

Review

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Review

Generational Wisdom: Lesson from the Oromo People

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Abstract

This review explores the foundational elements of Oromo generational wisdom, focusing on how their rich cultural heritage, particularly the Gadaa system, is passed down through generations. It explores the philosophical foundations, ethical frameworks, and practical applications of Oromo indigenous knowledge systems. The analysis highlights the dynamic interplay between traditional Oromo governance structures and their ability to adapt to conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and the preservation of generational wisdom in a rapidly evolving socio-political landscape. Despite challenges from external political and religious influences, Oromo indigenous systems remain resilient, offering viable alternatives or complements to formal legal frameworks. The critical role of elders is emphasised, as they draw on their accumulated experience to address contemporary societal challenges, ensuring the continuity of intergenerational knowledge (Tafese, 2016). This review provides a comprehensive understanding of the Oromo people's unique societal organisation, illustrating how their cultural practices and traditional institutions foster social cohesion and resilience. Central to this is the Oromo's oral tradition, which serves as a vital mechanism for transmitting collective identity and societal structures. This system of knowledge dissemination reflects the Oromo's deep connection to their environment and their communal approach to leadership. The Gadaa system, a constitutional framework, embodies these values, integrating democratic principles with a commitment to social accountability and human rights. For centuries, it has guided the Oromo people, promoting equitable governance and community well-being. This review explores the enduring relevance of the Gadaa system and its adaptive strategies in preserving Oromo cultural identity amid modernization and external pressures. By exploring these dynamics, this analysis underscores the significance of Oromo generational wisdom as a model for sustainable community governance and cultural preservation in a changing world.

Keywords: Oromo generational wisdom; Gadaa system; indigenous knowledge; governance; cultural preservation; the Oromo people

Introduction

The Oromo, a prominent Cushitic-speaking ethnic group in the Horn of Africa, possess a rich cultural heritage deeply intertwined with their historical, religious, linguistic, and geographical foundations (Jalata, 2010; Teresa & Raga, 2018). This heritage is meticulously preserved and transmitted across generations through a robust oral tradition, which serves as a foundational resource for understanding their collective identity and societal structures (Ahmed & Umer, 2020). This intricate system of knowledge dissemination underscores the Oromo's profound connection to their environment and their communal understanding of leadership, which emphasises integrity over individual attributes like intelligence or wealth (Wako & Chala, 2025; Dibaba, 2020). The indigenous governance system, known as Gadaa, exemplifies this communal wisdom, embodying democratic principles and a commitment to social accountability and human rights (Aliye, 2020; Tolera, 2024). Indeed, the Gadaa system, a constitutional framework, has historically guided the Oromo people in establishing legitimate and democratic traditional governance for centuries, with its origins traceable to at least the 15th century (Gutema, 2017; Wako & Chala, 2025). This complex

system, deeply rooted in Oromo society, intricately regulated political stability, economic development, social activities, cultural obligations, moral responsibility, and the philosophy of religious order (Debele, 2018). Operating as a sophisticated socio-political construct, the Gadaa system organised Oromo males into five rotating age-grade sets, each holding distinct political and ritual powers for an eight-year term (Wako & Chala, 2025). This age-based system provided a robust mechanism for motivating and organising members of society into a stratified social structure, delineating specific socio-political rights and responsibilities associated with each grade (Hinew, 2013). The Gadaa system is noteworthy for its sophisticated checks and balances, promoting a balanced opposition and power-sharing mechanisms between various administrative organs to prevent the monopolization of authority (Jalata, 2009). This ancient system facilitated peaceful transfers of power and conflict resolution, demonstrating an indigenous peace system with enduring cultural values (Abdurahman, 2019; Tasgara, 2021). Furthermore, the Gadaa system actively promotes peacebuilding through proactive approaches that incorporate values of *safuu*, equality, respect, tolerance, law, and order (Debisa, 2022). This sophisticated framework not only ensures participatory governance through its age-grade system but also actively integrates dissenting views to foster collective decision-making and enhance the democratization process within the community (Ayehu et al., 2016).

Generational Wisdom of the Oromo People

The generational wisdom of the Oromo people is profound system extends its influence beyond political governance, impacting aspects such as child-rearing practices, community rituals, and even the Oromo calendar, reflecting its pervasive role in daily life and cultural practices (Disassa & Into, 2020). This comprehensive societal framework, therefore, stands as a testament to the Oromo people's sophisticated understanding of societal organisation and the sustained transmission of intergenerational knowledge (Hinew, 2013). A key aspect of this intergenerational wisdom is the Oromo people's unique understanding of time, which is intrinsically linked to spiritual movements and environmental cycles rather than a standardised linear model (Bass, 2022).

Echoes of Time: Insights Across the Decades (Source: Author's knowledge from his grandfather)

Each decade of life offers a unique lens through which to view the world and interact with others. These observations, presented with a touch of humour, highlight some general tendencies associated with different age groups:

1. **The Ten-Year-Old:** At this age, children are whirlwinds of boundless energy, unable to stay still even during sleep. Their restless nature transforms bedtime into a chaotic blend of flips, flops, and unexpected kicks. Consequently, "Don't sleep next to a 10-year-old—they flip and flop all night long!"
2. **The Twenty-Year-Old:** In their twenties, individuals often juggle packed schedules or embrace youthful zeal, devouring meals at lightning speed. Whether rushing between commitments or fueled by eagerness, their dining pace is relentless. Thus, "Don't try to eat with a 20-year-old—they eat incredibly fast!"
3. **The Thirty-Year-Old:** The thirties often bring peak physical fitness, with many embracing running as a passion or a way to stay active. Their stamina and speed make them formidable competitors on any track. As a result, "Don't try to run with someone in their 30s—they're often high-powered runners!"
4. **The Forty-Year-Old:** By their forties, life experience sharpens strategic thinking, enabling them to tackle challenges with clever tactics and foresight. In competitions or problem-solving, they've seen it all. Hence, "Don't race a horse with a 40-year-old—they know all the tricks!"

5. **The Fifty-Year-Old:** In their fifties, individuals refine their communication skills, excelling in debates with logic, charm, and experience. They're tough to outtalk in any discussion. Therefore, "Don't argue with a 50-year-old—they've mastered the art of winning debates!"
6. **The Sixty-Year-Old:** Entering their sixties, people develop keen awareness, noticing subtle changes others miss. Staying up late and ever-vigilant, they outshine even the best guard dogs. For this reason, "Don't rely on a dog for security—a 60-year-old person is alert, stays up late, and notices anything that comes near their yard!"
7. **The Seventy-Year-Old:** By their seventies, many have built resilience, particularly in handling sun exposure. Their skin, seasoned by years outdoors, thrives under the sun's rays while others may burn. Consequently, "Don't bask in the sun with a 70-year-old—their body needs the sun and won't burn easily, but you might get burned!"
8. **The Eighty-Year-Old:** In their eighties, individuals prioritize financial security, relying on carefully amassed savings and resources. Their trust in their financial wisdom runs deep. Thus, "Don't ask an 80-year-old for money—their savings and resources are what they trust most!"
9. **The Ninety-Year-Old:** Those in their nineties often value privacy and may find age-related questions intrusive or irrelevant. Memory might be selective, or they simply prefer discretion. As such, "Don't ask a 90-year-old their age—they might not remember it themselves!"
10. **The Hundred-Year-Old:** Centenarians, with a century of wisdom, prefer gentle, respectful interactions. Probing questions can feel intrusive, as they value their dignity and experience. Therefore, "Don't ask a 100-year-old too many questions—they might get offended and prefer not to be asked!"

This expanded longevity has also led to the emergence of a new age demographic, centenarians, whose unique perspectives on aging further enrich our understanding of the human lifespan (Nimb et al., 2024). These individuals often demonstrate remarkable vitality, characterised by an active engagement with life and a keen desire to continue living vibrantly (Merino et al., 2023). Their narratives frequently reveal a profound sense of acceptance and satisfaction with life, alongside a notable contentment with living in the present, indicating a continuous and intergenerational positive outlook (Ratan & Vries, 2019). This sustained positive disposition is often linked to the cultivation of strong social relationships and active community involvement, which are frequently cited as crucial for maintaining physical, mental, and relational well-being into advanced age (Cherry et al., 2013; Hu, 2024).

Overall, these centenarians often exhibit psychological resources, such as resilience and positive personality traits, that enable them to navigate life's challenges more successfully (Merino et al., 2023). Their capacity for intellectual curiosity, commitment, and control over their lives also distinguishes them, reflecting a proactive approach to well-being and personal agency (Merino et al., 2023). Furthermore, centenarians often engage in meaningful interactions, maintaining strong social ties and a sense of usefulness that contributes to their overall resilience and life satisfaction (Merino et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2018). This robust psychological profile, characterized by adaptability and a sustained engagement with life, offers valuable insights into the interplay between mental fortitude and extreme longevity (Merino et al., 2023).

Literature Review

The Oromo worldview, philosophy, and religious beliefs are integral components of this cultural tapestry, often explored in conjunction with their modes of livelihood and the Gadaa system itself (Jalata, 2010). This comprehensive understanding is critical for apprehending the traditional moral values that underpin Oromo society, which have been subject to critical evaluation to demonstrate their applicability in contemporary philosophical inquiry (Dewo, 2011). Moreover, these traditional values often manifest in indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, which represent a bottom-up approach to addressing disputes and fostering lasting peace within the community (Gena & Jarra, 2023). Such mechanisms often integrate local knowledge, traditions, and spiritual beliefs to promote solidarity and reject violence in post-conflict situations (Gena & Jarra, 2023). The effectiveness of these

indigenous approaches in cultivating a culture of peace has been consistently demonstrated, highlighting their vital role in community stability (Gena & Jarra, 2023). The Gadaa system, in particular, offers a unique lens through which to examine these peacebuilding efforts, as it inherently incorporates principles of conflict resolution within its structured age-grade responsibilities and communal decision-making processes (Tasgara, 2021; Eneyew & Ayalew, 2023). This framework fosters a continuous negotiation and cooperation among various stakeholders, demonstrating that peace is not merely a given but a product of sustained collective effort (Debelo & Jirata, 2018). Indeed, indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms are crucial for establishing a culture of peace post-conflict, offering alternatives to formal litigation that aim to restore social solidarity (Gena & Jarra, 2023). However, contemporary challenges, including the increasing inclination towards formal litigation and evolving societal dynamics, often diminish the effectiveness of these traditional mechanisms (Gena & Jarra, 2023). This decline is particularly problematic given that conventional transitional justice systems, while robust, often overlook the deep-seated restorative values embedded within indigenous justice systems, leaving their potential contributions to national policy largely unexplored (Taddele & Ebrahim, 2024; Muluken, 2020). This oversight can lead to a justice landscape where many communities feel alienated from legal processes that govern them, emphasising punitive measures rather than the restoration of relationships and communal well-being as prioritized in traditional African justice systems (Chukwudebelu, 2024). Consequently, there is a compelling argument for integrating these traditional systems into modern legal frameworks to foster more inclusive and culturally resonant approaches to justice (Chukwudebelu, 2024; Abe & Ouma, 2017).

Methodology

To comprehensively understand the Oromo indigenous knowledge systems, a thorough literature review highlights the significance of the restorative justice principles. Consequently, further exploration of these indigenous frameworks is crucial to discern how their restorative principles can be effectively integrated into contemporary legal and social structures, thereby promoting more inclusive and equitable justice outcomes. This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, emphasising ethnographic inquiry and in-depth textual analysis of Oromo cultural texts and historical accounts to illuminate the intricacies of their generational wisdom (Mekonnen, 2011). This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how Oromo indigenous institutions, such as the Gadaa system and various conflict resolution mechanisms, have historically adapted to internal and external pressures. Specifically, this study examines the intricate interplay between traditional Oromo governance structures and their adaptive capacities in resolving conflicts, sustaining peace, and transmitting generational wisdom within a rapidly changing socio-political landscape (Gamtessa, 2024; Eneyew & Ayalew, 2023). The research further investigates the efficacy of these indigenous mechanisms in contemporary Ethiopia, considering factors such as globalisation and the decentralisation of state power that challenge the traditional roles (Gamtessa, 2024).

Results

This section presents the findings from our qualitative research, detailing the historical and contemporary efficacy of Oromo indigenous institutions, with a particular focus on the Gadaa system and its various conflict resolution strategies. The analysis reveals how these mechanisms, deeply embedded within the Oromo worldview, contribute to social cohesion and stability by emphasizing communal participation and restorative justice (Chukwudebelu, 2024). Furthermore, these traditional systems often serve as crucial intermediaries where formal legal services are inaccessible, providing a platform for dispute resolution through community leadership and active involvement (Chukwudebelu, 2024). The study thus highlights the enduring relevance of these indigenous approaches, showcasing their capacity to address multifaceted conflicts ranging from land disputes to inter-clan disagreements, often with greater efficacy than formal legal systems (Gamtessa, 2024). Moreover, the research underscores the importance of integrating these local practices into broader

policymaking to ensure interventions are culturally sensitive and effective (Wako & Chala, 2025). A key aspect of this integration involves recognizing that indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms are distinct from one ethnic group to another, varying across cultures and regions within Ethiopia (Gamtessa, 2024). For instance, the Gedeo's Gechuma, the Awi's indigenous institutions, and the Borena's Aboled each demonstrate unique approaches to social support, conflict resolution, and resource management within their respective communities (Gamtessa, 2024) (Genet, 2021). These distinct systems, while differing in specific rituals and practices, share core principles of inclusivity and trust, aiming for durable resolutions through community-led processes (Gamtessa, 2024) (Genet, 2021) (Eneyew & Ayalew, 2023). To further enhance the effectiveness of these indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, documentation of their practices and increased awareness among younger generations are crucial steps for preservation (Gamtessa, 2024).

Discussion

This discussion delves into the theoretical underpinnings and practical implications of the findings presented in the preceding section, critically examining how the Oromo Gadaa system and other indigenous mechanisms contribute to societal harmony and generational knowledge transfer. It evaluates how these traditional systems, by emphasizing communal participation and restorative justice, offer viable alternatives or complements to formal legal structures, especially in contexts where state-provided services are limited or distrusted (Hassan, 2020). The integration of these indigenous frameworks into contemporary legal and social structures, while respecting their autonomy, could foster more inclusive and effective justice outcomes (Gamtessa, 2024). However, several factors, such as a lack of codified practices, resistance from youth, gender inequality, political interference, and the influence of modern religions, can hinder the effectiveness of these traditional systems (Gamtessa, 2024). Despite these challenges, many traditional mechanisms, like the jirgas in Afghanistan and various community-based systems in Nepal, are often preferred over formal courts due to their perceived fairness, accessibility, and role in strengthening social solidarity (Eneyew & Ayalew, 2023). Moreover, the sustained efficacy of such indigenous mechanisms often relies on the recognition and consistent support of respected community elders and spiritual leaders, who frequently act as primary mediators (Bayeh, 2015) (Gamtessa, 2024). These traditional mechanisms also benefit from being deeply embedded within the cultural fabric of a society, leading to a high degree of community acceptance and adherence to their decisions (Hassan, 2020) (Bayeh, 2015).

Conclusions

This article has systematically delineated an emic African Appropriate Dispute Resolution philosophy, underscoring its historical roots and key principles within the Oromo context (Maraire, 2024). It highlights the intrinsic value of indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, emphasizing their capacity to foster peace, reconciliation, and community well-being through non-punitive measures that prioritize relational harmony (Maraire, 2024). This philosophy, rooted in African self-reliance, advocates for the development and systematization of African alternative dispute resolution independent of Western capitalist principles, thereby emphasizing an epistemic diversity grounded in indigenous knowledge and traditions (Maraire, 2024). This approach moves beyond simply acknowledging the existence of diverse dispute resolution practices to actively theorizing them as a distinct, legitimate, and academically rigorous field of study (Maraire, 2024). This systematization not only decolonizes legal thought by challenging the hegemony of Western epistemologies but also aims to integrate these culturally resonant approaches into contemporary legal frameworks, thereby enhancing access to justice for African communities (Maraire, 2024). This endeavor requires critical engagement with existing frameworks to identify and address their limitations while asserting the distinctiveness of an African ADR philosophy (Maraire, 2024). Such an approach, grounded in pluriversality, acknowledges the practicality of integrating aspects of traditional systems into formal legal structures rather than reverting entirely to pre-colonial practices (Maraire, 2024).

This shift calls for a concerted effort to recognize and validate African legal thinking and practices as legitimate sources of legal ideas, values, and methods, moving towards a more inclusive and representative justice system (Maraire, 2024). This involves a careful integration of customary norms and institutions into modern legal frameworks, recognizing that such pluri-versal approaches can enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of dispute resolution mechanisms across the continent (Maraire, 2024).

Social implication: The successful integration of these systems could lead to more equitable and sustainable peacebuilding efforts, fostering a stronger sense of community ownership over justice processes. Moreover, this decolonizing approach to legal theory challenges the Western-centric view that has historically marginalized African legal systems, asserting their distinctiveness and validity (Maraire, 2024). This involves a fundamental re-evaluation of legal epistemologies, moving towards a polycentric world where multiple forms of knowledge are recognized and valued (Maraire, 2024). Such integration recognizes that while overturning established legal systems like Roman-Dutch or English common law may be impractical in contemporary African society, incorporating African Alternative Dispute Resolution within the formal justice system can position general law courts and litigation as merely one option among many in a pluri-versal context (Maraire, 2024). This perspective advocates for a nuanced understanding of legal pluralism, where traditional mechanisms are not merely supplementary but integral components of a comprehensive and culturally responsive justice system (Chukwudebelu, 2024) (Maraire, 2024).

Limitation: The broad scope of “African ADR” presents a significant limitation, as it risks oversimplifying the vast diversity of indigenous conflict resolution practices across the continent by potentially homogenizing distinct cultural and regional nuances (Maraire, 2024). Future research should therefore focus on in-depth, localized studies to provide a more granular understanding of specific indigenous ADR philosophies, recognizing the need for nuanced conceptual frameworks that embrace epistemic de-linking from Eurocentric validation (Maraire, 2024). This would involve the codification of local concepts, integration of local law into state legal systems, and incorporation of local institutions into these state frameworks, thereby facilitating a more explicit cooperation and innovation within traditional dispute resolution systems (Maraire, 2024). This approach can foster an amalgamation of traditional legal systems with modern legal frameworks, thereby promoting a more unified and effective system of justice (Maraire, 2024).

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