Traditional Forms of Resistance against Patriarchal Control: Siiqqee and Atteetee Rituals among the Guji and Borana Oromo of Ethiopia

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May 2018

Glossary

Gadaa System- Social stratification system that deals with all aspects of communal life
Luba- The five classes that is organized by the Gaddaa
Odda- A sycamore tree on which Gadaa meetings and ceremonies usually take place
Aba Gadaa- The title of the head of the Gada assembly
Kality- Wife of Aba Kalu
Aba Kalu- The counselor in charge of spiritual matters
Bunakele- Traditional coffee ceremony of the Borana Oromo
Mukalaaftuu- Literally translated as soft wood, and is a law that is resulted by the Gadaa system
Halogaa- Strangers/outsiders in patrilineal Oromo society
Safu- Power of Waaqqaa (God) that holds together everything and everyone in the cosmos in a well-balanced egalitarian order
Waaqqaa- God
Addooyee- 1. The institution of solidarity among adolescent girls, which they enter at the age of eight years  2. A girl’s intimate girlfriend
Siiqqee- Literal meaning: stick a girl receives as a gift on her wedding day through a blessing ceremony. The women hood a girl transfers to after the girlhood of addooyee.
Daragageessa- Young men
Qabdo (Shaxaraa)- Kissing and ‘necking’
Saakumee- The most intimate addooyee
Migira addooyee- A grass they hold between them and break it as they say an oath of sisterhood and solidarity
Qarree- Virginity
Haa ta ’u- Amen
Akkoo Mannoyee- ‘Grandmother’ Mannoyee, a semi-mythical Oromo queen
Qilxxu- A big tree they gather around
Walargee- Meetings
Abarsa- Cursing
Iyayiqi- Screaming
Halagaa- Stranger
Ateetee- A female deity
Saddeetta- Council
Yakka- Indigenous socio-cultural institution that focuses on defending the rights of women among the Sidama ethnic group in Southern Ethiopia.

Background

The notion of ‘resistance’ stresses that power and counter-power are not in binary opposition, but rather, exist in a decoupled, complex, ambivalent and perpetual movement. The notion bases itself on the Foucauldian idea that ‘wherever there is power there is resistance.’ In order to investigate resistance, we refer to Lila Abu Lughod’s application of Foucauldian principles of power and resistance. In The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformation of Power through Bedouin Women, Abu Lughod, following Foucault, argues that resistance is an intrinsic component of power relations and that should be viewed as a ‘diagnostic of power’. Quoting Foucault, Abu-Lughod asserts that ‘Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power’ (1990:12).

Based on these notions of power and resistance, we argue in this paper that Oromo women living within the boundaries of the traditional Gadaa System have found ways to resist their exclusion from the hierarchies of the Gadaa structure through the development of a parallel system, the Siiqkee, and through a strong bond through women’s familial, and non-familial relationships.

The Gadaa System

The Gadaa System which is a social stratification system largely in use among Borana and Guji Oromos living in Ethiopia and Kenya, as well as the Gedeo of Southern Ethiopia, has been lauded as ‘one of the most astonishing and instructive turns the evolution of human society has taken.’ (Asmerom, 2006) Inscribed in 2016 on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity the Gadaa System, estimated to have been in existence since the 1400s is a traditional and largely democratic system of governance enriched by dialogue and communal learning (Sirna, 2015). The Gadaa System deals with all aspects of communal life where it is practiced – according to the citation by UNESCO, ‘the system regulates political, economic, social and religious activities of the community dealing with issues such as conflict resolution, reparation and protecting women’s rights. It serves as a mechanism for enforcing moral conduct, building social cohesion, and expressing forms of community culture.’ (ich.unesco.org) The Gadaa System is organized into five classes called Luba consisting of men whose fathers are already members of the Gadaa. Each class or Luba progresses to the next class in eight-year periods - the last age-group functions as the ruling class consisting of a chairperson, officials with specific duties, and an assembly. The Lubas are taught
by oral historians who teach Gadaa members history, laws, rituals, cosmology, myths, rules of conduct and the function of the Gadaa system (ich.unesco.org). Moreover, the Gadaa system has five permanent political parties whose members assume leadership once every eight years – this means that within forty years, all five parties would have served the system in rotation, consisting of ‘One Gadaa.’ (Sirna, 2015)

The Gadaa Structure

The five parties represented in the Gadaa structure have six Council members each, representing past as well as current and future administrations that will receive the leadership mantle in rotation. Therefore the 30 Council members offer rich collections of experiences to draw from, and future possible leaders are included in the assembly to learn from their elders. (Sirna, 2015) Gadaa meetings and ceremonies usually take place under a sycamore tree – called Odaa, which has through the centuries to represent dialogue and consensus. Major clans establish their own Gadaa centers, and ceremonial spaces specific to their locales. (Sirna, 2015)

The Gadaa General Assembly

According to Zelalem Tesfaye Sirna, the Gadaa General Assembly among the Guji Oromo takes place once every eight years, one week before the transfer of power to the incoming Aba Gaddaa. Amongst the Borana-Oromo, the general assembly takes place once every eight years but in the middle of the term of an Abba Gaddaa. (2015)

The power of the Gadaa general assembly is to exercise supreme legislative authority. Its functions include (but are not limited to) reviewing laws at work, proclaiming new laws, impeaching the men in power, and settling major disputes that could not have been resolved at the lower levels of its judicial organ(s). Any decision passed by the general assembly is final and cannot be reversed by any other assembly. (Asmerom 1973) The legislative and adjudicatory supremacy of the general assembly is historically conditioned and culturally deep-rooted.

Gadaa and Women

In its documented history, the formal Gadaa system has left out women of its formal institutions, although Sirna (2015) notes that women attend General Assembly meetings to listen but not deliberate. Women are also the last to arrive at the assembly, and the first to leave when deliberations are completed. Women’s role in the Gadaa System is largely relegated to the ceremonial sphere of offering blessings by the Kality (wife of the Aba Kalu, the Councilor in
charge of spiritual matters) and of making Bunakele, a traditional coffee ceremony of the Borana Oromo strongly linked to the Gadaa System.

**Women in Oromo Cosmology**

Researchers of the Gadaa System have argued that because the political culture of Gadaa is based on male age-grade sets that exclude women, a functional necessity to create male-female checks and balances in order to maintain the egalitarian aspirations of the Gadaa system has resulted in the law of muka laaffu (literally: soft wood). (Kumsa, 1997) As a group, women and girls are seen as halagaa (strangers/outsiders) in patrilineal Oromo society – because they will soon leave their communities of birth in marriage. Women and girls are also halagaa in the communities they marry into as they have come from another community. Strangers in all patrilineal communities, women are instead seen as the ‘floating glue’ that belongs everywhere and holds together disparate communities of men. (Kumsa, 1997) This bonding role of women parallels the broader spiritual bonding role of safiu in Oromo cosmology. Safiu is the power of Waaqaa or God that holds together everything and everyone in the cosmos in a well-balanced egalitarian order. (Kumsa, 1997)

The parallel institutions of Addooyyee/Siqqee and Gadaa help maintain safiu in Oromo society by enabling Oromo women to have control over resources and private spaces, social status and respect, as well as sisterhood and solidarity by deterring men from infringing upon their individual and collective rights. If the balance between men and women is broken, a siqqee rebellion may, in theory, be initiated to restore the law of God and the moral and ethical order of society. (Kumsa, 1997; 2013)

**The Addooyyee Institution**

Addooyyee has at least two layers of meaning. First, addooyye refers to the institution of solidarity among adolescent girls, which they enter at the age of eight years, which is the age at which boys enter the first grade of the Gedaa System. Up to 8 years of age, all children, boys and girls alike are referred to as 'she' here she indicates liminality – the state of a spiritual being, not femaleness *per se*.

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1 After they complete their active Gadaa political cycles and retire into advisory council (become Gadamoojii), men go through a rite of passage where their heads are shaven and they are referred to as 'she'. Here again 'she' refers to their liminal status rather than their biological sex. On the contrary, women are referred to as 'he' after they complete the parallel cycles of their husband's Gadaa. In this case 'he' refers to women's increasing spiritual power, their coming out of liminality. Rather than biological sex, then, 'she' and 'he' refers to liminality and of power respectively (Kumsa, 1997).
Addooyyee girlhood blossoms in full when girls court dargageessa (young men) and when they go to nighttime dance parties in full moon. Although mothers usually take the girls to these parties, they do not usually intrude into their private spaces when they dance with the young men they are courting. Girls are often free of parental interference, and they are often free to kiss and ‘neck’ with young men. The practice of kissing and necking is known as qabdoo and sometimes as shaxaraa. Sexual intercourse however is strictly forbidden. Indeed, virginity is valued and there are serious consequences both in spiritual and cultural terms for losing one’s virginity before marriage.

Addooyyee girls remind each other, often in song, of the terrible consequences of losing their Qarree (virginity) (Personal Communications from friends and family members, in Afan Oromo, with Firaol Belay, November-December 2017). (Kumsa, 2013)

In its second layer, addooyyee means a girl’s intimate girlfriend. Within this meaning there are levels of addooyyee intimacy where Saakumee signifies the most intimate addooyyee. Girls become addooyyees to each other by taking an oath to support each other, protect each other, accompany each other, share secrets and protect each other’s secrets. They pull out a grass called migira addooyyee hold it between them and break it as they say ‘yoo an si gane akkas na haa kutu’ (‘If I betray you, may I be broken like this’). This is an oath of sisterhood and solidarity. Once they take this oath, they do not call each other by their personal names - they call each other ‘Addooyyee’. They go to dance parties together; they sing together; they go to market, to farm field and school together; they fetch water and firewood together. The secrets they share are often the secrets of the men they like (Kumsa, 2013)

The Siiqqee institution

In its literal meaning, siiqqee is the stick that a girl receives as a gift on her wedding day through a blessing ceremony. It marks her transition from the girlhood of addooyyee into the womanhood of siiqqee. The mother holds one end of the siiqqee as she chants blessings and the daughter holds the other and repeating ‘haa ta’u’ or ‘Amen’ after every chant. While siiqqee signifies the mother daughter bond in this ritual, there are broader socio-cultural and spiritual meanings to siiqqee rituals.

According to Bulcha, such a blessing ritual contains within it the oath that women take to remind each other of the matriarchal reign of Akkoo Mannooyyee (Grandmother Mannooyyee), the legendary matriarchal leader whose egalitarian rule touched all Oromos (2011). According to folklore, power-greedy men overthrew her kind rule, distorting her story and debasing her character. To this day, Akkoo Manooyyee is laughed at in order to warn Oromo women of aiming too high. Subverting this caricature of a good, egalitarian woman ruler, Oromo women use every siiqqee ritual to remember the glorious matriarchy of their grandmother, Akkoo Mannooyyee, and to pass her memory on to next generations of females\(^2\). (Bulcha, 2010)

\(^2\) Many Ethiopian communities have traditions of semi-mythical women rulers and queens whose stories bear remarkable similarity of bravery, a rule that elevated the status of women, unfair treatment of men, and eventually, the violent demise of
In addition, *siqqee* symbolizes the mother and broader female ties between all mothers and all daughters. Thirdly, standing for the universal mother, *siqqee* also symbolizes the broader female ties among all *halagaa* (‘stranger’) women in all clans and sub clans. Fourthly and at a more profoundly spiritual level, *siqqee* represents the spirit of *Ateetee*, the female deity - women cling to their *siqqee* sticks when they pray to Waaqaa or God. (Kumsa, 1997) (See Below a discussion of *Ateetee* Worship).

According to *Siqqee* tradition, when there are violations of their rights, women leave their homes and children to travel to a place where there is a big tree called *Qilxuu* and assemble there until the problems they face are solved through negotiation by elders of men and women. (Kumsa, 1997) According to Kumsa: “Married women have the right to organize and form the *siqqee* sisterhood and solidarity.’” (1997)

In the *siqqee* system, women get together regularly for prayers as well as for other important individual and community matters. If men try to stop women from attending these *walargee* (meetings), it is considered against *safiuu*. Oromo women used different *siqqee* mechanisms to maintain their rights; such mechanisms include the *abarsa* (cursing) and *iyya siqqee* (screaming). As Kumsa comments, “because of their liminality, women wield a special religious power where they draw an enormous moral and ritual authority. Men, therefore, try to avoid their curse and seek their blessings.” (1997) Women in general are symbolically and politically liminal and correspondingly enjoy a special sacred power as a class. People respect and revere a woman because *Waaqaa* made her to be respected and revered. Interference with a woman’s sacred authority is regarded as violating…*safiuu*. “(Kumsa, 1997) The ethnographic research of Marit Tolo Ostebo among the Arsi-Oromo supports the notion that women are closer to God than men are. Her respondents tell her that women are closer to God because ‘they are more humble and weak; [they are] soft, [they are] innocent and will not fight. “Their spirits are with God” - *Hafura waqaa wajjin qaban*. Ostebo also notes that due to these qualities, women’s prayers to God have more value – “What a woman blesses will be blessed, what she curses will be cursed.” (2009) If a woman raises her *siqqee* and screams or ululates, it means the cosmic balance of *safiuu* is upset and everyone, women and men alike, must interrupt everything they are doing because *safiuu* must be restored before any normal life activity can resume. The women of her community will consider it their sacred duty to restore *safiuu* with their raised *siqqee*, and so they will gather under a *qilxuu* tree. They will listen to the current violation, recount past infringements and pass their verdict. If a woman suffers emotional or physical abuse by any person, which is considered an infringement of her *Wayuulet*, she will take her *Siqqee* and go to

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3 *Wayuu*
the offender’s house with other women members of her *halagaa* community. The women will sing insults as they go to the offender’s house — where the offender is a man; the women’s *saddeetta* (council) members negotiate with the men’s *saddeetta* for a resolution. At the end, the offender is expected to confess his or her guilt, ask for forgiveness and offer a gift, usually in the form of a cow for sacrifice. (Kumsa, 1997) It is at this spiritual depth and within such intricate interwoven-ness of female liminality, sacredness and *safiuu* that *Gadaa* and *Siigqee* are constituted into inseparably interwoven institutions.

**Ateetee Rituals**

The *Ateetee* institution among Oromo communities is organized and led by women. *Ateetee* consists of prayers to ask for rain when the rainy season has not yet begun, and in cases of drought. Women go to the river with their *siigqee* praying for the rains to come. *Ateetee* can also be used to address other problems such as infertility, difficulties with pregnancy and childbirth, sickness, war, disputes and gender-based violence. In all these manifestations, the way women evoke and practice varies depending on several factors, including the specific type of case, the individuals involved, the communities, and the geographic areas. *(Kumsa, 2013)*

Not easily translated into English, the following are some representations given by our informants in order to give meaning to the word *wayyuu*:

- Something which is sacred
- Something that should not be touched
- Something or someone to fear
- Persons who have respect (*wayyicha*)
- Persons who should be respected

**Some of what is said to be wayyuu among the Arsi Oromo:**

- Waqniwayyuu - God is wayyuu
- Laftiiwayyuu - The earth/land is wayyuu
- Abbanwayyuu - The father is wayyuu
- Soddaanwayyuu - A male in-law is wayyuu
- Soddaatiwayyuu - A female in-law is wayyuu
- Haatiideetewayyuu - The woman, who gave birth to you, is wayyuu for you. This also includes the masaanu – the co-wives of your mother
- Hadha mana wayyuu - The married woman is wayyuu
- Dubriwayyuu - The unmarried girl (the virgin) is wayyuu
- Dubartiulfaawayyuu- A pregnant woman is wayyuu
- Qanaffawayyuu - The Qanaffa is a sign that a woman will wear on her forehead during the 4-5 first months after she has delivered. This implies that a woman who wears the qanaffa is wayyuu
- Hanfalawayyuu – Hanfala, a belt made of leather from cattle, which the married woman will wear around her waist is wayyuu
- Sinqee wayyuu – Sinqee, a stick (ulee) a woman will receive on her wedding day is wayyuu. It is used during religious ceremonies (*atteet*), as well as during collective female-only marches mobilized when a woman’s wayyuu or her rights have been violated
- Gooltii wayyuu - The “bedroom”/ the bed of husband and wife is wayyuu and a protection area for a woman. If a woman enters her gola nobody can touch her

This list could have been extended even further; as one of Firaol’s informants said, “everything has its wayyuu”

The respect that is reflected in wayyuu is not ordinary respect. It is a special respect that comes from God. It is a mutual respect as according to Oromo traditional belief, God has given respect to all things. *(Ostebo, 2009)*
Ostebo quoting research by a male academic, Dilu Shaleka (2011) argues that the Sidama ethnic group in Southern Ethiopia has a women-only institution, Yaka'a, that’s almost identical to Attettee (2009).

**Conclusion**

In this paper, we have briefly discussed women’s traditional forms of resistance against gender inequality among the Arsi and Borana Oromos of Ethiopia. Setaweet, in the quest for the articulation of Ethiopian feminism argues that the belief in the equality between women and men, and the struggle for gender equality are intrinsically Ethiopian values that benefit from cross-fertilization with feminist thoughts from other parts of Africa and the world. As the first Ethiopian feminist movement of contemporary times, Setaweet is committed to research and highlight everyday forms of resistance by Ethiopian women from all walks of life.
References


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