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## 8 **Power's Ambiguity or the Political Significance of *Gadaa***

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*Gadaa* is certainly a very strong symbol of Oromo identity, but, as with most symbols, it may have multiple meanings. Among the people still practising it as an ongoing institution, it affects a wide range of social phenomena, including prescriptive rules, ceremonies, rites, public offices and actual physical villages enhancing political meanings. Each manifestation holds symbolic meanings which influence both the conceptions and social relations. When an Oromo nationalist talks about *gadaa*, he may not be interested in the constellation of symbols of *gadaa* practice, but rather in the institution as a whole. *Gadaa* becomes a conceptual abstraction, something in which all Oromo are supposed to identify themselves because they recognise it as a root feature of Oromo culture or as a

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symbol of a pan-Oromo national political identity (as distinct from the Ethiopian national identity) (Baxter 1994a). The recent debate on the application of the principles or values of *gadaa* to a modern state<sup>1</sup> is part of this process.

The conceptualisation of *gadaa* with this second meaning is the outcome of a long tradition of Oromo studies which has, by and large, legitimated Oromo nationalists to stress the central political role of the system. However, when shifting from *gadaa* as a symbol of identity to *gadaa* as a political practice we are moving from one domain to another. Baxter's criticism of the classical political interpretation of the *gadaa* system (1978a) and, more recently, of its applicability to a modern polity (Baxter 1990, 236; 1994b, 260; 1994a, 177-84) constitutes a warning of the possibility that some misinterpretations may have occurred.

### 8.1 The Prevailing Model Within Oromo Studies

The earlier accounts of the Oromo political system have probably been affected by a lack of analytical instruments. The European travellers or missionaries of the 19th and early 20th centuries could only interpret the ethnographic data against the background of the known political concepts and models.<sup>2</sup> Oromo polity appeared to be structured and ordered, showing some elements of political centralisation. The society was guided by institutional leaders differentiated by a variety of formal titles and the internal political discourse was dominated by a constant reference to widely accepted oral norms and laws. The various authors have, consequently, translated Oromo titles and institutions with terms and equivalent concepts which referred to current Western political systems,<sup>3</sup> particularly to Western democracies. However, there was very little critical analysis of the functions, powers, and operational rules inherent in the various Oromo political offices and institutions.

Later, when the characteristics of Oromo polity were formulated in more technical terms, the ethnographic descriptions had become the ethnographic reality, a process certainly favoured by the scarcity of research in the specific field of political anthropology.

The analogies with Western state systems have, for instance, been expressed indirectly by stressing a bureaucratic character in the

<sup>1</sup> Asmarom Legesse (1987) and Lemmu Baissa (1994) are, among others, relevant contributors to this topic.

<sup>2</sup> The instruments for analysing the great variety of African political systems have only developed with the growth of comparative political anthropology.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Salviac directly translates various Oromo titles and institutions into "premier magistrate", "assesseur", "juges", "parlement", "gouvernement" and "minister" (Salviac 1901, 183-4).

*gadaa* polity, an interpretation which may have originated from the following statement by Herbert Lewis:

certain characteristics of Jimma government, particularly those that seem most bureaucratic [...] were typical [...] of the “republican” Galla. (1965, 126)

Lewis’s book is certainly one of the few relevant contributions to the political anthropology of the Oromo. However, it refers to an Oromo monarchy whose protagonists had completely abandoned the *gadaa* system; he was forced to rely on older or less specialistic sources to reconstruct the *gadaa* type of polity. Despite references to the functional specificity of the different *gadaa* offices, in several passages Lewis introduces many restrictive remarks<sup>4</sup> on such a feature, which is accepted as an “ideal pattern” (H. Lewis 1965, 28). Indeed, he explicitly expresses doubts about Salviac’s translations (H. Lewis 1965, 28). According to his interpretation, the ideal pattern should be regarded as a feature that concretely developed only with the formation of a monarchy. Two years later we can read, from an authoritative European anthropologist, that “the leading positions of the class in power can be said to constitute a bureaucracy in Weber’s sense” (Knutson 1967, 167), thus giving a concrete dimension to the ideal pattern.

These kinds of scholarly traditions have probably influenced later scholars more than is generally assumed. For example, Asmarom Legesse, whose systematic study has so strongly marked the current ideas on *gadaa*, writes “that the core band has already developed some characteristics of a functionally differentiated bureaucracy” (1973, 69).<sup>5</sup> As a result, most descriptions of the *gadaa* system seem to respond to a general model consisting of a generation class acquiring the leadership of the *gadaa* council (called *ya’a* in Borana) for 8 years and, with it, acquiring the political (as well as the ritual) power and the capacity to ‘govern’ for 8 years. During such a period of ‘government’ the members of the class are called *gadaa* (or *luba* among some Oromo groups). The cyclical replacement of the ‘class in power’, a typical feature of the ‘*gadaa* government’, is considered a rotation in the control of the political power and, consequently, it is sometimes regarded as a basis for the Oromo, or *gadaa*, democracy, as opposed to the Amhara ‘imperialism’ and ‘despotism’ [tab. 6].

In their prevailing use, such terms as ‘power’, ‘government’, ‘centre’, and other correlated expressions refer either to ambiguous or

<sup>4</sup> He explicitly expresses doubts about Salviac’s translations (H. Lewis 1965, 28).

<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere in the book Asmarom seems critical of that same view. He explicitly states that the Borana “have little inclination to parcel out specific tasks to individual officers [...] in the manner of bureaucratic organizations” and that “the assembly has little internal differentiation in terms of functional tasks” (Legesse 1973, 69).

Table 6 The prevailing model of *gadaa* as a bureaucratic institution

Progress of a generation class through the grades	Grades	Bureaucratic attributions
8 years	dabballee	
16 years	gammee	
8 years	kuusa	
13 years	raaba	
8 years	<b>gadaa</b> = government	
27 years	yuuba	
8 years	gadaammojjii	

too wide political categories. Even in the narrow field of political anthropology, they have been used with different meanings. For a rational attempt to apply the *gadaa* political philosophy to a socially and economically differentiated modern Oromo polity, the terms of the discussion must be clarified, and the political significance of the *gadaa* system needs to be analysed in its proper context. I will try to illustrate my views using the results of the research I have carried out among the Borana Oromo of Southern Ethiopia.<sup>6</sup> The majority of the Borana of Ethiopia follow their traditional religion and among the Oromo groups the strongest attachment to and observance of *gadaa*.

<sup>6</sup> This paper is primarily based on data collected in Southern Ethiopia in 1989 and 1990 as part of the requirements for a doctoral program at the *Istituto Universitario Orientale*, Naples. More extensive ethnographic evidence can be found in the author's doctoral thesis (Bassi 1992c), which is currently undergoing further analytical elaboration. The author extends gratitude to Dr. Berhanu Abebe and Dr. Taddese Beyene for their assistance from Ethiopian academic institutions, and acknowledges Dr. Bernardi and Dr. Triulzi for their academic guidance. Special thanks are also extended to Dr. Baxter for providing comments on this paper.

## 8.2 Assembly Organisation and Decision Making

Perhaps the dominant element of Borana polity is not the *gadaa* system, but rather, as Baxter and Uri Almagor were already suggesting during the 70s (1978b, 19), their complex, articulated and structured assembly organisation. There are assemblies of different types, concerning different types of social groups, as well as of different levels, involving larger groups in a pyramidal assembly structure. All binding decisions, concerning virtually all spheres of social activity,<sup>7</sup> have to be reached during an assembly. They include money or cattle collections for collective investments or for assisting the needy, arrangements for the management and use of natural resources and all juridical proceedings. Each issue is discussed in the appropriate assembly context.<sup>8</sup>

The modalities through which binding decisions are reached are strictly regulated by specific and complex procedural rules. Broadly speaking, decisions are taken by consensus under the guide of the institutional leadership. The prerogatives of the institutional leaders, as well as the limits to their decisional power, are implicitly fixed by the procedural rules, by the assembly's behavioural practices and, more explicitly, by the dominant political ethos.<sup>9</sup>

### 8.2.1 Participation in Decision Making

The decisions taken during an assembly can only involve the members of the community concerned with that specific assembly. The married men of the same community can either be represented or participate personally.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, through the overwhelming assembly organisation, all binding decisions are reached by consensus with the direct or indirect participation of the persons involved. Once the individual or his representative has accepted a resolution, there is no need to enforce it by the use or by the threat of an executive force. The formation of consensus, however, is not a spontaneous process. Several procedural items and expedients are used to avoid

<sup>7</sup> Decisions regarding the allocation of manpower within the family are excluded since they fall under the competence of single *abbaa waraa* ('father of the family'). Domestic disputes are, however, discussed at the assemblies.

<sup>8</sup> Assemblies may be held frequently and in any place; the organisation of and the participation in assemblies can be considered among the most demanding engagements in Borana and are certainly the elders' main job and responsibility.

<sup>9</sup> The egalitarian ethos of the Borana has several times been stressed by Baxter. See, for example, Baxter 1994a, 183.

<sup>10</sup> Borana assemblies, therefore, fall within Kuper's 'community-in council' category (1971, 14).

or to get out of impasse situations. There are also specific procedural means, which I have elsewhere called ‘procedural sanctions’, used to persuade individuals to accept the assembly’s will. Sometimes the pressure exercised by the assembly and its leaders on individuals is so heavy as to be considered full coercion.

The lack of executive powers by the *abbaa bokuu*<sup>11</sup> and by the assembly of the Oromo was already noted during the 19th century by Massaja (1886, 79, 172). Hence, the characteristics here described may not be exclusive to the present-day Borana, but they may also apply to the highland Oromo during the mid-19th century.<sup>12</sup>

We can thus conclude that, in Borana polity, coercion is directly exercised within the assembly context, taking the form of persuasion, even if that is sometimes an exasperated one. The leaders, by their prerogatives, play an important role in exercising this type of coercion/persuasion and they may be able to obtain some public goals, such as the maintenance of the *yaa’a* or an investment for digging a well. In this sense they have some executive capacity, but, since they do not control any executive force, they are not invested with what is usually implied by ‘executive power’.

### 8.2.2 The Rhetorical Use of the Juridical Sanctions

The Borana legal system fits the general pattern described above. Borana customary law is characterised by a relatively large number of juridical sanctions. They include heavy fines, corporal punishments and others. The curse (*abaarsa*), implying both a metaphysical dimension and the community’s ostracism, may end up in banishment.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes the oral law contains the enunciation of the proper sanction to be applied in the case of law-breaking. However, if the ethnographer moves his attention from the theoretical statements of law to its practical application, then it becomes evident that the heaviest sanctions are only rhetorically used to persuade individuals to accept court resolutions rather than being applied and enforced (Bassi 1992b).<sup>14</sup> This is in line with Dinsa Lepisa’s study, which, while emphasising the authoritative character of Borana law, after evaluating a significant number of cases concludes that the Oromo legal system

**11** Among several Oromo sections the title of *abbaa bokuu* is equivalent to the *abbaa gadaa* of the Borana.

**12** Massaja is one of the few 19th century authors providing some observations on specific aspects of the political process among the Oromo.

**13** For a comment see Baxter 1990, 238. For a systematic account of Oromo legal institutions see Lepisa 1975.

**14** See also ch. 3 in this book.

is oriented towards arbitration and compensation rather than punishment (Lepisa 1975, 86). Hence, as in the case of the village tribunals of the Bunyoro (Beattie 1960, 69), the juridical practice of the Borana seems to aim at the restoration of good relations rather than at the punishment of an offender.

### 8.2.3 The General Assembly and the Legislative Process

Among some Oromo groups, a general assembly may be gathered, whose legislative role for the entire community has rightly been stressed. I refer especially to the Borana *Gumii Gaayoo* (the ‘crowd’ at the place ‘Gaayo’), which is the supreme juridical and formal legislative body. However, it would be misleading to think of it in terms of a central and permanent legislative body on the model of a modern parliament. The *Gumii Gaayoo* meets only periodically, once every *gadaa* period (8 years), and the number of laws proclaimed during each general assembly is quite limited. Asmarom Legesse lists twelve laws (Legesse 1973, 93-9) announced during the 1966 assembly. Since the same laws were reported as ‘cardinal laws’ also during the 1988 assembly (Abdullahi Shongolo 1992; 1994) they are legal re-statements. Shongolo also describes a few supplementary laws.

The proclamation of laws at the *Gumii Gaayoo* is only the final phase of a wider legislative process taking place through the long debates at all types of assemblies. Among the Borana, as elsewhere, norms are expressed in a variety of ways, ranging from old and new social practices to concepts and values embodied in ritual performances. Such a wide normative domain falls under the Borana category *aadaa*. When a dispute arises, it is taken to the assembly where people are confronted with the established norms. In this context norms of any kind need to be verbally expressed and hence verbally re-elaborated. Conflict resolution may need non-ambiguous normative statements which have binding value. Such statements are the oral laws, *seera*, which can be defined as that specific category of verbally expressed norms, which are elaborated and applied in the assembly context. Only a few of the commonly applied laws are formally announced at the *Gumii Gaayoo*. While important, this gathering is not the exclusive legislative and juridical assembly. It is, however, an integral component of the assembly organisation.

### 8.3 The Power of the *Gadaa* Officers and the Borana ‘Government’

The stress usually put on the political power of the *gadaa* class is probably a consequence of failure to recognise the different qualities of the ritual and the political powers. Bernardi (1984) has shown that in societies regulated by age and generational class systems, the two types of power are interrelated but not identical. He defines power in terms of “the capacity to perform social activity” (Bernardi 1984, 59). Such a capacity can be ritual, political, and so on in the different grades of the system. When taking a leading role at the *yaa’a gadaa*, the six *hayyuu aduulaa*, including the three *abbaa gadaa*,<sup>15</sup> are the representatives of the *gadaa* generational class. However, this does not imply that the class members as a whole and the class representatives are also the political leaders of the Borana.

The term *yaa’a* (‘yaa’ is the root of the plural form of the verb ‘to go’, ‘to move’) is used to describe any mobile village whose members co-reside to perform ceremonies on behalf of the whole Borana community. There is the *yaa’a gadaa*, led by the *abbaa gadaa arbooraa*, and five *yaa’a qaalluu* (‘village of the *qaalluu*’), each led by a different *qaalluu*. The *yaa’a gadaa* is in turn divided into three coordinated sub-villages, each led by one *abbaa gadaa*.<sup>16</sup>

Despite being a political centre, for reasons which I will explain later, the *yaa’a gadaa* should not be considered a centre of government. I never saw or heard from the elders about the necessity to implement or ‘execute’ a decision formally taken at the *yaa’a gadaa*, other than providing the human and material resources needed to maintain the *yaa’a* itself and to perform the inherent ceremonies. I neither heard of nor witnessed any behaviour suggesting that the *yaa’a gadaa* was the appropriate forum for discussing issues not resolved within lower assembly contexts. According to my Borana interlocutors, “the *yaa’a* members are kept too busy with rituals”.

The different titles, such as *hayyuu aduulaa*, *hayyuu garbaa*, *hayyuu meedicha* and various *abbaa gadaa* point up different attributes, such as the individual’s generation class, and which *yaa’a* he serves based on his class and clan membership and to the order of his nomination. Title differences may imply different ritual statuses and different assignments during the performance at a *yaa’a*, but not a differentiated political responsibility, let alone differentiated administrative or executive duties.

<sup>15</sup> The six *hayyuu aduulaa* are nominated at an earlier grade of the *gadaa* cycle. The three among them that are first mentioned during the public announcement will become the three *abbaa gadaa* when their generational class reaches the *gadaa* grade.

<sup>16</sup> There is also a *yaa’a rabaa*, related to the *gadaa* institution, which is not relevant in this discussion.



Political power should be identified with the capacity, within the various assemblies, to take over certain leading roles. During all types of assembly, the members of the *gadaa* class do not enjoy any decisional prerogative compared to the non-*gadaa*. The decisional influence grows with age and experience. Since the members of the *gadaa* class are relatively young, or even very young, they have very limited political power.

The situation is more complex concerning the six class representatives, the *hayyuu aduulaa*. Permanence in the *yaa'a* is a prerequisite for institutional political leadership. The taking over of the most important formal roles during the assemblies is reserved for those who have been invested with titles such as *abbaa gadaa*, *qaalluu*, *hayyuu*, and *jallaaba*, which correspond to certain roles at the various *yaa'a*.<sup>17</sup> The *hayyuu aduulaa* are only a minority among the various officers in service at any given time at the *yaa'a gadaa*. All the officers are equally entitled to institutional political leadership. Several Borana commenters have claimed that the *hayyuu aduulaa* have often shown less capacity than other types of *hayyuu* because they are chosen when they are too young to be properly evaluated. Moreover, the *wara qaalluu* descent segments<sup>18</sup> are represented by their own leaders at the respective *yaa'a qaalluu*.

Most important is the fact that entitlement to formal leadership is only a *potential* social capacity: the *actual* assignment of authoritative roles is largely conditioned by the consensus of the community involved in any given assembly. Only those who are considered capable of adequately responding to the responsibilities assigned to them have political prestige and authority. This requires some definite qualities, such as knowledge of both substantive laws and procedural rules and rhetorical skills. All these skills may grow with the experience and practice of assembly activity, and it is only over time that a political leader gains the trust of the people. This is why, in all assemblies, I have happened to attend, the *yaa'a* officers currently in service, including the representatives of the *hayyuu aduulaa*, have shown smaller political authority than older and 'retired' *hayyuu*. The *gadaa* officers in service, despite having a central ritual responsibility, are not regarded as those with the capacity to chair an important assembly, to act as a judge or to solve practical problems, other than those regarding their ritual activities at the *yaa'a*.

<sup>17</sup> Only the *jallaaba*, the institutional leaders of lower level, can eventually be nominated without having resided at one of the *yaa'a*. For example, some Muslim elders living in Garba Tula received the *meedich* bracelets from the *qaalluu* of the Sabbo moiety as a sign of appointment (Baxter, personal communication). Since those *jallaaba* must be chosen by a *hayyuu* or by the *qaalluu*, the source of their legitimacy is anyway related to the *yaa'a*.

<sup>18</sup> Borana descent sections are known as either *wara qaalluu* or *wara bokkuu*.

In this context, if the *gadaa* officers have to be considered the 'class in power', then it is their ritual power which has to be stressed, since in the assembly context they do not exercise more political authority than 'retired' leaders, nor do they represent a centre of government. If the term government has to be applied to Borana polity, then it may be better described as a 'diffused government', following Lucy Mair's well known definition of a government which can be said to consist of the whole adult male population (1962, 78).

#### 8.4 Political Centre and Integration

I have elsewhere suggested that clans are the basic units of Borana political organisation.<sup>19</sup> The *gadaa* system plays a key role in integrating those units (Bassi 1994). The officers in service at any given time at the *yaa'a* embody the major clan divisions. The *hayyuu's* common action and their common residence at the *yaa'a gadaa* symbolise inter-clan unity and inter-clan cooperation. Through the performance of *gadaa* rituals, they serve as intermediaries between the human and spiritual realms, fostering the *Borana nagaa* ('the Peace of the Borana') (Baxter 1965, 1978a; Bulcha 1996; Helland 1996; Oba 1996). They are the ritual guarantees of inter-clan peace, to which they devote a minimum of eight years of their lives. Only after such an experience, hence when they have become conscious of the critical importance of promoting good inter-clan relations, are they allowed to lead their own clans. At that point, they will be able to value the interests of the Borana as a whole above and higher than their immediate corporate interests.<sup>20</sup>

Institutional political leadership, therefore, is legitimated by the formative ritual experience at the *yaa'a* and, consequently, it possesses a divine dimension. The divine source of the leader's power is symbolised, for instance, by the *rufa* turban, which they wear during the *yaa'a* rituals and, later, during the assemblies. The *rufa* combines the colours black and blue, both of which in Oromo are called *gurracha*, the colour of *Waaqa* (literally 'sky' and 'God'), passing from blue to black with the coming of night. Furthermore, it is kept on the head and hence is up like the sky. It is said that it should never touch the ground, just as the sky, the domain of *Waaqa* ('God'), does not touch the earth, the domain of man. The *rufa* symbolises the sky and the divinity. The person wearing it is consequently a bridge between the

<sup>19</sup> Borana clans fulfil all requisites of corporate groups as defined by Allott, Epstein and Gluckman (1969, 41).

<sup>20</sup> See chs. 1 and 2 in this book.

sky and the earth, hence a mediator between the social (human) and the divine worlds.

We can thus conclude that the *yaa'a gadaa* is not a centre of government, but it is a political centre, a centre of ritual super-integration which bears a direct political effect on the process of formation, and on the legitimation of, the institutional leadership.

The *gadaa* offices – *hayyuu aduulaa*, *hayyuu garbaa* and *hayyuu medichaa* – are equally divided among the major descent sections. This prevents political competition, though such competition may emerge at a lower level of descent segmentation, among adjacent clans, or within clans. The clan corporately selects its candidate for appointment as *hayyuu* or *abbaa gadaa*<sup>21</sup> and also provides the human<sup>22</sup> and material resources<sup>23</sup> that are necessary for being accepted by others and for the maintenance of the *yaa'a* and the performance of the inherent ceremonies. The *yaa'a* activities are implemented with the contribution individually provided by the various officers residing at the *yaa'a*, who are in turn supported by their own descent section.<sup>24</sup>

### 8.5 *Gadaa* and Kingdoms: Two Alternative Political Philosophies

The ritual and political integration achieved through the *gadaa* system has significant economic implications. Despite intense competition for scarce water resources, clans and other social entities avoid physical clashes. Residential groups are organised on an inter-clan basis, fostering pastoral cooperation among members of different clans (Oba 1996; Helland 1996). The exploitation of all natural resources occurs on an inter-clan basis and appears to be extremely efficient and highly coordinated. These features differentiate the Borana from other segmented pastoral societies since they recall the achievements of African kingdoms as described by Fortes and

<sup>21</sup> In the literature it is often recorded that these officers are 'elected'. The term refers to the process of internal selection. Once the descent section has selected the person, the candidate starts a campaign by visiting the *yaa'a* and other influential elders for being accepted and achieve the final ritual nomination.

<sup>22</sup> The 'helpers' of each *hayyuu* are classified into *makala* ('messengers', 'pastoral assistants') and *jallaaba* ('assistant', who help the *hayyuu* in the coordination of his ritual-political activities).

<sup>23</sup> The material resources can be either *kaato* (legitimate contribution to the *yaa'a* members), mainly cattle to be slaughtered during the ceremonies, and *galata* (literally 'thanks'), consisting in cows or cash, *harakee* (alcoholic spirits) or other goods handed over to the *yaa'a* members in order to push a certain candidature for an office. The latter, though widely practised, is considered illegitimate.

<sup>24</sup> The *hayyuu aduulaa* can also collect cattle or the equivalent money (*kaato*) and assistants from among their own generation class mates.

Evans-Pritchard (1940).<sup>25</sup> However, whereas kingdoms and, more generally, states may impose law and political decisions by the use, or potential use, of an organised force – whose control is delegated to certain social entities – the Borana maintain their internal order by consensus and persuasion, which, in turn, are obtained by diffused and intense participation in decision-making within the assemblies. The two political systems radically differ in their operational modalities. Though the assembly procedures may be as coercive as the use of physical force, the political philosophy inherent in Borana’s polity seems to be opposite to that of African kingdoms. On the other hand, similar practical achievements would rather suggest that Borana polity is an alternative to kingdoms.

The Borana have successfully developed an egalitarian but efficient political system in a pastoral context, with the *gadaa* system promoting social integration. It seems that the Oromo were able to apply the same institution to the agricultural environment of the Ethiopian highlands. However, whereas the Borana *gadaa* integrates clans, among the highland Oromo of the 19th century “the gada assemblies and officers were territorially organized institutions, uniting contiguous local districts” (H. Lewis 1965, 29). In the agricultural highlands, clans were no longer corporate groups and the organisational capacity had shifted to the local communities, a process facilitated by the clan fragmentation related to the migration and by the closer bond to land inherent in agricultural activity. Moreover, under certain historical and environmental circumstances, the *gadaa* type of polity was replaced by a state system, as in the case of the Oromo monarchies (H. Lewis 1996).

## 8.6 The Oromo Democracy

Borana polity, with *gadaa* as just one component, can indeed be regarded as a democracy in the strict sense of “government of the people, by the people, for the people” (Lincoln). The widespread participation in decision-making and the political process, spanning the juridical, legislative, and other fields and moving effectively from the base to the centre, arguably renders it even more democratic than modern states based on the division of powers and universal suffrage. However, Borana’s polity lacks several features typically associated with modern democratic states. To emphasise, I would mention some of them, although they are quite evident. The *gadaa* system operates in an unstratified and non-specialised society, achieving political

<sup>25</sup> The demographic consistency of the Borana is also comparable to the African kingdoms as described by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940, 7).

integration among clans – groups that are analogous to one another. Nowadays, even in Borana country, *gadaa* is effective only in the rural context. Traders, social workers, public employees and others are not affected, since they refer to the Ethiopian legal system and administrative structure.<sup>26</sup> Borana polity lacks a bureaucratic administrative structure, a centrally or peripherally controlled organised force, or a delegation of executive power. Consequently, it does not produce a national budget. No division of powers is conceived as in modern democracies, since the institutional leaders, during the assemblies, are at the same time active in the juridical and the legislative fields, as well as in persuasive relations with their people.

I wonder if the use of such ambiguous words as ‘government’, ‘class in power’, and ‘alternation of power’, as well as of more specific but less applicable expressions such as ‘reigning set’, ‘parliament’ and ‘bureaucracy’ are a response to the unproved, but dominant, ideological assumption that a centralised state based on the use of an organised force is a more efficient polity. From this perspective, those terms implicitly invite a direct comparison between the Oromo and Ethiopian polities, suggesting equal efficiency but marked differences highlighted by the term ‘democracy’, emphasising the moral superiority of the Oromo system (Baxter 1994a, 177). However, in doing so, the genuine peculiarity and value of the Borana and *gadaa* political philosophy are implicitly undermined.

### 8.7 A Modern Oromo Polity

Perhaps the true problem is not the application of the *gadaa* principles to the emerging unitary, stratified and specialised Oromo nation, but the construction of a polity compatible with the old and still operative political practices. This is certainly a very serious challenge to the Oromo politicians. Without entering this extremely complex and muddling subject, I think it worthwhile to outline some of the elements which I think have emerged from the above analysis, hoping to contribute to a debate which, in my opinion, can only be constructive.

A very critical element concerns ‘despotism’ which is not avoided, as generally thought, by a rotation of the group ‘in power’, since there are no structures of government into which corporate groups periodically enter and exit. For the same reason the giving up of ‘power’, also mentioned by Baxter (1994a, 183), maybe a false problem. After having invested heavily in the specialistic training of one of its members, the clan and the community do not have any interest

<sup>26</sup> It is possible that this is simply the result of political submission. These activities are the ones in which non-Borana are engaged as well. Had the Borana remained autonomous, their own polity might have differently accommodated modernity.

in losing a capable leader. Rather, the political power of the institutional leadership is limited, at any given moment, by the rules and practices of the decisional procedures, by the political ethos and by an absence of delegation of executive power.

The peculiarity of the Borana polity lies in the widespread and decentralised participation in all forms of decision-making at various assemblies, with a general flow from peripheral assemblies to higher pyramidal councils and assemblies, or, in development terminology, from bottom to top. The practices and procedures of these assemblies, not subordinated to the *gadaa* system, have also been emphasised as central ‘republican’ elements of Oromo political culture and values, as well as democratic practices in Oromo life (H. Lewis 1993, 5-6, 9).<sup>27</sup> There is no reason to believe that such political elements are incompatible with a modern polity, although certain decisions may require faster procedures.

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**27** Lewis’ observations are very interesting because they were drawn from two different highland Oromo communities, one of which was previously a monarchy.