

The practices and dynamics of *Baalle*, an indigenous governance system of Gedeo (Southwest Ethiopia)

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This article comprehensively examines the governance quest of the Gedeo people (a Cushitic-speaking people in southern Ethiopia) and their itineraries in building an egalitarian indigenous governance system locally called *Baalle*. The *Baalle* governance system is based on the distribution of political powers and social responsibilities across nine grades, each with a life span of eight years. Our analysis focuses on the practices and dynamics of the *Balle* system. We have analyzed the roles of the state in the dynamics of the *Balle* system by considering the different historical phases of the Ethiopian state: the Imperial regime (1889-1974), the Derg regime (1974-1991), and the EPRDF regime (1991-2018). Data were collected through narrative interviews, observation, and focus group discussions from *Baalle* leaders and cultural consultants during several fieldworks carried out in 2018, 2019, and 2020. Based on our findings, we argue that *Baalle* is a complex indigenous governance system of Gedeo's social structure that influenced their economic, social, political and spiritual life. Moreover, given the complexity of the *Baalle* system, the presence of governance institution (*Songo*) in all the three autonomous regional territories of the Gedeo, the practices of sustainable economy that combined forestry with agriculture, and the presence of dense population, we argue that the Gedeo qualify for being a state. Since the incorporation of the Gedeo into the Ethiopian state in the late 19th century, *Baalle* has been structurally subordinated to the central government, and its roles in the day-to-day life of the local community have significantly declined. Although the post-1991 political developments of the EPRDF made attempts to protect *Baalle* from extinction, its role is still reduced to playing only supplementary roles to state conflict resolution institutions and instruments.

Keywords: *Baalle*, Gada system, *Songo*, Gedeo, indigenous governance, Ethiopia

1. Introduction¹

There have been two kinds of competing arguments in the study of social stratification and state formation in Africa (Diop 1987; Dundas 1915; Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940). One argument, guided by colonial anthropology, maintains that African societies in the pre-colonial period were not stratified and organized under a State (Dundas 1915). The other is based on Africanist framework and argues that the African societies whether in the past or at present are stratified like the societies in Europe, and organized under a State. According to these authors, state formation is not foreign to but indigenous to Africa (Chodak 1973; Diop 1987). According to Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940), the question of governance and institutionalization of the political system in Africa was different and should be treated differently from that of Europe until at least the post-independence/post-colonial period. The authors go on to classify African societies broadly into two: societies that have States and those which do not. While the former refers to pre-colonial Chiefdoms/Kingdoms like the Zulu, the Nguni, the Bemba, the Banyankole, and the Kede, and the latter includes societies which lack centralized authorities, administrative machinery, and constitute judicial institutions (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940: 5). African societies with indigenous age-set systems, like that of the Gedeo *Baalle* system, are included in the latter category. The work of these scholars has played a crucial role in shaping the Eurocentric views that perceive state formation as “alien” to African land. Later in this article, with empirical data, we will build on the views of these scholars, and argue that age class systems like that of the Gedeo *Baalle* system should be considered as a State.

Though there are some evidences that show age-set systems are found in some areas outside Africa, Africa is still well known for its rich and diverse age class indigenous governance systems. Age class systems are found in different parts of Africa with a relatively huge concentration in Eastern Africa (Bernardi 1985: 12). All age class systems have three components: the formal institution of class, the configuration of promotional grades, and the succession of classes in the grade. While class refers to a group of people structurally selected and promoted through successive grades, grades refer to temporal social roles, rights and duties associated to a categorized class (Bernardi 1985; Legese 1973). Age class systems take variant forms. Bernard divides them into two: age class systems and generation. The former is based on initiation, and the latter on the main principles of

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institutionalization. In the age class systems where initiation is the main organizing principle, initial class formation is done by the public recognition of the candidates' physiological maturation. In generational class systems, the generational distance between the father and the son is structurally determined. In this case, age is not that much important as it is for initiation in the age class systems. Because of the structural rigidity, Bernard noted that "...[T]he system based on generation classes are always complex because they structurally define the age distance between son and his father which in turn creates huge age gaps within a given class yet performing similar tasks" (Bernardi 1985: 4-6).

From the generational class systems, the peculiar of which are the Gada systems (i.e., proto-Cushitic systems embedded in the cultures of the eastern Cushitic speaking peoples like the Borana, Guji, Konso, Gedeo, Sidama, Hoor (Arboore) and so forth), the members of specific age-sets are no longer coevals; indeed, they may range in age from infants to dotards (Legese 1973). And, at the same time, many of the patterns associated with normal age-sets persist. For instance, the respect that the members of a junior age-set must pay to a senior age-set does not vary. In his outstanding book on the Gada system of the Borana community, Legese (1973: 112) caught his observation beautifully:

I have witnessed with unending fascination many rituals and ceremonies in which eight-year-olds were dancing, praying, and chanting with middle-aged men, without batting an eyelash. All that matters is that they are members of the luba (i.e. the governing class in the Borana Gada system).

Gada systems have attracted the attention of many scholars (Legese 1973; Bassi 1996, 2005; Alemayehu 2009; Jalata 2010; Dirribi 2011; Fayo 2011; Sirna 2012) because of their interesting features when compared to other African societies governed by age class based political institutions. The Gedeo version of the *Gada* systems is known as the *Baalle* system² and it has not been systematically studied so far. Despite the incorporation of the Gedeo into the Ethiopian state and the introduction of a "modern" form of governance, the Gedeo still today practice their *Baalle* system to run their socio-political matters and resolve conflicts (Chodak 1973; Kippie *et al.* 2008). Thus, the main purpose of this article is to delve into the practices and contemporary dynamics associated with the *Baalle* system of Gedeo.

² *Baalle* refers to both a governance system and a name for each of the nine classes in the system. In the case of the former, we write the first letter in capital (i.e., *Baalle*), and the latter case in lower case form (i.e., *baalle*).

2. Methodology

The philosophy, practices and dynamics of the *Baalle* system is embedded in the Gedeo's indigenous ways of life. Such uniqueness can only be best grasped by the interpretive world view (Crowell 2014). Under this paradigm, the main principles that have guided us are the connectedness between the physical and spiritual realms, focus on the uniqueness of the *Baalle* system, and the inseparable relation between us (the researchers) and the Gedeo people (Sherwood 2010; Hart 2010; Smith 2012). Design-wise, we have employed a qualitative research design. While stating the imperative of qualitative research design in understanding the contribution of locally framed institutions like *Baalle*, Crowell states that qualitative designs are best when they are employed for the purpose of understanding how certain social institutions are developed and put into practice (Crowell 2014).

Empirical data were collected from Dilla town (the main administrative center of the Gedeo Zone) and three rural districts, namely, Dilla Zuriya district, Gedeb district and Bule district. The rationale for selecting Dilla town is to examine contemporary dynamics in the *Baalle* system as the town has always served as the seat of administration in all the three regimes. The rural districts are selected to study the essence of indigenous governance because the *Baalle* system is still actively practiced. In both settings, different complementary methodological tools including focus group discussions, narrative interviews, transect walks and observations of public spaces, and storytelling have been employed. The daily practices in *Songo* (the traditional setting where *Baalle* is practiced) have become the center of our observations and transect walks. Moreover, relevant secondary data were consulted particularly through published materials (books, theses, dissertations and articles) and unpublished materials (government offices and minutes).

Field data were collected from three fieldwork visits. The first round was conducted from May to July 2018; the second fieldwork was carried out from January to February 2019; the last fieldwork was a gap filling conducted in November 2020. A total of 51 individuals have participated in the research process. While selecting potential interviewees, we have relied on our already established network with the Gedeo Zone Culture, Tourism and Sports Department. This is because the knowledge of indigenous governance institutions is not democratically distributed, but accumulated in the hands of a handful cultural consultants. Indeed, we have made efforts to incorporate the views of different actors including elders, representatives of the indigenous governance system (*Abba Gada*, *woyo*, *hayyichcha*), women, youths and state officials at different levels of administrative structures. Field data from different sources are cross-checked and triangulated to enhance the validity and trustworthiness of our findings. Throughout the research, due consideration was given to ethical aspects. "At a fundamental level, indigenous research ethics is about establishing, maintaining and

nurturing reciprocal and respectful relationships that pre-exist the researcher” (Smith 2005: 97). Thus, we have tried our level best to leave the field stable after our fieldwork. Moreover, during the data collection, different measures like securing anonymity, taking consent form and ensuring participation of informants during the different stages of our study were taken into account in order to ensure ethical consideration. Finally, we have analyzed the empirical data thematically along with the conceptual framework of our research.

3. Context of the study

Today, the Gedeo people mainly live in the Gedeo Administrative Zone in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Regional State (SNNPRS), and in neighboring Oromia and Sidama National Regional States in Ethiopia. The Gedeo language, which serves as the mother tongue of the Gedeo people, is a Highland East Cushitic language within the Afro-asiatic phylum (Raymond 2005). Of course, bilingualism, and to some degree, multilingualism, is on the rise. The Gedeo people who live around the borders of the Gedeo Administrative Zone are bilinguals: those bordering with the Sidama National Regional State and Oromia National Regional State speak Sidama and Ormo in addition to the Gedeo language, respectively. Additionally, Amharic, the lingua franca in Ethiopia, and the working language of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, is widely spoken in Dilla and other small towns in the Gedeo Administrative Zone. Schooled people also speak English to varying degrees.

The origin of the Gedeo people is debatable until today. Mainly there are three competing perspectives in this regard. One of these traces the origin of the Gedeo to Harsu, a place currently found in Oromia National Regional State, from where the fathers of Gedeo crossed the Hawatan River and settled in the present day Haro Wolabu, a village currently found in Bule district in Gedeo Administrative Zone. Actually, similar places are also found in neighboring Oromo community that even take Haro Wolabu to the level of mythical place. According to this account, the political, spiritual and social system of the Gedeo people was innovated by the founding fathers in *Oda Ya’a*, a public gathering space, and then disseminated to the other parts of Gedeo (Council of Nationalities 2011: 328). The second account states that the origin of the Gedeo people goes to the aboriginal tribe *Murga-Gosallo* (Kippie *et al.* 2008). The third tradition relates the origin of the Gedeo people with Borana and Guji people. This account states that there was a man with three sons. The eldest was *Deraso*, the father of today's Gedeo people, followed by *Borru*, the father of today's Borana people, and youngest was *Gujo*, the father of today's Guji people. In turn, *Deraso* had seven sons from two wives. These seven children of *Deraso* are considered today as the base for today's seven clans of the Gedeo

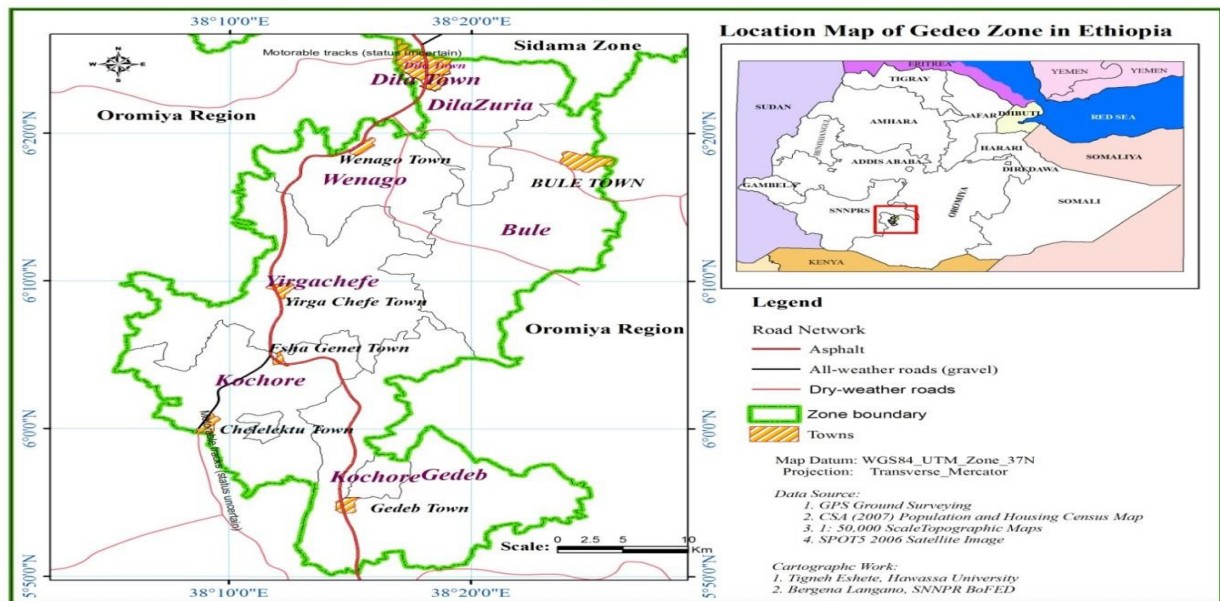
(Kippie 2002: 25; Council of Nationalities 2011; interview with Tilahun, 2020). Furthermore, the seven clans are broadly classified into two houses. The first house is *Sase baxxe*;³ it includes three clans: *Hemba'a*,⁴ *Logoda* and *Bakkaro*. The second house is *Shoole baxxe*; it includes four clans: *Darasha*, *Gorgorsha*, *Dobo'a* and *Hanuma* (Kippie et al. 2008; interview with Tilahun, November 2020, Dilla). Other accounts categorize the seven children of Daraso into two groups: *dhalana*⁵ (senior)–the first three son's descendants from the senior wife, and *belbana* (junior)–the rest four from the junior wife. Regardless of the variations in the categorization, what makes the Gedeo clans similar is that all are exogamous and political power is vested by the descendants of the senior wife over the descendants of the junior wife. The political roles of the latter are limited to facilitation rather than exercising actual leadership role (field note, February 2018, Dilla Zuriya).

The Gedeo economy is mainly based on their historical heritage of *enset*-based agro-forestry. In his dissertation entitled “*Five thousand years of sustainability? A case study on Gedeo land use*,” Kippie (2002) stated the miraculous nature of the Gedeo agro-forestry system in not only feeding the ever-growing Gedeo people in a very small area but also ensuring sustainable economy for centuries. Part of the agro-forestry is an organic coffee particularly known with its brand name of *Yirga Chaffe* that the Gedeo produce for local, national and international markets. And, the products of *enset* (false banana) like *bullā* and *kocho* are used both for home consumption and national market transaction. During our latest fieldwork in November 2020, we learned the commencement of some activities already put in place to make *enset* products export standard. The Gedeo exchange their production with the neighboring communities like the agro-pastoral Guji and the agrarian Sidama (McClellan 1988; field observation in inter-ethnic market areas around Gololcha and Wonago in June 2016).

³ The letter x in Gedeo alphabet represents the voiceless, alveolar ejective /t'/ consonant.

⁴ The apostrophe (i.e., ') in Gedeo alphabet represents the voiceless, glottal stop.

⁵ The letters *dh* in Gedeo alphabet represent the voiced, alveolar implosive /d/.



Map 1: Gedeo Administrative Zone (adapted from Tadese 2016)

4. Internal evolution of the Gedeo indigenous governance system: From autocracy to democracy

The Gedeo, like many other communities throughout the world, were hunters (Kippie 2002: 22). Before the expansion of agriculture and the development of agroforestry as the typical form of their livelihood, the Gedeo used to live in natural forests full of wild animals hunted for food. This hunting-based economy, where constant mobility in search of prey was mandatory, determined not only the economy of the Gedeo but also their socio-political system. The mobile economy gave special management and administrative power to elderly men who could not afford hunting, and mothers who stayed at home for a long time with babies when the adult males constantly moved for hunting. The absence of men at home for the most part due to hunting slowly shifted the political landscape at home: the political power of women at the family level gradually expanded to the community level, and finally gave birth to the first matriarchal socio-political system known as the *Aakko Maannooye* system (Kippie *et al.* 2008: 19).

In the *Aakko Maannooye* system, the fact that the political power was vested in the hands of mothers and reflected in the day-to-day life of the Gedeo people amounted to an authoritarian governance system of “queendom” political administration in which the power to make decisions over resources and other public affairs fell totally in the hands of the queen (Tilahun, November 2020, Dilla). What is more, strict obedience to the queen’s authority was favored over that of men and other community members. Lineage was matrilineal, and the roles of men were limited to only domestic chores. In the *Aakko Maannooye* governance system, women with dominion personality were valued and became heroine queens. Even though it is hard to state the exact period of *Aakko Maannooye*’s

hegemony, Gedeo elders state that the period would most likely be between 2000 to 1000 BC (Focus group discussion, June 2018, Gedeb). Of course, similar stories exist in neighbor ethnic groups like the Sidama and Guji. However, the *Aakko Maannooye* system has become legendary because of the absence of written evidence. Indeed, the absence of written documents does not necessarily mean the absence of oral history. Part of the evidence comes from the Gedeo oral heritage. There are songs and stories in which the *Aakko Maannooye* system is embedded. For instance, Hayyichcha Worasa Suku and Atara Abira (Kippie *et al.* 2008: 20) recall the song by men after the successful collapse of the *Aakko Maannooye* system as follows:

1. *Tee*⁶ *Akkoyyo, maye'a rettette?* (2x)
'You Akkoyyo, why did you pass away?' (2x)
Hoo Hoo Siisso!
Tee Akkoyyo, maye'a rettette? (2x)
'You Akkoyyo, why did you pass away?' (2x)
Hoo Hoo Siisso!
Sha Shanbalaqqi (2x)⁷
'We rejoice your death' (2x)

During the *Aakko Maannooye* era, the Gedeo started to adopt a settled agriculture life that accumulated adult men around their farm and/or homestead instead of sending them out for hunting. This gradually increased men's political role over that of women. As some oral traditions show, the oppressiveness of *Aakko Maannooye* system, coupled with the innovation of an agricultural economic system, finally resulted in the replacement of the matriarchal system and gave rise to the second patriarchal governance system known as *Gosallo* system (see also Kippie *et al.* 2008). The *Gosallo* system highly resembles a kingdom administrative system in which the words of the king become the law of the entire society. Even though *Gosallo* reversed the nature and practices of the previous system, it still failed to satisfy the Gedeo people's quest for a more egalitarian type of administration. As the grievances of the *Gosallo* system increased, the general public equally increased their discontent with this masculine version of the *Aakko Maannooye* system. This led to the death of the *Gosallo* system around the late 15th century through a popular revolt led by two youngsters, Fiffoo and Dachcho.

⁶ *Tee* is a vocative form of the third person singular feminine.

⁷ The letter q in the Gedeo alphabet stands for the voiceless velar ejective /k'/.

This revolt ignited the birth of the new democratic government structure: the *Baalle* system (Council of Nationalities 2011; Kippie *et al.* 2008; Focus group discussion with elders in Bule district, May 2016). The *Baalle* system, like other *Gada* systems of many Cushitic-speaking peoples in southern Ethiopia, is based on a decentralized type of governance in which different parts of the system have their own functions and roles. In this system, the seven clans of the Gedeo participate in administrative, supportive and spiritual duties unlike the *Gosallo* system in which only Darasha clan rules the others (Kippie *et al.* 2008).

5. The *Baalle* system from structural-functionalist perspective

Baalle is a system of classes which succeed each other every eight years and assume economic, political, social and spiritual position. There are nine rotational grades in the *Baalle* system in their bottom to top order:

2. *qadado* → *siida* → *lumasa* → *raaba* → *luba* → *Yuuba* → *guduro* → *qululo* → *chawaje*

What is further interesting is that newly born male babies automatically join the class of their fathers in order to reduce the passage through all the grades (Kippie *et al.* 2008: 25; interview with Tilahun, Dilla Zuria, November 2020). This makes the Gedeo *Baalle* system different from the *Gada* systems of the neighboring communities. For example, among the Borana, Legese reports that “the newly born infant boy always enters the system of grade exactly forty years behind the father regardless of the age of the father. The father and son are always five grades apart at all times” (Legese 1973: 51). Put differently, the Gedeo *Baalle* system crucially differs from gerontocracy, a political system where the council of elders rules over the younger generations. This is particularly because two generations (i.e., a father and his son) simultaneously are allowed to belong to the same *Baalle*, sharing similar responsibility, honor and respect. The best evidence here is the current *Abba Gada* who assumed the *Baalle* leadership position at his early 30s.

Each grade has rules and responsibilities. However, the fifth age-grade (*luba*) is the most decisive because it is only in this grade that men are assigned for governance positions in the *Baalle* system. The first four grades preceding *luba* are grades preparing themselves for governance, and mainly engaged in activities like facilitating power transition by making sure that the precondition for communal ceremonial events are fulfilled. The other three grades succeeding *luba baalle* are engaged in advising the leaders in *luba baalle*. Members of the last *baalle* (i.e., *chawaje*) are not involved in any

activities. Rather, it is a class of retired members who have ‘finished their life cycle, and come back to their childhood’ (see also Kippie *et al.* 2008: 25).

In the pre-*luba baalle* classes, the fourth *baalle* (i.e., *raaba*) is a very critical class in the sense that it has many functions in the *Baalle* system. First of all, it is a class where the preparation for the peaceful power transfer takes its full and final shape. Secondly, it is in this class that the leaders who would assume different *luba* structures after eight years are selected. Thirdly, members in this class have the responsibility to protect the society not only from externally induced conflicts but also from natural disasters as well as internal man-made crises. One of the typical features of the Gedeo *Baalle* system, unlike its neighboring *Gada* systems, is that war with external enemies is waged only when it is an existential threat and calls for self defence. Along this, for example, Legese noted the following:

...[B]efore assuming a position of leadership, the *gada* class is required to wage war against a community that none of their ancestors had raided. This particular war is known as *butta* and is waged on schedule every eight years. It is this event that was most directly connected with the pulsating frontier of their dominions in the sixteenth century leading toward the conquest of nearly half of Ethiopia’s land surface” (Legese 1973: 8).

To effectively fulfill their duty of protecting the community, the *raaba baalle* is organized into eight positions, each with its own recruited leader, called *bobbaasa*. The *bobbaasa* has the responsibility to lead the army (*sanachcha*), police force (*mosiisa*) and assembly (*ya’a*). He has two vice officials: the *murte* who is responsible for justice affairs and oversees judges (*dabballichcha*), and the *fatte* who is responsible for administrative issues. Furthermore, in this class, as is in other classes, there is one important institution called *murra*. The role of this institution is to disseminate valid information between authorities and the mass public. It is the survivors of this challenging class who become eligible for the *luba* class.

Luba is organized in a way that the highest power goes to a public assembly called the *ya’a*. *Ya’a* selects crucial positions including *Abba Gada* (the leader of the *Baalle*), *Ja’laaba* (the vice *Abba Gada*), *Abba Roga* (an administrator for the three administrative regions of Gedeo: *Suubbo*, *Dhiibata* and *Reqata*), *Jalqaba*, *Hulati Hayyichcha* (representatives of the seven Gedeo clans) and *Baxxeti Hayyichcha* (a *Songo* leader). Though the *Abba Gada* institution combines both administrative and spiritual powers, there are specific individuals who, by virtue of vested powers, lead the spiritual aspects of the *Baalle* institution. Such leaders are locally called *Woyyo*. Their main responsibility is conducting blessing and cursing. It is believed that their blessing and cursing always have inevitable consequences.

The classification of responsibilities like head of a state and vice-head should not create a wrong impression that the *Baalle* system is hierarchically organized. Rather, it can be best understood as a system that divides the whole Gedeo society into nine grades with functional differentiation. The fact that *Ya'a* enjoys the highest political power in the indigenous governance system of Gedeo resembles the modern democratic institutions where the houses of peoples' representative exercise the highest power. Regardless of its sophistication in decentralizing power across individuals and generations and local relevance, the *Baalle* system has been denigrated since the integration of Gedeo into the Ethiopian state and the associated waves of "modern" education and religions which are at odds with the indigenous Gedeo cosmology.

Territory-wise, the Gedeo *Baalle* system had been administered over three autonomous regions (*roga*) before its incorporation into the Ethiopian state during the late 19th century. The three *roga* are the *Subbo roga*, *Dhiibata roga* and the *Riqata roga*. Each *roga* has its clear territorial boundary classified following physical ecological features like mountains, valleys, rivers and so forth, for they solve their own problems. The relationship between the three *rogas* is horizontal; however, often *Subbo roga* is considered elder *roga* but it has no special power over other *roga*. The leaders of each *roga* are called *roga* with its vice structure *jalqaaba*. When the *roga* fails to solve matters, they are referred to as *Abba Gada (Gadicha)*.

It is worth mentioning the governance institution of the Gedeo *Baalle* system. The Gedeo have an institution called *Songo*. This governance institution is a multi-purpose social space in which different activities are carried out: laws (*Seera*) are both enacted and implemented; youths exercise socialization; adults pray to *Mageno* (Sky God), etc. In a nutshell, *Songo* is a political, spiritual and cultural institution (Kippie *et al.* 2008: 42-47). Unlike the *roga* who are organized along physical features, *Songos* are organized along clan bases. Accordingly, in each of the seven clans of the Gedeo, we find 75 *Songo* institutions evenly distributed. Totally, there are 525 *Songo* institutions in Gedeo where *Baalle* is practiced as a system.

6. The notion of power and the practices of power transfer in the *Baalle* system

The Gedeo notion of power is not divided into secular and spiritual domains as it is the case in the western democracies. Power is one, united and holistic form embedded in the *Baalle* system. For example, the literal meaning of the term *Gada* means an office term (i.e., a period of eight years), and *Abba* is father. So, *Abba Gada* literally means "the father of a brief term." The practical implication of this notion is that each *Abba Gada* exercises a holistic power that incorporates political, economic,

social and spiritual domains. *Abba Gada* (and his team) is considered as a father, all-provider and fulfiller of the needs of Gedeo people in the given term.

Among the Gedeo, a father is highly respected. During the fieldwork, the study participants explained that the father should be heard with respect even if mistaken (interview with Abba Jibo, May 2018, Gedeb; Hailu Beyene, Dilla, November 2020). They added that one is not allowed to see their father straight into his eyes. Such realities are embedded in the Gedeo oral heritage such as proverbs as shown in 3.:

3. *anna uuddoole, ille butti'a uuddaan*
 anna uuddoole, ille butti'a uuddaan
 father look.PRES.COND eye down look.FUT
 'Youngsters show their respect by avoiding looking into the eyes of the elders'
 (lit.: 'Looking at the father, the eye will bend down')

This paternalistic aspect of the Gedeo people is parallel to the Chinese conception of the state (Jacques 2009). The difference is that the Chinese state is atheist, but the Gedeo indigenous governance system combines both secular and religious power. Though such paternalistic view about the head of the state resembles the eastern, often that of Chinese, governance model, the exercise of holistic power including the spiritual domain by the *Abba Gada*, puts *Baalle* system at odds with the secular Chinese model (Jacques 2009). On the other hand, exercising time-bounded power in the *Baalle* governance system warmly fits into the context of advanced western electoral democracies. Though the Gedeo did not solely associate themselves with a single *Abba Gada* (as it was the case in southwestern and northern kingdoms in Ethiopia, where the King was the crucial figure of the Kingdom) the Gedeo highly respect their *Abba Gada*. This is partly because the people believe that the will of *Mageno*, the Sky God who is the Creator and owner of the visible and invisible universe, leads their selection to the right person. They believe that since “our selection of a particular *Abba Gada* is led by *Mageno*, we have to obey the *Abba Gada* because the will of *Mageno* is upon him” (Interview with Hailu Beyene, Dilla Zuria, November, 2020).

The Gedeo select their seasonal leader based on some complex criteria. The criteria are comprehensive and include physical, social, political, spiritual and personal traits of the candidate. According to the study participants, the candidate should, from the outset, be physically healthy and with no signs of scars on his body. Such physical “purity” is thoroughly checked by the assembly of elders (*Ya'a*) by making him undress. Socially, a strong socialization into the Gedeo culture and

having blood relationships with previous *Abba Gada* is very essential. Such socialization often takes place at different levels ranging from family up to *Songo* (Kippie 2008; Focus group discussion with elders, January 2019, Bule). Another socially relevant criterion is the absence of criminal records especially murder. Personality-wise, impartiality and integrity during judgment is highly valued among the Gedeo. The Gedeo analogy for the capacity of a good leader to keep his balance between competing interests in the community affairs is “a nose between two eyes.” In the words of Hailu Beyene:

4. *hayyichchi sano ken. Middi’anna bita’i’anna gamatabaan*

hayyichchi sano ken. Middi-’a-nna bita’i-’a-nna gamata-baan

leader nose is left-side-and right-side-and incline-NEG

‘A leader is like a nose. He should not incline to left and right, but remain balanced in the middle’

The study participant adds that “as the nose stands firmly in the middle of two eyes, so should the *Abba Gada* maintain a balance between competing and conflicting interests of the community members. He shouldn’t incline to either side, but to the *Seera*, the constitution of *Baalle* system” (Interview with Hailu, Dilla Zuria, November 2020). Spiritually, what is much expected from a good candidate is a strong belief in the mighty power of *Mageno*. This is partly because the Gedeo believe that one who is selected as *Abba Gada* receives an accurate spiritual power to bless and curse. And, finally, politically, the candidate should belong to either of the two political bodies (equivalent to the western conceptualization of parties): *bilbana* and *dhalana*. Moreover, if selected, he should be willing to lick honey harvested from a tree that is locally termed *qumbi* and make an oath to serve his community whole-heartedly. Once selected, the *Abba Gada* and his company enjoy various socio-political and spiritual powers and execute their responsibilities for eight years. Some of the responsibilities of the *Abba Gada* include leading the meetings of *Ya’a*; ensuring peace and security, and law and order of the community; leading ceremonies of power transfer and other spiritual festivities; ordering *bobbaasa* to lead defensive wars during any foreign invasion; and making decisions on any political, social, and spiritual aspects of the Gedeo people. Of course, such decisions demand him of making consultations with his advisors in his class members and people in the immediate senior class (i.e., the *yuuba baalle*).

The success and failure of a given *Abba Gada* (and his term) is evaluated from multi-dimensional perspectives. In order to evaluate his success or failure, the public asks such questions as those in 5.:

5. Is the term blessed with good harvest?

Do the planted crops and trees bear abundant fruits?

Are coffee and enset plants productive?

Is there peace and harmony during the given season?

Did the people defeat their enemies during war (if there was any)?

Is there any natural disaster?

Do the youths and children respect the elders and their parents?

Is there continuity in the general cultural values of the Gedeo during a given season?

The answers emerging out of these questions determine the leadership quality of the given *Abba Gada* and his team members. If everything during the term goes smooth and as expected, then, it is believed that the *kaayo* (literally ‘fortune’) is good. Consequently, the people celebrate *Daraaro* (annual thanksgiving festivity of the Gedeo people) by presenting gifts (locally called *Gumata*) to *Abba Gada*. However, if the eight years of a given *Abba Gada* are full of problems like war, drought, inundation, instability, epidemic, high child mortality, starvation, and so forth, then, the leaders are summoned to *faci’e*⁸ (literally ‘confession’) ritual. During the *fachi’e* ritual, the *Abba Gada* and his team as well as the general public confess their sins in order to purify the people and the season.

We have already mentioned that in the *Baalle* governance system, a very peaceful power transfer takes place every eight years regardless of the success or failure of the *Abba Gada* (Wondimagegnehu 2018). For example, a member in the *Luba baalle* must be promoted to *Yuuba baalle* after serving in *Luba baalle* for eight years. The reasons are mainly threefold. The first is the use of age as a structural tool to organize society. Along this line, Bernardi (1985: 6) noted that “[W]hen age is employed for structural ends, it does not know territorial boundaries or divisions based on kinship. Indeed, paradoxical because its ultimate end is death, age is mystically placed beyond all age, as when it creates a link to the ancestors beyond time.” The second is governing the whole process by the unwritten, but firmly obeyed, law of the Gedeo (i.e., *Seera*). And finally, there are only two political bodies (*bilbaana* and *dhalaana*) which take the political power turn by turn (Kippie *et al.* 2008). Indeed, there are certain ceremonies that must be accomplished before conducting the generational power transfer. First of all, the ceremony of *Falo* (literally, ‘cultural prayer’) takes place in seeking peace

⁸ In the Gedeo alphabet, the letter c stands for the voiceless alveo-palatal ejective /c’/.

throughout the process of power transfer. This is followed by the ceremony of *fachi'e*. In this ceremony, the *Baalle* leaders, the *Woyyo* elders and the whole community members confess their sins before *Mageno*. It is believed that the confession brings mercy from *Mageno*, and prosperity to the society. What follows is *qeexala*, in this ceremony, people gather together in order to worship and give thanks to *Mageno* for the peace and prosperity he gives following the *Faci'e* ceremony. Finally, the *Abba Gada* orders some people to gather all the sins and bury them in a place called '*qarra*.' This process of burying sins is locally called *bita hu'na*.

Based on the above findings, we argue that the nature of the *Baalle* governance system of the Gedeo contradicts with the generic conclusion of Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940: 16) that depicts African societies as having a model for violence, oppression, revolt, civil war rather than a system that creates internal harmony. Of course, it is obvious that instability and social unrests are one of the common features of contemporary African political systems. Even though internal conflict and change are common in almost all political systems, conflict with external groups is mainly inherent in kingdoms than decentralized governance systems. From the Kingdom mentality, the economic and political power of the king or kingdom depends on the vastness of its territory as each new territory provides additional source of political power and wealth. For this reason, almost all kingdoms in history go out for war to hunt new territories (Munroe 2006). Kingdoms of the 19th century Europe like France, Germany, United Kingdom, Belgium, and some pre-colonial African kingdoms like the Fulani Kingdom of West Africa, the chiefdom of Nuuni in South Africa, the Abyssinian Kingdom in the Horn of Africa, etc. are good examples in this regard.⁹ Decentralized African indigenous governance systems (age class systems as some anthropologists call them), however, are often known for their internal and external stability mainly because of distributing social roles and political power to all community members across generations. An exception to the latter might be the Oromo Gada system that practices *butta*, a structurally scheduled war every eight years against an outside community by a *gada* class before assuming a position of leadership. Legese noted that "...[I]t is this event (i.e. *butta*) that was most directly connected with pulsating frontier of their dominions in the sixteenth century leading toward the conquest of nearly half of Ethiopian's land surface" (Legese 1973: 8).

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzF88HBLAHY>.

7. Were the Gedeo a “State”?

A state is a contested concept. When it comes to state formation in pre-colonial Africa, it is even more contested due to conflicting ideas and theoretical orientation of the political scientists and anthropologists who studied African politics. The core of the debate is often what constitutes a state. After synthesizing studies on the distribution and key features of age-class systems throughout the world, Bernardi (1985: 140) noted that “patrilineal descent, minimal political organization and “acephalousness” are the common features of all societies governed by age class systems.” The word ‘acephalous’ is derived from Greek ἀκέφαλος literally “headless.” From Bernardi’s conclusion, all societies governed by the age class systems, including the Gedeo, lack leaders or heads, any institutionalized system of power, authority, and hierarchies. Fortes and Ewans-Pritchard (1940) even go further, and divide African polity sharply into two: states (centralized chiefdoms/kingdoms like the Nguni, the Bemba, and the Ankole in which the chief/king rules over the tribe/society) and “stateless” societies (societies with decentralized and egalitarian institutions like the Nuer, Konso, Gedeo, Borana, Arbore, Arusha, Masai in which institutions maintain social order).¹⁰ We argue that this generic categorization of African polity into two is only guided by Eurocentric mentality. For example, there is no clear evidence in which Chiefdoms are states while others are not except the similarity of the former to the colonial kingdoms in structure and its easiness for indirect rule. Here it is worth mentioning Bernardi’s statements:

The conquering nations, at the moment of territorial occupation, needed local leaders to serve as a broker in their rule over the populations. In case of centralized kingdoms, this was simply a matter of forcing the king and the other leaders to follow the orders of the conquerors or to substitute them with others, maintaining the ancient structure. However, where there were no heads, the conquerors were faced with an enigma (Bernardi 1985: 24).

Based on our field data, we argue that the Gedeo were a state under the *Baalle* governance system. First, they had a clearly defined territory under three *roga*. Secondly, its dense and relatively large number of population size fits the requirements. Third, their economy produced, and still continues to produce, cash crops particularly *Yirga Chaffe* organic coffee. Fourth, their relationship with the neighboring communities like the Guji and Borana, and, above all, their complex indigenous

¹⁰ It is nevertheless to be noted that none of these proposals takes into consideration sovereignty of power—according to many the only defining feature of a proper state.

governance system (the *Baalle* system) located at the center of their social fabric qualify the Gedeo for being a State.

It is important to mention that the governance trajectory of the Gedeo shows that during pre-*Baalle* period, the Gedeo used to be ruled by chiefs in the *Gossalo* period. It was the brutality of these chiefs that led the Gedeo people to completely overthrow the Chiefdom system and replace it with the egalitarian *Baalle* system. In other words, *Baalle* is a conscious institutional decision of the Gedeo not only to abolish Chiefdom but also to continually dismantle its rise in their society. Thus, setting chiefdom as a fundamental criterion to define a State is not unacceptable. The focus should rather shift to other parameters like institutional complexity and capacity for maintain social order.

8. The influence of Ethiopian State on the *Baalle* system

Like the internal evolution in the Gedeo indigenous governance system, the Ethiopian state also has undergone trifold re-construction in its governance itinerary. From the outset, Ethiopia took its present geographical shape through the kingdom building project of Emperor Minilik (1866-1913), the King of Shoa, in the second half of the 19th century. Minilik, with his desire to expand his territory, continued to move to the autonomous regions in all directions, becoming *negusänägäst* ‘King of Kings’ (Aregay 1997)¹¹ of Ethiopia in 1889, and remaining in power until his death in 1913. Small kingdoms¹² in the southwest like the Wolayta, Kafa, Gofa, and peoples under egalitarian governance systems like the Sidama, Konso, Gedeo, Borana, Guji and so forth did not manage to escape the expansion of the *negusänägäst* (Filippini 2002). Following the incorporation of the Gedeo into the Ethiopian state in 1895 (Kippie 2002), the domination of the northern Kingdom governance system prevailed over the egalitarian *Baalle* system.

According to Kippie (2002), the kingdom building process of the Imperial regime (1889 - 1974) was very painful, in that it took away not only the *Baalle* system but also whatever the Gedeo had: their language, economy, costume, administrative system and even more utterly their history. Debelo

¹¹ Negus (King) was the governor of each autonomous region. By using the title *negusänägäst* ‘King of kings’ the rulers of northern kingdoms, since the Aksumite period (1st to 7th century) up to the Solomonic dynasty which emerged in the late thirteenth century and survived until 1974, could conveniently indicate their supreme rulership over all other *nägäst* ‘kings’ (see also Aregay 1997).

¹²By kingdom, we mean “the governing influence of a king over his territory, impacting it with his personal will, purpose and intent, producing a cultural values, morals and life style that reflect the king’s desires and nature for his citizens” (Munroe 2006: 31).

(2007) provides similar reports saying that the formal state sanctions and assimilation processes changed the egalitarian *Baalle* system to absolute feudal monarchy, on the one hand, and the subsistent agricultural economy to the extractive *balabat-gebar* “landlord-tenant” system. Of course, it is worth mentioning that the imperial regime was also exploiting the northern Christian cultivators, with some authors suggesting as much as 30% of the total annual production going to the feudal lords in the form of rent and tribute (Crummey 1983). The only difference with the south is the level of severity: there, the feudal system was entitled to tax 50% and in some highly resistant cases up to 75% of what was produced (McClellan 1988: 59). This, however, does not mean that there were no positive developments under the imperial system. For example, Woldemariam (2015) mentions some positive developments like the introduction of rail way, vehicles, postal service, public transport, etc. Moreover, the first University College of Emperor Haile Selassie (now Addis Ababa University) was founded in 1950 by Emperor Haile Selassie, the last King of the Imperial regime.

During the third quarter of the 20th century (i.e., 1960s), the imperial system under Emperor Haile Selassie failed to respond to the “nationality” questions raised by Addis Ababa University students and the associated social unrests in the country. Walelign, then student at Haile Selassie University, who is often considered the pioneer of the nationality movement, in a short, but very powerful article, claimed that Ethiopia is not one nation-state but a state of multiple and, except for the Amhara nation and to some extent the Amhara-Tigre front, marginalized nations (Mekonen 1969). The response of the King to the student movement from his own university was arresting and killing students, including Walelign, who were leading the quest for a multi-national state, rather than addressing the nationality questions. Woldemariam (2015) labels such ideologically suppressive behavior of the imperial regime አዳፍኝ (*addafnä* ‘repressive’). This repressive behavior of the imperial state coupled with social unrest in various parts of the country resulted in self-defeat of the imperial regime. Once the regime began to be weaker and weaker, there was a deluge in opposition movements either in the form of movement or party. The most prominent movements include the Ethiopian Socialist Movement (ESM) mainly composed of Ethiopian scholars returning from Western countries, Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Party (EPRP) mainly composed of Addis Ababa University students and their teachers, Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), and the Derg- the military base of the King Haile Selassie. One of the distinguishing features of these movements is that all of them were pegged in socialist ideology. But it is the *Derg* (1974-1991) that eventually managed to take the state power in 1974, and established its own version of socialist government using its military power. Along this line, Alemayehu and Gebru (2005) state

that Debelu Dinsa, a top military official of the *Derg* regime and one of the leaders of the revolution movement officers, officially announced the removal of the king from power as follows:

Your Majesty, King of Kings, you stayed in power for a long period of time. Because you are old enough and incapable of leading the country this time, you are ousted from power since June 29/1966 E.C. From now on, I kindly request you to go to a special place arranged for the King of Kings.

With these sentences of Debelu, not only the majesty removed from power, but also the century-old monarchy as a governance system of Ethiopia came to an end. Once the *Derg* regime came to power, the remaining four resistant movements devised their strategies, not ideologies, to deal with the military junta in power. TPLF and EPLF chose to use farmers as their main path towards securing political power. On the contrary, EPRP chose urban terror as a political strategy to defeat the *Derg* regime. ESM chose a completely different itinerary to power: it inclined to work together with the military regime. The ‘urbanite’ strategy of movements (EPRP and ESM) resulted in the fight against each other, and later led to their disintegration and demise.

Once the military regime took power from the king, it imported its ideology from abroad instead of revitalizing the denigrated indigenous governance institutions in Ethiopia. Put differently, the *Derg* was inspired by the socialist ideology whose main proponent was the Soviet Union whose communism was built to ensure a total control by the party over the state and by the state over the society via the twin levers of a centrally planned economy and of Marxist-Leninist ideology enforced by a tightly controlled cultural apparatus (Castelles 2010). Following the same footprint, the *Derg* tried to exert a total control over the politics and economy of the country. When the Soviet variant of communism failed to survive the stormy waters of historical transition between industrialism and informationalism during the last quarter of the 19th century, the *Derg* also went to its grave in 1991, and left the country in the hands of TPLF and EPLF, the two survivors among the five socialist movements of the 1960s. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its ideological child, the *Derg* regime, clearly have given a good lesson about the importance of building political project from the specific history of the nation rather than only theoretical blueprint. Castelles, in this regard, contends that “the artificial paradise of theoretically inspired politics was buried forever with the Soviet state” (Castelles 2010: 65).

Once the TPLF and EPLF secured the state power after 17 years of armed struggle, they made a very profound restructuring in the geography, politics and economy of Ethiopia. Geographically, the country was segmented into two independent countries when Eritrea seceded from Ethiopia and

gained de jure independence in 1993. On the part of Ethiopia, TPLF controlled Ethiopia by re-organizing itself as Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). This new front was made up of the surrogate TPLF and three newly cooked-up liberation movements: Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), and Southern Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Movement (SEPDM). The EPRDF regime (1991-2018) not only overthrew the Derg regime but also shifted the currency of political power. During and before the Derg regime, for example, Ethiopia was considered and structured as a nation-state even though some primordial group differences were considered by the Derg regime. However, EPRDF propagated identity politics and multi-cultural nation state both as a means to and sustainer of political power. According to the transitional charter and the 1995 Constitution of the FDRE, the political power did not emanate from ideology but rather from nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia. Moreover, the 1995 Constitution grants nations, nationalities and peoples of Ethiopia the right to develop and promote their cultures and languages. Furthermore, the Constitution (Article 39, sub-article 1) grants "Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession."

Regardless of the shift from ideology to identity, the accumulation of power at the center has become the central theme of both the pre-1991 nation-state regime, and the post-1991 multi-nation state regime. The accumulation of power even becomes stronger than expected. For example, Abbink (2011: 596) states that "EPRDF was an authoritarian governance regime in which ethnicity becomes the center of national political rhetoric." He even goes to the level of saying that the federal democratic model has not even been put to the test. Our findings warmly fit with Abbink's argument. We have used two indicators to substantiate our argument: power transfer and the method of ensuring public representativeness in the governance system.

Let us begin from how elections were carried out. First, as long as power transfer is considered, the analysis of the political history of Ethiopia under EPRDF for the last three decades shows worst results. During this period, about five very contestable general elections were carried out, and EPRDF was always the sole winner (Gutama 2017: 27). In the 2005 general election, for example, the positive conduct of campaigns and polling initially indicated that a fundamental change was taking place in Ethiopian political culture because, apparently, there was a new acceptance for displaying public political dissent – an observation that led some scholars to label the elections as 'founding,' 'formative' and 'genuine' for true democracy in Ethiopia (Clapham 2004). However, the aftermath of the election, with the excessive crackdown on the political opposition and civil society, coupled with the launch of new and repressive laws and the expansion of local structures of control and coercion,

all demonstrated that the outcome of the 2005 election was not more democracy, but rather more authoritarianism.

Second, concerning representativeness, the 1995 Constitution gives the highest power to the House of People's Representatives in all government structures ranging from village to federal. Article 50 (3) of the constitution states:

[T]he House of People's Representatives is the highest authority of the Federal Government. The house is responsible to the People. The State Council is the highest organ of State authority. It is responsible to the people of the state.

However, in practice, the front (EPRDF) was the highest authority of the federal government and its member regional parties (i.e., "liberation" movements) are the highest body in their respective regions. This was done in order to enable the front to intentionally manipulate the house for its own purpose. In other words, when the house was (re-)formed every five years, EPRDF made the house in its own image by applying the principle of "tweedism" in Lessig's (2015) words, who coined the term on the basis of the famous sayings of the greatest American political philosopher, Boss Tweed: "I don't care who does the electing as long as I get to do the nominating." Tweedism, according to Lessig, is any two-stage process where the few get the nominating and the rest all elect from the nominees. Tweedism creates a systemic responsive to the few only. In line with this, during the EPRDF era, first the party nominated members of the house, and then the general public elected the party. Even in small rural villages, it was the party that nominated representatives of the people. As the head of Gedeo Zonal People's Council noted, the very criteria for nomination are party loyalty and submissiveness rather than becoming voice to the voiceless (interview with the head of Gedeo zonal People's Council, February 2019, Dilla Zuria). This is how representative democracy was thrashed at its infancy in the Ethiopian polity. Of course, at the face value, party leaders have no voice during the formal meeting of the members of the people's council. However, they (party leaders) were the architects during the pre- and post- formal meetings. Along this line, Negaso, the first and late president of Ethiopia and a prominent actor in the early stages of drafting the constitution, noted in his words "I didn't see when the public depose a member of the parliament when he/she went wrong. It is only the party that nominates and fires members of the house" (Alemayehu and Gebru 2005: 57).

In a nutshell, the bottom line is that though initially ethnic federalism solved some old problems of the county and awarding the right to self-determination including the right to secession for ethnic groups, but later it created new and grave problems: it encouraged the emergency of new minority

groups unknown and unheard of before. In doing so, it consolidated power, centralized every political decision, and established dominant party rules at the expense of genuine federalism, and intensified the feeling of distinctiveness following the colonial print of “divide and rule.” Moreover, although the cultural and political space granted in the 1995 constitution has at least rescued the *Baalle* system from complete demise, a long way remains to be done for genuine revitalization.

9. Concluding remarks

Finding efficient and effective government institutions has been at the center of human quest since human beings started to live in larger groups. The Gedeo society is no exception. The quest for an effective and efficient governance system has never been a time, but has been a continuous process involving the shaping and reshaping the system. This way, the Gedeo indigenous governance institutions have evolved from one institution to other. Of all the various stages and forms of governance institutions in Gedeo, the *Baalle* system is by far the most important institution because of its egalitarian nature, effective power management mechanism, and strong implications to the imported and inefficient governance institutions in contemporary Africa in general and in Ethiopia in particular. In a world where governance systems are still not yet fully answered, it is crucial to study the peculiar governance experience of the Gedeo people which is based on the principle of holism, consensual decision making, power management, and communal participation in politics.

Using a critical indigenous lens, we have found out that the Gedeo *Baalle* governance institution was, and, to a very weakened level is, a sophisticated egalitarian system before its incorporation into Ethiopia during the late 19th century. Since incorporation in the Ethiopian kingdom, the Gedeo *Baalle* system has been denigrated and replaced by the *neftagna-gabar* (literally ‘landlord-tenant’) system during the imperial regime and by the Marxist-Leninist ideology during the socialist regime. It is during the EPRDF regime that the peculiar civilization of diverse nations in Ethiopia was recognized, at least in the 1995 Constitution that marked a new trend of revitalization in the Gedeo *Baalle* system through research and piecemeal practices.

Regardless of such positive developments, however, the accumulation of political power at the center in the name of “democratic centralism” coupled with influences from exogenous religions and education system has hampered the full revitalization of the Gedeo *Baalle* system. We believe that a good deal of lessons could be learnt from the indigenous governance institutions of Gedeo as well as other communities for the political hygiene of the contemporary Ethiopian polity that is grappling with more than a hundred ethnic-based parties with no clear political ideology, but fighting to hold public offices, and lead a multi-ethnic country.

List of abbreviation

ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement
COND	conditional
EC	Ethiopian calendar
EPLF	Eritrean People’s Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Party
ESM	Ethiopian Socialist Movement
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
FUT	future
NEG	negation
OPDO	Oromo People’s Democratic Organization
PRES	present
SNNPRS	Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Regional State
TPLF	Tigray People’s Liberation Front

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