

The last type of assembly is the *ad hoc* meetings organised to address specific judicial cases and disputes that do not fit into any regular or standard assembly. Such assemblies may be called by different names, but a generic expression encompassing all of them is *kora jarroole*, meaning 'assembly of the elders'. These assemblies are the only type that Kuper recognises as being operational in East African pastoral societies.

2.4 The Rules of Decision-Making

Except for military decisions and issues internal to a production unit, such as the daily allocation of labour and resources, all binding decisions in Borana must be made in the context of a community-in-council. During these meetings, certain individuals are allowed to take on leading roles. In the ascriptive and ad hoc assemblies, members of the institutional leadership usually assume these roles. The *hayyuu* acts as the chair or moderator of the meeting and serves as a juridical expert, while the *jaallaba* mostly takes on the role of a prosecutor. All active and capable elders, the *jaroole*, play equally important roles, frequently expressing their opinions on all matters.

In the assemblies for the coordination of pastoral activities, these roles are assumed not by institutional leaders but by individuals with special economic rights over specific natural resources.

Regardless of the assembly type, no one has the power to impose their personal will. Decisions are reached only through general consensus. Consensus must include the person or group that will be penalised. For example, in judicial cases, the accused must admit guilt, and disputes are considered resolved only if one of the parties involved admits guilt. This prevents Borana assemblies from being used as a tool to transmit decisions from the centre to the periphery or lower hierarchical layers, as may happen in less democratic societies characterized by elite councils.

While it may be argued that consensus is difficult to achieve and such a political system could be inefficient, the peculiarity and strength of the Borana polity lie in the dynamics and complex expedients used to reach consensus.

A fundamental guiding principle is the recognised *mura* power vested in Borana institutional leaders, particularly the *hayyuu*. *Mura*, literally meaning 'to cut', likely alluding to their ability to succinctly conclude discussions with a wise statement rooted in their knowledge of *aadaa* and *seera*, the norms and customary laws of the Borana. In the context of assemblies, their role is to enlighten the assembly about Borana norms and laws to resolve impasses, rather

than making decisions themselves. In judicial cases, they are expected to propose appropriate awards or penalties for specific cases, but not to pass judgments or verdicts on reported facts – this prerogative rests with the assembly. In simpler terms, while institutional leaders elucidate the law, the community assesses guilt. Importantly, any participant, especially elders, can express opinions differing from the leader's. I have witnessed instances where the chair of an assembly, a *hayyuu*, altered his opinion based on the prevailing sentiment in the meeting.

A second crucial element for achieving consensus and resolving disputes lies in educating individuals on decision-making and appropriate conduct during assemblies. Discourse needs to adhere to specific standards to prevent resentment and anger. Instances of aggressiveness must be kept in check, and there are ritual methods to alleviate tension. The requirements concerning the ability to master political and juridical speeches and style of discourse, coupled with the necessity for an in-depth understanding of Borana norms and laws, explain why young men are not often granted the opportunity to speak at lengths and why elders are generally perceived as more politically influential.

A third crucial element involves the use of 'procedural sanctions', named so because they are applicable exclusively during the formal assembly proceedings (Bassi 1996a, 177). In Borana assemblies, there is a tendency for the minority to acquiesce to the prevailing opinion. If motivations and sentiments against the majority's argument are exceptionally strong, individuals or assembly factions may persist in resistance. However, when the prevailing opinion is widely accepted and seen as deeply motivated, procedural sanctions come into play. This is particularly common when a single individual, often the one facing penalties from a specific resolution, persists in resisting the general consensus.

Procedural sanctions manifest in both positive and negative forms. The most prevalent is *eebaa* – a blessing – a positive sanction aligning with Borana's decision-making and the judicial system's objectives of alleviating social tension rather than solely punishing the guilty. *Eebaa* takes the form of a collective good wish expressed by assembly members. Symbolically, its positive content represents something the community offers to the recalcitrant individual in exchange for accepting the resolution. *Eebaa* is articulated clearly and audibly only after the individual accepts the assembly's will. However, if resistance persists, the matter may escalate to the attention of larger assemblies, including the *Gumii Gaayoo*. It is in this context that *abaarsa* – the curse – can be invoked, carrying negative implications.

Both the blessing and the curse, as highlighted by Baxter (1990, 238), carry significant social implications. They effectively convey

the community's stance in an environment where interpersonal co-operation is vital for survival.

Another expedient employed to encourage individuals to comply with the assembly's will is the gradual escalation of juridical sanctions as the case is deliberated in successive assemblies. The same wrongdoing is fined with increasing amounts of cattle as the case is discussed at the local level, at a *kora gosaa* or the *Gumii Gaayoo*. In serious cases or when an individual persistently continues to oppose the assemblies' resolutions, the *abaarsa* will be pronounced in the context of the *Gumii Gaayoo*. It is the most severe sanction, signifying expulsion from the Borana community.

Finally, it is crucial to note that the judicial process is marked by the practice of institutional forgiveness, wherein the sanction is mitigated when the culprit pleads guilty (Bassi 1992b).[8] On one hand, the presence of institutional forgiveness enables leaders to declare a severe penalty in cases of misbehaviour, while, on the other hand, it facilitates the admission of guilt and, subsequently, the restoration of proper social relations within the community.

In summary, the judicial proceedings emerge as a rhetorical strategy aimed at reaffirming the principles of correct behaviour within the community and restoring good social relations.

2.5 An Alternative to State Organisation?

The focus of the discussion so far has been Borana polity, with a specific emphasis on assembly organisation, highlighting its structural, functional and procedural complexity. The assembly structure is connected to other features of the political field, including ethical values such as *nagaa Booranaa* and institutions like *qaalluu* and *gadaa*. A more comprehensive understanding of Borana's polity requires a deeper analysis of these elements as well. The *gadaa* system, in particular, is acknowledged as a complex institution that has been subject to extensive scholarly scrutiny and debate.

Then, a fundamental question, with deep political implications, arises: are the Borana traditionally organised in a state? The answer depends on what we mean by a state. If we examine the level of integration between the constitutive segments of the polity, then they are.[9] The *gadaa* system – through its symbolism, specialized training and legitimisation of the political leadership, as well as the logistical

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[8] See ch. 3 in this book.

[9] This statement challenges the anthropological classificatory literature. The polities based on age and generation class systems are in fact considered a sub-category of the stateless or primary societies (Bernardi 1985).

organisation of the general assembly – provides the means to integrate different clans both at the political and productive levels. It establishes the existence of a permanent political ritual centre. This is a typical achievement of pre-colonial African kingdoms. However, there are two basic differences from African kingdoms. The first is that in Borana there is no king. I will address this point later on. The second is that kingdoms are considered to promote and guarantee order through the use or threat of an organised force controlled by the king. Although the Borana and the Oromo had a powerful organised force for external conflicts based on the *gadaa* institution,[10] they do not employ it within their society, at least according to my ethnographic records. Since the publication of *African Political Systems* (Fortes, Evans-Pritchard 1940) and in common sense, the presence of an organised force controlled by the political centre for both external and internal use is considered one distinctive feature of state systems. If we accept this definition, we should exclude the Borana Oromo polity from the state category. In this case, however, we should also review our assumptions. In evolutionary thinking, state organisations are considered late achievements in human evolution, associated with high culture and civilisation, leading to social and political complexity. Although there are, of course, complex states – for instance, modern democracies or some African pre-colonial kingdoms or large historical empires – the distinctive feature mentioned above, by itself, does not connote any degree of 'high political achievement'. The presence of a pyramidal structure of power without functional differentiation of political roles, with a king controlling an armed force to impose the extraction of surplus, would meet the criteria of statehood but has nothing complex in itself. If we look into the internal dynamics of the coercive process, we realize that such a system is the reproduction at a larger scale of the primate band structure, based on status gained by the use of intra-group violence and aggressiveness. It is more difficult to build a system that can guarantee the rights of the polity's members. This is, to a certain extent, within the specific political philosophy, achieved in modern democracies or some complex pre-colonial African kingdoms. It is a much more central concern in the Borana Oromo political organisation, binding every decision to the assembly context and transferring coercive action directly within the assembly context. In this way, coercion is never exercised by using violence and force but rather by elaborated symbolic and rhetorical expedients: once an individual has accepted a resolution, there is no need to enforce it.

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10   This is considered as the military basis of the so-called "Oromo expansion" of the XVI, XVII and XVIII centuries.

The internal political processes of Borana society appear to me to be more sophisticated than those found in complex African pre-colonial kingdoms. The Borana decisional dynamics more fully exploit the specific quality of human beings: their high capacity to think symbolically and act accordingly. At the same time, they reduce violence on human beings performed on behalf of public institutions. They also provide a satisfactory answer to the permanent tension, underlying many political theories, between the need to coordinate human activity and the social injustice generated by the coordinating political system. The internal use of an organised force implies that someone controls it, a condition facilitating the development of structural inequality, whereas, in the Borana case, an individual or a group always has the ultimate possibility to reject a resolution felt to be deeply unjust.

As mentioned, among the Borana, the political community does not identify itself with a king – that is, a single man symbolising the entire country from his investiture to his death – but rather with a group of *gadaa* officers that is replaced every eight years (a *gadaa* calendrical period). Among them, the *abbaa gadaa* assumes a leading symbolic role. Since, according to accepted anthropological literature, only kingdoms are accounted as pre-colonial state systems, this is again an element that may have contributed to excluding the Oromo polity, based on a generation class system, from the statehood category or, through the misleading evolutionary extension of meaning, from complex or civilized societies.

It is interesting to observe that such a discriminatory attitude is not found among European observers who, in the second half of the 19th century, resided among the agricultural Oromo communities of the Ethiopian highlands. For instance, Salviac (1901) described the Oromo political offices and institutions with terms currently applied to Western political systems, such as *premier magistrate*, *assesseur*, *juges*, *parlement*, *gouvernement*, *and ministre* (1901, 183-4). Both Salviac (1901) and d'Abbadie (1880), in the titles of their contributions, labelled the Oromo people as a "grande nation africaine". Salviac further clarifies the concept:

> Ainsi le peuple Galla, fortement attaché à l'Abba Mouda, le chef de la tribu aînée, le Représentant de Dieu aux yeux de toute la nation, mérite, et par l'identité de l'origine, du nom et du langage, et par l'unité de la religion, des lois et du caractère, d'être considéré comme un seulpeuple, une seule famille agrandie d'Orma. (1901, 182)[11]

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11 About a century earlier, Bruce (1790, 216, 227), too, uses, in a more generic way, the term nation for the Oromo. He briefly describes the voting process by which each section sends delegates to the head-quarter 'of the king' in charge for seven years (1790,

According to d'Abbadie (1880), the Oromo custom concerning assemblies "rappelle la coutume basque […] de convoquer le parlement sous le chêne de Guernica". Salviac adds that it "rappelle aussi bien les assemblées du Champ de Mars chez les Francs" (Salviac 1901, 184). The direct confrontation between the Oromo and highly estimated pre-modern European people is more systematic in Salviac's chapter dedicated to the Oromo procedures and legislation:

> C'est sa loi non écrite, c'est son *common law* qui fait la force de l'Angleterre; c'est une sagesse séculaire qui a créé les *fueros* basques si admirables et si peu connus. On n'aura donc pas de peine à comprendre que les Oromo, qui ne savent pas ècrire, aient des lois tout aussi valables que celles des Anglais. (Salviac 1901, 201)

> On ne s'ètonnera donc pas de trouvar des règles de procédure étables même parmi les nations peu civilisées. (Salviac 1901, 201)

> "Comme chez les Anglais et les Basques, le ministère public est inconnu". (Salviac 1901, 201)

> Quand ils sont tous d'accord, – car les Oromo, de même que les Anglais, n'admettent que l'unanimité – le jugement est pronuncé. (Salviac 1901, 202)

During a time of dominant evolutionary thinking, Salviac comments the *gadaa* system in the following way:

> Voilà bien une organisation compliquée, semble-t-il, mais en soi fort simple, et qui révèle, en ceux qui l'ordonnèrent, la sagesse et la prévoyance d'une haute civilisation et une philosophie sociale non moins admirable. (Salviac 1901, 194)

The use of equating political systems by using the same terminology, the explicit reference to the concept of nation and the positive comparison with European people express the feeling that the Oromo, before being too affected by the Shoan kingdom's conquest, were organised in a complex polity, ready to accommodate the modern transformation.

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219). Bruce's knowledge of the Oromo, however, is much more occasional, superficial, and filtered through Abyssinian views and sources.

2.6 Beyond the Tradition/Modernity Dichotomy

Of course, today, there is a deep qualitative gap between the modern Ethiopian state and the surviving self-government organisations of the Oromo. The Ethiopian state ideology assumes continuity between the older Abyssinian kingdoms and the modern Ethiopian governments (Megerssa 1997). The same dominant ideology projects the northern superiority back to the Axumite time, based on the evolutionary assumption that a kingdom system is more efficient and more complex than other types of political systems. This is also one of the sources of the structural ethnocentrism I have mentioned in the introduction. Although I have not been specifically dealing with the Abyssinian kingdoms – actually not much is known about their internal political process, despite their tradition of writing – I hope I have provided enough arguments to show that such a superiority is not supported by evidence.

The qualitative differences observed during the 20th century between the Abyssinian and the Oromo systems are simply the result of specific 19th-century historical circumstances, at the time of the scramble for Africa. The development of international relations gave better access to European-made firearms and military superiority to one of the Ethiopian centres of power. The Shoan kingdom could, thus, conquer its empire, at the same time the European powers were using their technological and military superiority to build their colonies all over Africa. The winning system was internationally legitimised and empowered within the international arena. As such, it had the economic resources and the opportunity to modernise. The history of modern Ethiopia is a history of progressive and slow construction of a modern state, marked by critical events.[12] The losing system was, instead, isolated from the international arena. Both practically and ideologically, it was cut out from the process of modernisation, being relegated to the biased 'traditional' sphere.

Had the Oromo been left independent, would they have had the capacity to assimilate the critical elements of modernity, mainly consisting of technology, scientific knowledge and their control through specialisation? These would, of course, have implied changes in the system, including the development of infrastructure, educational institutions and appropriate juridical and administrative devices. From a strictly historical point of view, the question is a sterile exercise. However, the issue is theoretically relevant in the contemporary context. I disagree with the European ethnocentric idea that

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12   With the risk of oversimplifying a complex issue, it is worthwhile to mention the infrastructure development during the Italian occupation, the bureaucratisation of the state, and some industrialisation in the post-Italian imperial period, mass education during the Derg and democratisation in the post-Derg period.

modernisation is only possible within a European-like cultural and political setting. This is, once again, an evolutionary assumption implying the radical transformation of the African social, political and values systems as a pre-condition for progress, an idea, that, within the European internal dialectic, has been functional in legitimising the colonial conquest. My personal opinion is that most systems if left alone, can incorporate and socialise positive innovations, while in the process they adapt themselves to the new needs.

Particularly among the Borana, of whom I have direct knowledge, I have observed the process initiated by TLDP (Third Livestock Development Project). The introduction of new mechanical technology for the excavation and maintenance of traditional wells was challenging to the Borana normative system, both for procedural reasons and for its influence on the correlation between investment and property rights (Bassi 1996a, 146-50). The new situation produced a strong internal debate, and it activated the legislative process, which ended up with new formal procedures to accommodate the innovation and its side effects within the existing Borana legal framework. Similarly, the recent ethnography by Boku Tache (personal communication) shows how the Borana have critically provided differentiated socialising answers to other technical innovations introduced by NGOs and how land enclosing for private use has activated the Borana judicial and legislative processes.

The 'traditional' political elite is fully aware of the new demands. When I was doing my fieldwork, during the Derg period, some influential elders were discussing the candidatures for important *gadaa* offices. They wanted to select educated youths, but the latter refused the offer for fear of being excluded from the more relevant economic and political 'modern' arena.

These simple facts show that technical innovations are easily socialised, that normally the society activates its internal processes to absorb the innovation within acceptable local political, ethical and legal frames and that the system undergoes self-adjustments to respond to the new needs. All these are happening exclusively within the so-called 'traditional sector', without any involvement and even awareness of the formal state, or modern, institutions. I think it is enough to claim that the so-called 'traditional' institutions and the 'traditional' ethical and legal models are the ones that still matter to people. 'Traditional' institutions are ready to modernise themselves if they are allowed to. It is only their marginality, mainly their lack of legitimacy within the broader national and international political and economic arena, which prevents them from doing so.

In short, I tend to believe that the qualitative gap that can be observed today between state and traditional organisations is simply the result of the marginality imposed on the latter. Even in the Ethiopian case, it has nothing to do with an older superiority whose

perception is based on misleading evolutionary assumptions, but, as elsewhere in Africa, it is the result of the process of formation of modern African states. Forced marginality into the 'traditional' sphere is a major cause of failed modernisation and underdevelopment of many African communities.