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Indigenous Governance Systems and Democracy in Ethiopia: Yejoka Qicha System of the Gurage People

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Abstract

Indigenous governance systems within the Eastern African nation of Ethiopia are often dismissed by Western political elites as undemocratic. We assessed the nature of and level of democracy in Indigenous governance systems in Ethiopia by focusing on the *Yejoka Qicha* of the Gurage people. We found that, while the Yejoka Qicha system includes democratic elements that can support national efforts to consolidate democracy, it also marginalizes some groups, such as women, from political and economic benefits. As such, we recommend the implementation of policies that eliminate the oppressive aspects of the Yejoka Qicha system, while also recognizing the role that these Indigenous governance systems can have in promoting democracy within Ethiopia.

Keywords

democracy, governance, Gurage, Indigenous, Yejoka Qicha

Indigenous Governance Institutions and Democracy in Ethiopia: Yejoka Qicha of the Gurage People

Recently, many scholars have discussed the importance of Indigenous governance institutions in guiding the socioeconomic and political affairs of societies around the globe (Boahene, 2017; Holzinger et al, 2020; Wedajo et al., 2019). Governments are increasingly providing constitutional recognition to Indigenous practices in administration processes (Holzinger et al., 2020). The Afrobarometer surveys revealed that citizens of African countries continue to consider Indigenous institutions important and express a desire for a greater political role for Indigenous leaders (Logan, 2013). State constitutional laws encourage Indigenous institutions supporting the political system. Out of 193 member states of the United Nations, 61 countries recognize the necessity of Indigenous institutions in administration (Holzinger et al., 2016). The JuriGlobe World Legal Systems Research Group (n.d.) also estimates that 57% of the world's population lives in countries where Indigenous governance systems and other forms of administration coexist with State governments.

Increasing global recognition of Indigenous governance suggests a veritable revitalization from Western denigration and trivialization—an Indigenous resurgence. Indigenous governance institutions were labelled as primitive, backward, and resistant to change by Western travellers and colonial agents, and Westerners claimed these institutions were replaced by the "advanced" culture of the West. Hlawnching (2006) had this to say in this regard:

> When the outsiders met [I]ndigenous [P]eoples for the first time over five centuries ago, their concept [for] understanding … [I]ndigenous [P]eoples was very disparaging and [they] called them aborigine, natives, tribal, schedule tribe, ethnic minorities and ethnic nationalities, connoting backwardness and primitiveness. … [I]ndigenous systems including governance, culture, social, legal and judiciary, philosophy, [and] economic systems were replaced with supposedly more advanced systems to assimilate and "modernize" [I]ndigenous [P]eoples. (p. 2)

The prevalent discourse around governance in Africa focuses primarily on achieving and imbibing Western values and ideals (Damptey, 2017). This view exists partly because many African scholars think that Indigenous institutions are undemocratic, and therefore they have seen limited potential for political development (Dake, 1996; Simiyu, 1987). In contrast, the majority of African citizens value their Indigenous cultures, customs, and governance systems, which were formed over centuries before their disruption by colonialism (Zartman, 2000).

Prior to colonization, African societies had rich Indigenous institutions that oversaw social control, the allocation of resources, and law-making (Boahene, 2017). Indigenous institutions were integral parts of African culture, which brought harmony and stability to society. They influenced politics and were used in dispute resolution, land administration, and the provision of social security (Holzinger et al., 2017). Moreover, they were the custodians of the people's norms, cultures, and practices. In contemporary Africa, these institutions shape various issues, ranging from the provision of public goods (Baldwin & Mvukiyehe, 2015) and economic development (Baldwin & Holzinger, 2019) to fostering peace and stability.

Like other African countries, Ethiopia is rich in Indigenous institutions that can maintain peace and security, foster social harmony, and allocate public goods. Nevertheless, the relevance of Indigenous institutions to political development in Ethiopia has been overlooked on the grounds that they are undemocratic (Messay, 2008). These denigrator arguments have been made without properly studying, analysing, or interpreting Indigenous institutions. While social organizations in Ethiopia were non-egalitarian, and this feature denied some citizens an opportunity to rise to the highest social and political ranks, this does not mean that these systems have no democratic elements. Administrative activities in Indigenous governance institutions are based on people's participation, and, according to customary laws, leaders will be sanctioned if they try to act arbitrarily.

Ethiopia's efforts to build genuine democracy were derailed by the introduction of Western discourses, which supplanted Indigenous systems of governance. Rooted in the tradition of Western modernity, Ethiopian elites pursued political ideals that have led to the self-destructive political patterns that the country currently experiences (Teshale, 2008). Ethiopia currently lacks a democratic political culture. These democratic limitations contribute to today's political atmosphere, which is full of uncertainty and despair. Harsh political, psychological, and economic realities are manifesting themselves daily within the sociopolitical landscape of the country.

In light of the present challenges facing Ethiopia, revisiting old wisdom may have worthwhile outcomes. The revival of old wisdoms is possible through empirical investigations of the nature of Indigenous institutions. Taking *Yejoka Qicha*, the Indigenous governance institution among the Gurage, as a litmus test, this article critically examines whether the structure and functions of Yejoka Qicha are democratic. The examination of the degree to which Indigenous institutions are democratic is imperative to inform the appraisal and criticism of their mode of governance and to assess its pertinence to contemporary governance. The nature of Yejoka Qicha is examined from the perspective of the structure and function of Indigenous governance institutions, without comparing them to Western democracy. This is because democracy is a system that is practised differently by different institutions (Ayittey, 1999). Indigenous institutions have democratic elements in their own respect, including people centredness, consensual decision-making, governance through social values and practices, decentralized administration, and transparent criteria to select leaders. Thus, the present article used these defining features as an analytical framework to examine the nature of Yejoka Qicha.

While the contemporary political crisis that inundates Ethiopia is the result of the failure to strengthen Indigenous governance institutions and the inappropriate application of Western structures, the existing literature has failed to closely examine it. Messay (2008) examined how the advent of Marxism caused cultural dislocation in Ethiopia. He argued that Marxism brought antagonistic political interests, including the nationalities question, which was followed by politically motivated killings and ethnic conflicts, in contrast to the culture of pardon and reconciliation within traditional political systems. Teshale (2008) discussed how Eurocentric readings of Ethiopian history created political narratives based on Western political traditions, rather than the "communal democracy"—the horizontal social ties among the people, which took democratic forms.

Understanding the relevance of Indigenous institutions to political development requires expanding the literature by using empirical approaches to examine Indigenous institutions at the local level. Indeed, Bahiru (2002) assessed the local system of governance among the Gurage people of Ethiopia. Providing

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a detailed description of the Gurage governance systems, Yejoka Qicha and *Gordanna Sera*, Bahiru focused on the revitalization process that these institutions have experienced since 1991. He argued that, although their influence has fluctuated over centuries, Gurage Indigenous institutions "helped to foster and sustain the people's sense of identity" (p. 27). Though Bahiru's work contributes to the understanding the origins of Yejoka Qicha and Gordanna Sera and its relevance to the solidarity of the Gurage people, it failed to address the nature of these governance systems. This article thus aims to fill this knowledge gap by investigating the nature of Yejoka Qicha in order to reconcile two polarized views of Indigenous institutions: romanticism by the traditionalist approach and trivialization by the modernist approach.

Setting the Context

Like many other ethnic groups in Ethiopia, the origin and history of the Gurage people is relatively unknown, making their culture susceptible to subjective interpretations by a coterie of scholars who have studied them. Due to this fact, studies of the Gurage people have "generally suffered from the opposite defects of insulation and extrapolation" (Bahiru, 2002, p. 19). The Gurage are Semitic people who belong to the *ensete* (false banana) cultural complex of Southwestern Ethiopia (Worku, 2000). Farming, livestock raising, trade, and migration constitute the major economic activities of the Gurage.

Linguistically, the Gurage are divided into three groups: the Northern Gurage (Aymellel, Kestane, and Sodo), Eastern Gurage (Silite and Wollene), and Western Gurage (the Sebat Bet), as described in Bahiru (2002) and Worku (2000). In spite of the strong belief among Ethiopians that they have common identity, which leads to the Gurage being treated as a single ethnic group, these are distinct categories. Religiously, the Gurage share an Indigenous religion whose deities have followers and ceremonial leaders throughout Gurage land. Three major branches are *Waq* (warrior god) for men, *Damwamit* (goddess) for women, and *Bwaja* (thunder god) for both sexes, are organized on a territorial basis (Markakis, 1998). These religions have a hierarchical structure beginning at the sub-Clan level and at the apex is the paramount figure who resides in the location where an annual pan-Gurage festivals takes place. Currently, Indigenous religious systems are on the verge of collapse as a result of the incursion of Christianity and Islam deep into the Gurage homeland.

Political authority among the Gurage reflects genealogical segmentation, with Clans and sub-Clans functioning quite autonomously and lacking an established hierarchy (Markakis, 1998). Historically, the Gurage is thus known with its "tradition of political fragmentation" (Bahiru, 2002, p. 20). Oral Tradition among the Gurage indicated that political fragmentation bred a good deal of internecine strife and a high incidence of enslavement. It is from this political and social turmoil that the idea of forming an alliance among the Gurage was initiated. The alliance between the Western Clans, named the Sebat Bet, gave birth to the Gurage Qicha subsequently named Yejoka. A parallel process also resulted in the promulgation of the *Yegordanna Sera* in the Northern Gurage (Bahiru, 2002). Thus, it is fair to argue that the typical feature of the Gurage land is the prevalence of Indigenous institutions, which helps to foster solidarity among the Gurage. It is this aspect of the Gurage that interests us in this article. We will concentrate on the nature of Yejoka Qicha.

Yejoka Qicha is selected as an illustrative case study because its laws and principles were codified within a single document by Gurage elites in 1998 and then revised in 2008. It is important to highlight,

through empirical investigation, the lessons contained in this example of development so that other groups in Ethiopia can benefit. Codifying Indigenous governance systems can help identify ways in which they effectively address local problems, and they can inform the national policy arena. Codification prevents the erosion of Indigenous systems due to the advancement of globalization, modernization, and development-induced human displacement.

Methodological Approaches and Methods

This study employed Indigenous methodologies, which are relationship based. These methodologies are shaped by local knowledge and traditions, and they acknowledge life experience and stories as authentic ways of knowing (Kurtz, 2013). Indigenous methodologies are fundamentally rooted in the traditions and knowledge systems of Indigenous Peoples and allow Indigenous people to create their own images and stories (Evans et al., 2014). The goal of Indigenous methodologies is to enable Indigenous people to develop knowledge and to speak for and of themselves about all elements of the world they inhabit. In this study, we consulted with religious leaders, local Elders, Clan Chiefs, and Yejoka leaders to critically investigate the nature of Yejoka Qicha systems from the perspective of the local community. This led us to employ a qualitative approach to provide a deeper understanding and interpretation of the issues under investigation.

Data collection for this study included in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). The study participants were selected using purposive sampling based on criteria, such as their knowledge, life experience, or characteristics or role within a group and community (Khan & Manderson, 1992). Hence, informants and participants for this study were selected based on their position as a Clan Chief, religious leader, local Elder, or other leadership role within the Yejoka. Secondary sources were used to supplement the primary data. Sources were screened for their relevance and academic credibility. Books, articles, conference proceedings, and working papers were analysed to enrich the outcomes of the study.

The researchers developed the interview and FGD guidelines before starting the fieldwork. Once in the field, we contacted local people and found two field assistants who helped us to find informants and arrange FGDs. We conducted the fieldwork over three months (from May 20, 2020, to July 27, 2020). The sample size was determined by the data saturation point (Kumar, 2011). A total of 16 interviews were conducted with local Elders ($n = 4$), Yejoka leaders ($n = 3$), religious leaders ($n = 3$), and Clan Chiefs ($n = 6$). Moreover, two FGDs were organized with local communities, which separate groups for males and females.

During the interviews, participants gave informed consent. The interviewees were informed that the purpose of the study was for academic use only. In order to show respect for the traditions and customs of the local communities and the stories that the informants told us, the researchers took care to record what was shared accurately. In the analysis section, we have further secured the participants' privacy by withholding their names and using codes as identifiers. Most importantly, we believe that acknowledging the authors of works cited and the views of research informants and FGD discussants is a critical component of research ethics.

The researchers took notes and tape recorded during the interview and FGD sessions. After completing the fieldwork, the researchers transcribed the data and consulted with informants, who validated the transcript, in order to increase the trustworthiness of the data. In the end, the data were analysed

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through thematic analysis, which helped the researchers develop a model that could be locally contextualized and interpreted. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method used for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (i.e., themes) within the data. Thus, the data that were collected from interviewees, FGD participants, and documents were structured into themes to allow clear analysis of the results based on the established objectives.

Theoretical Framework

Indigenous Governance Institutions and the Concept of Democracy

There have been contentious scholarly debates over the nature and functions of Indigenous governance institutions in Africa. The debate revolves around the two main approaches towards Indigenous institutions: those of modernists versus traditionalists. Modernists view Indigenous institutions as gerontocratic, chauvinistic, authoritarian, and increasingly irrelevant form of rule that is antithetical to democracy. Simiyu (1987), a Kenyan historian, claims that Indigenous institutions in Africa were non-egalitarian, which denied some citizens an opportunity to elevate themselves to the highest social and political ranks. Gerontocracy is an important feature of African social organizations and decision-making processes, which has led some to conclude that Indigenous systems are intrinsically non-egalitarian and undemocratic (Dake, 1996). In general, modernists view Indigenous governance institutions as relics of the past that may impede democratic development and must therefore be abandoned entirely.

Through abandoning Indigenous institutions, modernists envisioned the replication of Western democracy in Africa. They argued that the West's institutional form of liberal democracy is universally valid and that Africa's aspiration to a democratic system of rule should look the same (Logan, 2008). Liberal democracy is presented in this modernist model as the best political system because Indigenous institutions are believed to restrict the individual rights of citizens and inhibit the development of democratic states (Mamdani, 1996; Ntsebeza, 2005). This argument developed as a result of Europe's global hegemony since the 14th century, which fortified the assumption that Western development experiences were universal. But these derogative and one-sided arguments of modernists have been challenged by many African scholars who argue that democracy is not simply practised "correctly" by one culture or race but is used differently by various cultures (Ayittey, 1999). Grefe Faremo (cited in Teffo, 2002) supported Ayittey's argument:

> We must not forget that democracy must grow from local roots. … It cannot be imposed from outside. The people of each nation must take their fate into their hands and shape the form of government most suited for national aspiration. Consequently, we must avoid imposing pre-defined model of democracy on African countries. (p. 2)

Labelled as traditionalists, this group regards Africa's Indigenous Chiefs as the true representatives of their people—accessible, respected, and legitimate. Traditionalists note that although heredity often served as the basis for assigning leadership, many systems had means for unseating leaders who did not meet with the community's approval (Ayittey, 1991). The traditionalists' perspective on Indigenous institutions was best captured by Keulder (1998):

> For them, the institution of traditional leaders and its procedures of governance is not only a simpler form of government, but also a more accessible … and a more participatory one. It is

> more accessible because it is closer to the subjects than any other system of government; subjects have more direct access to their leaders because they live in the same village and because any individual can approach the leader … decision making is [by] consensus, which create[s] greater harmony and unity; it is transparent and participatory because most people attend tribal meetings and express their views directly, not through representatives. (p. 11)

In pre-colonial Africa, strands of democratic participation could be found in decision-making processes, involvement in communal affairs, and functional representation of different sectors within the ruling council (Chazan, 1994). According to Wiredu (1995), African society practised a kind of democracy called consensual democracy, which ensures that the community is unified by the individuals that belong to it. In the tradition of consensual democracy, decisions were made through consensus rather than the liberal democracy principle of majority vote. The premise behind making decisions through consensus was to ensure that minority positions were heard and taken into account.

Modernists critique Indigenous institutions by claiming that they are unaccountable because their leaders are undemocratic and not subject to electoral sanctioning (Baldwin & Holzinger, 2019). However, according to the same authors, Indigenous governance institutions can be compatible with democracy and accountable to their citizens insofar as they adopt inclusive decision-making processes, and leaders have strong non-electoral connections to the community. The inherited chieftainship in Indigenous systems may seem feudalistic, but the process of selecting leaders has democratic manifestations. Indigenous leaders are selected by community members on the basis of knowledge about custom and tradition, protection, honesty, wisdom, generosity, and sense of justice. Hlawnching (2006) described the selection process for Indigenous leaders:

> The Chief did not establish the village and rule the people who lived there—the village was established first and the villagers selected someone who had certain characteristics to be a leader … Generally, the villagers selected someone with extensive knowledge of custom, wisdom, as well as prowess and organizational ability. The selection of the Chief was conducted through a community meeting of all mature village members. (p. 4)

Thus, it is fair to argue that governance in pre-colonial Africa started and ended with the people (Bell, 2002). Based on this fact, Williams (1987) commented that the concept of the people's sovereignty was as natural as breathing in Africa. The very defining characteristic of Indigenous governance institutions, therefore, is its people centredness. In Indigenous governance systems in Africa, the people are the first and final sources of power (Williams, 1987) and are the building blocks of government (Ayittey, 1991), decisions are made through consensus (Wiredu, 1995), and the political system is decentralized. Thus, the African pre-colonial past can serve as a guide to its re-democratization (Barber & Watson, 2001) and can support democratic consolidation efforts. A homegrown constitution, which stems out of the values of the society, is important in settling contemporary predicaments of the continent. According to Tiky (2014), this new constitution would eliminate the current Western approach to democratic promotion, which focuses exclusively on elites and a few urban activists.

Rather than searching for Indigenous solutions to Ethiopia's political predicaments, many scholars and politicians advocate for support of liberal democracy, based on their admiration of its so-called success in the West. Scholars have ignored the fact that Ethiopia had well-developed Indigenous governance

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systems prior to its contact with the West. As Teshale (2008) succinctly put it: "Ethiopia was ruled on the basis of rule of law. The powers that be were mandated to abide by the established law, written and/or customary" (p. 364). The sophisticated governance systems of the *Yegobez Aleqa* in Amhara society, the *Gada* system in Oromo society, and similar systems used by other ethnic groups were used to manage the affairs of the Ethiopian people. Some aspects of such Indigenous governance systems could guide us towards consolidating democracy and dignified political arrangements that would allow for the nation's desired creativity, authenticity, workability, and progress in political domains.

Political systems that emerge from domestic realities will address the needs and fit the realities of the people. It is from this ground that Haile Sellassie (1968/2009), the majestic Emperor of Ethiopia (1930–1974), once said, "no modern legislations, which do not have roots in the customs of those whom it governs, can have strong foundations" (p. v). For Ethiopia to come out from the vicious cycle of undemocratic systems, scholars need to "re-examine [I]ndigenous political systems, revitalize them, and make them pertinent to contemporary applications" (Bahiru, 2002, p. 18).

Constrained by Western political discourses, Ethiopia at present lacks genuine democracy. The Ethiopian people are divided along parochial ethnic lines. The introduction of Western modernity eroded Indigenous forms of communal life, without providing an alternative form of social cohesion. As a result, polarized political narratives and ethnic tensions dominate the news in Ethiopia today. Given the overall problems facing the country, there needs to be a deeper understanding and critical investigation of Indigenous governance institutions and their relevance to nationwide political development.

Results

The Earliest Account of Yejoka Qicha

The Gurage people are a part of different Clans. The Chief of each Clan administered diverse sociopolitical and economic issues. The Chief of each Clan was called *Yegondar Nigus*, which is literally interpreted as "the king of the necklace." The title was given to the leaders of the Gurage Clans, and each were bestowed necklaces, which served to distinguish them from the local people. The Chief served as a Clan leader, administrator, and judge. According to Oral Traditions of the Gurage, Clan Chiefs were given the power to settle inter-Clan and intra-Clan disputes. Thus, Clan Chiefs served to provide social harmony and a peaceful way of life among the Gurage.

After the inclusion of the Gurage into the wider Ethiopian State, through the unifying force of Emperor Menelik (1889–1913), who defeated Italy at the battle of Adwa in 1896, the title of the Gurage Clans Chiefs was changed to *Azmach*. Azmach is an Amharic title for the hereditary political leader of the Gurage. Today, the person with the title of Azmach serves the Gurage people as a Clan leader and symbol of unity. In the tradition of Gurage, the man elected as an Azmach must show his courage by fighting against enemies, and he must be the eldest son of a family.

The Gurage Oral Tradition shows that personal qualities such as courage, kindness, honesty, and generosity were used to evaluate people, and public feasts and political actions were used as a formal means to select outstanding candidates for important titles, such as *Abegaz* (the commander chosen for

his military exploits) and Azmach. Men who achieve high status bring prestige to their lineage, Clan, and people, and they were sometimes immortalized in poetry and songs.

In the late 18th century, the Gurage Clans were in the midst of struggle—at the end of which they decided to establish a common political institution to preserve peace among them (Markakis, 1998). Mature male members of the community directly participated in the creation of an alliance of the Gurage Clans (Assefa, 2009). The alliance between the Western Clans gave birth to the Sebat Bet Gurage Qicha subsequently named Yejoka. The term Yejoka is believed to have been derived from the *Zegba* (podocarpus) tree that serves as the venue for assembly (Bahiru, 2002). Discussing the very beginning of Yejoka Qicha, one Elder informant said:

> There was a time in the history of Gurage that self-appointed leaders ruled the local community. Such leaders appointed themselves using economic power and social prestige as a means to convince or dominate the people. They acquired social prestige through creating fear within society, claiming that they are brave and courageous and that they can bring suffering to those who didn't accept their leadership position. In this time, there were no customary laws that could prevent arbitrary rule and due to this fact, there was a state of anarchism … leaders were heavily involved in the arbitrary killing of local people, the abduction of women and girls, stealing the property of innocents, and inter-Clan conflicts. As the state of anarchism and arbitrary rule reached its highest point, a few members of the Gurage raised the main concerns of the community in the main square by masking their body through a leaf called foreforemat. It is in this situation that the most respected Elders of the Gurage came together to discuss how to solve the predicaments that the community was experiencing. In the meeting, the idea of a pan-Gurage alliance was initiated. The Yejoka was formed by representatives of the five Clans of the Western Gurage. Representatives discussed several issues and enacted the Qicha. Seeing the positive outcomes from Yejoka Qicha, the remaining two Clans of the Western Gurage joined and became part of this institution. And now, all the Sebat Bet Clans of Gurage are ruled by the system of Yejoka Qicha. (Personal interview, June 21, 2020)

Yejoka Qicha is a collection of laws enacted for the administration of inter-Clan relations and settlement of disputes between the sub-Clan and Clan levels. The Yejoka Qicha assembly combines legislative and judiciary functions. Representatives of the constituent units of the Sebat Bet gather together to agree on the fundamental rules governing the community. Indigenous religion, as embodied in the deities of Waq and Damwamit, feature prominently in the traditions of both the promulgation and administration of Yejoka (Bahiru, 2002). Periodic meetings were also held to revise laws, when deemed necessary.

The Yejoka laws are subject to continuous modifications, adaptations, and amendments in accordance with the changing nature of socioeconomic and political systems, new ways of life, and the burgeoning of new social developments. To consolidate these amendments, a group of Gurage intellectuals, who lived in Addis Ababa, compiled the fragmented customary laws into a single document for the first time in 1998, and then revised them in 2008. Included in the latest version of the document is information on issues related to HIV and AIDS prevention, new technologies, sociocultural changes like wedding and mourning ceremonies, and new types of crime.

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In today's context, Yejoka Qicha operates side-by side-with the modern State agencies in administering the affairs of Gurage members (Assefa, 2009). In term of organizational form, a council of Elders set up different administrative levels, including for the neighbourhood, village, Clan, and tribe. Its purpose is to set and enforce norms and rules ranging from simple socioeconomic relations between individuals to laws for the wider community. The institution is engaged in the settlement of disputes and management of conflicts in order to obtain justice and social order among communities. It also serves as the custodian of cultures, traditions, social values, and customs that cement the Gurage people.

Social Values as Peacemaker

The Gurage have a reputation in Ethiopia for being sociable, welcoming, and peace-loving people. This belief emanates from their social values, which are rooted in antiquity. Social values help the Gurage to have positive communication, cooperation, a peaceful way of life, and deep social solidarity. Local associations, which are part and parcel of the Gurage's social values, are imperative in building and improving the social capital. *Geze*, for instance, is a local associations of Gurage men that is established temporarily so that members can perform agricultural tasks together.

The Gurage people are very reluctant to commit crimes because of their entrenched social values. One example of a social practise that Yejoka leaders have used to foster a sense of justice in Gurage society is the tradition of *teya* (swearing in the name of God). Yejoka leaders employed teya to investigate crimes committed in a covert manner and in situations where there was no witness who could expose the culprit. In the tradition of teya, suspected individuals are asked to swear in the name of God and say, "I am innocent." If they swear, they are innocent; otherwise, they will be seen as being guilty by Yejoka leaders. As one informant eloquently said:

> Before the ceremony of teya begins, every person suspected of committing a crime is gathered together and detained in a single house. And then, a group of experts from Yejoka Qicha force them to expose the culprit. They expose the real culprit because they fear the cantankerous outcomes of teya. The Gurage used to say this proverb, "*yeseb zer mere yejepun bewuri teya*, *yeche zer mere yejepun bewuri wesa* [when one is asked how the human race was devastated, it is swearing in the name of God; when one is asked how the plant race was devastated, it was the axe]," to show the dangerous consequences of teya. Thus, fear of the consequences of teya makes the Gurage not falsely swear in the name of God that they are the culprit. In cases in which none of the suspects are found to be guilty, the plaintiff is brought in front of the Yejoka leaders and ordered to pay remuneration. (Personal interview, July 7, 2020)

Beriche, wherein morally deviant individuals are cursed by local Elders, religious leaders, and community leaders, is cited as another Indigenous social practise that prohibits them from committing crimes. The curse is believed to have negative effects across seven generations. The fear of the Elders' curse motivates the Gurage to abstain from wrongdoing. In the tradition of Gurage, local Elders and religious leaders have a prominent role in settling disputes. Due to this fact, it is the local Elders and religious leaders who have the power to facilitate the ceremonies associated with beriche. Since it is believed that beriche has a generational impact and its curse is believed to be dangerous, religious leaders try not to practice it.

The other social practise that facilitates a peaceful way of life among the Gurage people is the concept of *tihur*, which means blissful, virtuous, and morally correct. In contrast to beriche, tihur is blessing by the most respected local Elders, religious leaders, and community leaders. According to the Oral Tradition of the Gurage, tihur prevents a person from doing evil acts by blessing those who commit a morally favourable action. The Gurage Elders say to a person who commits a morally favourable action, "*tihur yegebabet bet yihun, tihur yewotabet bet ayihun* [literally interpreted as "may tihur enter into your house, may not tihur run out of your house"].

Gurda is another of the social practice that facilitates peaceful relationships and fosters justice within the Yejoka system. Gurda is a kind of personal promise between a man and woman that, when they face divisive issues, they will not betray each other. The role of gurda in maintaining social solidarity and fostering justice is best explained in the statement from an Elder:

> When individuals agree to make gurda, their witness is the gurda itself rather than a person. The Gurage believe that, while we make gurda, the sky and the Earth observes what we are doing. In the tradition of Gurage, the sky serves as God's throne and the Earth as the stool for God's feet. When we make gurda, we say, "*afer etonhe egzer dagnhe* [the Earth is a witness, God is the judge]." We believe that no one is hidden from the eye of God … if we violate the gurda, God will bring severe punishment upon us. As a result of gurda's strong connection to God, it is a highly respected tradition among the people … calling the name gurda directly is forbidden. The Gurage used to say, "*yethebed gurda* [glory to gurda]," when someone accidentally called it out loud. (Personal interview, July 5, 2020)

All the social practises that the Gurage people have developed are part of the Yejoka Qicha system. In this system, preventive mechanisms to reduce social conflicts are employed. In addition to preventive mechanisms, the Gurage people have a system called *heterat*, which is employed as a temporary resolution mechanism during times of war and in local conflicts. Heterat is a kind of buffer zone between conflicting parties—local Elders order the disputants not to cross the line until the case is settled peacefully. When the Gurage Elders say heterat, they mean *begoita anq kum* [stay there in the name of God]. Heterat is important to prevent the escalation of conflicts and to give enough time for Elders to see and analyse the different dimensions of the case before administering an agreement. The Gurage believed that heterat is not only the desire of Yejoka leaders but also the command of God. Hence, the conflicting parties give respect to heterat because they fear the punishment from the heavenly power, as well as earthly sanctions.

These social values show that the people prioritize communal interests rather than individual ones. Communalism among the Gurage holds that individuals, by nature, are an integral and inalienable part of the social structure and the social fabric. Their communalism captures the Aristotelian view that the individual's participation in society cannot be optional. Working for the fulfilment of the community is an essential attribute of human beings within the communal tradition of the Gurage. The Gurage will say of an individual whose conduct does not display compassion, generosity, respect, or concern for others is behaving in a way that is not conducive to the welfare of others. However, communalism does not discourage the individual from realizing their own aspirations and potentials. Each individual is responsible for the pursuit of their own life path. The individual is recognized as having free will that enables them to initiate a free action in pursuit of goals and in fashioning their own destiny.

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Most interviewees agreed that, in the contemporary period, Indigenous institutions and social values have been significantly degraded, mainly due to the advent of the ideals of modernity and globalization. Many participants argued that, unless reclaimed and revitalized, these values would be abandoned. Gurage youths have to grapple with Western culture and values, which many believe represents civilization and is believed to be a sign of modernization. Some of the youth label local values as uncivilized and primitive, believing they should be replaced with Western ideals and values. Elder informants said that youths are not in a position to question the good values of their forefathers because they lack knowledge about them. Youth accept Western values without reflection in order to be considered modern and successful in business and education. As one local Elder put it:

> Currently, the youth are not in a position to follow the path of their forefathers because they have labelled our social values as backward and consider the Elders to be conservative and resistant to change. They are swallowed up by the culture of the city, which is far from our forefathers' customs and practices. You can see their clothing style, their way of speaking and their treatment of Elders; nothing has to do with our culture. If the situation continues at this pace, I fear that our social values that cement us will disappear from the surface of the Earth. (Personal interview, July 7, 2020)

The other factor threatening Gurage communalism is the expansion of extreme individualism, which has disrupted the social values that have enabled the Gurage people to live together for centuries.

Social Marginalization

Many scholars have critiqued Indigenous institutions for limiting the rights of citizens, augmenting biases against historically marginalized groups, and undermining the rule of law (Baldwin & Holzinger, 2019). They have documented the "weak" rights afforded to marginalized groups, especially women, under Indigenous systems. Bahiru (2002) found the tendency to marginalize women and other social groups to be pervasive in the governance systems of the Gurage, despite cultural values requiring that women be respected.

The Yejoka Qicha can be used to construct and sustain male dominance in many social endeavours, especially in marriage, in ways that oppress women. Traditionally, the family chooses a husband for a Gurage woman. Participants said that this tradition has recently changed to allow women some choice in who they marry. However, the acceptance and blessing of her family is still mandatory. Since the extended family takes part in the formation of the marriage, they are also seen as having decision-making power when it comes to marital conflicts. In the tradition of Gurage, divorce is rarely regarded as a solution; the Elders place more emphasis on creating harmony between married couples. If a woman seeks a divorce, it is only granted if the Elders, her husband, and the extended families reach an agreement.

This limited right to divorce is perpetuated through belief in a curse called *anqit*. Anqit is believed to be a binding agreement between a bride and a bridegroom before marriage. Once the anqit is signed, women cannot break the relationship agreement or divorce without the consent of their husbands. No matter how badly women are treated by their husbands, the tradition of anqit can be used to undermine women's capacity to seek a divorce. Oral Tradition says that women who defy this custom are very likely

to experience "supernatural punishment," such as the inability to bear a child, giving birth to a disabled child, or accidental death through being struck by lightning (Tigist, 2009).

The system of governance under Yejoka Qicha also reflects the patriarchal nature of Gurage society. Women were marginalized in the decision-making process. They had no power to put forward ideas and no right to be part of decision-making. Women were not represented in the assembly of Yejoka Qicha and were rarely allowed to present their cases by themselves. In addition, they were not allowed to own property, including land and other means of production. In Gurage society, the social roles of women were largely confined to composing poems describing the nature of social communities, praising the brave, and chiding the cowards (Bahiru, 2002).

It is these restrictions that gave rise to one of the most remarkable Gurage women, activist Yeqaqe Wardewat. This famous woman, who we call a Gurage feminist, rose against the tradition of Yejoka Qicha and challenged the existing social system. Her defiant struggle against the male-dominated norms of her society has been celebrated in poems and anecdotes. Tradition says that she led a delegation of women to one of the Yejoka assemblies and demanded, at the very least, that women should be free to attend meetings and that they should have the right to divorce their husbands. Her eloquent oration has been recorded in the following manner in Gebreyesus (1991):

> We women, your sisters, your mothers and your obedient servants for all time, appear before you today to ask for our rights if we, at all, have any! We women are treated as if we are created only for the pleasure of men. You never make us participate in things you are doing or planning. We have no security. If you like us, we are lucky, we live with you, and when you dislike us, we are chased out empty-handed. Therefore, we came here to Yejoka today to beg for some rights even if it is not the same rights as for men. It is not to beat our husbands as you do your wives or to scold them. We shall remain obedient to our husbands, continue to wash their feet and cook food for them.
>
> We are not asking you either to test us in the battlefield at the initial stage. This can come eventually. All we are asking you is to give us some minimum rights, like to be free to come to Yejoka and share our views with you concerning all the problems pertaining to "your country" or if we will be allowed to say so, "our country." Second, when we feel repressed, to leave our husbands and go without being tied up by the rigid procedures of divorce, which remain based upon rigid customary laws and traditional beliefs, the anq'it. When you divorce us, you just say go because you are not tied up by anq'it. Let us have the same right, although we cannot tell you go from your establishments. But for us to be able to say, "I am going and goodbye." (p. 158)

Bahiru (2002) continued the story:

> The male community—so the tradition continues—was momentarily flabbergasted by this challenge. But, in the end they were able to isolate Wardwat by intimidating her companions. To mollify her, they gave her the right to choose her husband and divorce him whenever she so wished and the option of attending Yejoka meetings. The tragic finale of her remarkable story, wherein she is struck dead by a thunderbolt, must have served as a severe warning to all Gurage women to stick to their assigned place. (p. 24)

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Despite these social sanctions, the Gurage social system provided respect to women in their home-based activities. They celebrate a special day labelled as *anthroshit* each year. Anthroshit is the day for giving thanks to mothers. Oral Tradition suggests that this day began to be celebrated before the battle of Adwa, which ended Italy's ambition to colonize Ethiopia. The day is celebrated in January, a month in which Gurage mothers completed the production of *enset*, a staple food. After several months of a heavy workload, on this day, Gurage mothers take a rest, wash their bodies, wear new clothes, and enjoy time with their family.

Under the tradition of Yejoka Qicha, it was not only women who were excluded from the decision-making process. The *Amarican* are one of the Gurage Clans who are considered to be inferior because of their professions. Their name is derived from Unites States of America because their knowledge of poetry, weaving, architecture, and crafting were equated with American civilization. Far from earning them respect, these skills contributed to their marginalization (Bahiru, 2002) and exclusion from decision-making power within Yejoka. Even though these professions are indispensable to the living conditions of the Gurage people, they were not allowed to marry people from other Clans.

Key informants said that there has in recent times been a change in attitude among the Gurage people: Local relations have changed from being closed to being more open to the Amarican. They are often called "Fuga," a derogatory name that implies they are slaves or migrants in the language of the local community. Thus, by calling them Amarican, the local community shows its respect and appreciates the indispensable role of their professions to the survival of the Gurage.

Democracy and Yejoka Qicha System

Since the incursion of Western democracy in Africa, existing literatures on the nature of Indigenous institutions have been dominated by the ideals of liberal democracy. As a result, the dominant existing frameworks for understanding Indigenous institutions emphasized fundamental incompatibilities between Indigenous institutions and liberal democracy. Modernists disregard Indigenous governance systems and structures as atavistic and pedantic and, as such, not only contrary to democracy but its antithesis and nemesis (Vincent & Chikerma, 2014). To that end, they recommend abandoning Indigenous governance institutions and replacing them with "advanced" liberal democracy.

In contrast, traditionalists claim that Indigenous Chiefs and Elders are the true representatives of their people and therefore still essential to political development. These institutions are associated with the customs and traditions of the local people; they are accurate reflections of historic governance systems. Indigenous institutions do incorporate democratic procedures, participatory decision-making processes, and soft accountability backed up by social pressure (Baldwin & Holzinger, 2019). As such, the inclusivity of decision-making practices and the non-electoral connection of leaders to their constituents must be reflected to form an accurate representation of the influence of Indigenous institutions in democratic systems.

Under Indigenous governance systems, decisions are made in accordance with the values and norms of society. Decision-making processes are inclusive in the sense that local people directly participate in the surrounding discussions. The goal of these discussions is not simply to reach a majority decision, as is the case in a liberal democracy, but to reach a consensus—a decision that reflects the views of all participants. As Gyekye (1997) pointed out, the pursuit of this kind of agreement requires "patience,

mutual tolerance, and attitude of compromise" (p. 136). Wiredu (1995) argued that Indigenous ideas about consensus and political organization provide the base for developing what he calls consensual democracy. These democracies include local decision-making bodies, national advisory councils, and deliberate processes geared towards achieving consensus rather than simple majority.

Yejoka Qicha*,* therefore, consists of important features of democracy. Historically, the Gurage people gathered in a specific place, such as around big trees, to discuss issues. Customary laws were enacted and modified in meetings that directly involved the local people. Inter-Clan and intratribal conflicts were also resolved through meetings of all mature members of the local community. In settling conflicts, disputants have the unconditional right to present their case to Yejoka Elders. Every participant in the conflict resolution process has the right to raise concerns that may mediate the dispute. Finally, the Elders make a decision after analysing the case presented by the conflicting parties. The decision is not made arbitrarily; rather, it is based on agreed upon cultural values.

The decisions made by Yejoka leaders are held in high regard by the local community because the Gurage people have immense respect for their Elders. The Gurage person refers to older men and women using the title *baliqe*—a word for Elder. According to Tigist (2009), the name itself suggests that the individual has earned respect from their community. In the tradition of Gurage, baliqes are chosen to be mediators of social problems because they are wise, eloquent, calm, and have knowledge of customary laws.

The court system in the Yejoka tradition is hierarchical. Social problems, such as personal and family issues, are resolved by local leaders through *sera*—local law below the Yejoka Qicha. Complex problems such as inter-Clan conflicts and community problems were settled through the Yejoka Qicha. The decisions of local Elders could be appealed to the Yejoka leaders. If someone is dissatisfied by the verdict of the local Elders, they have the right to appeal and transfer the case to Yejoka court for the application of Qicha. Moreover, every Clan has the power and authority to deal with its own social problems through their leaders. It is only when the case is too difficult to solve that it comes to the attention of Yejoka. The verdict given by the Yejoka leaders is final and binding. Every Gurage person is obliged to respect the leaders' decisions because the failure to do so could lead to social ostracization.

The goal of democracy is to create peace and stability, meet the needs of the populace, and maintain social solidarity. To reach these goals, it is essential that citizens participate in setting policy priorities, electing their leaders, and having the ability to remove them from power. The people should have control over the government they have elected, which is only possible when the system is socio-politically and psychologically connected to the people. This implies that governments should be established based on local traditions rather than imported from abroad. As Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali (1995) stated in his report to the UN General Assembly: "Democracy is not a model to be copied from certain states, but a goal to be attained by all peoples and assimilated by all cultures. It may take many forms, depending upon the characteristics and circumstances of society" (p. 2). Moreover, as Prah (2007) succinctly put, "Democracy has the best chance of institutionalized success when it is homegrown and enjoys the active participation in its development by the society as a whole" (p. 5). Institutions that are established on the basis of societal traditions are more accessible, better understood, and more participatory. They are accessible because they exist in closer proximity to the people than any

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other form of government. The Yejoka system, for example, is transparent and participatory because many people attend the meetings and express their views directly.

Within the Yejoka system, leaders are elected by the local people. Moreover, each of the Sebat Bet Gurage Clans have representatives within the Yejoka. Thus, Yejoka leaders are more effective in providing solutions to problems impacting the Gurage because they know the social fabric of each Clan. The role of Yejoka leaders includes maintaining peace and stability, inspiring and motivating the people towards development, advocating for cooperation, and supporting the national government in implementing national policies. Yejoka leaders are successful in achieving their goals because their words are respected, their praise is appreciated, and their examples are emulated by the people.

Nevertheless, Yejoka Qicha has been criticized for its systematic marginalization of women, as well as some Clans, that prevents them from participating in the decision-making process. Many scholars argue that Yejoka Qicha governance institutions are dominated by men who are often reluctant to support changes that would allow equitable participation by women (Bahiru, 2002). Modernists have presented Indigenous leadership systems as a major setback to democracy because they believe the systems privilege customary patriarchal values by silencing many members of the society (Vincent & Chikerema, 2014). In contrast, traditionalists claim that in the Indigenous governance systems of many African societies "women are much revered due to their supposed knowledge acquired through lived experience" (Boahene, 2017, p. 10). In pre-colonial African societies, as Byanyima (1992) succinctly stated, "there was no distinction between the public and the private spheres … women could play indirect roles in the extended family, via husband, brothers, sons and Clans peoples" (p. 136). However, it is undeniable fact that although women played many key social roles in pre-colonial Africa, the patriarchal system rarely allowed them to participate in decision-making on public issues.

The Yejoka Qicha system has historically been patriarchal—men had unrestricted power in public and private spheres. Women had no role in this system besides giving birth and raising children. They were forced to marry and were not allowed to own property or obtain a divorce without their husband's consent. In the Yejoka system, they had no right to attend meetings and had no power to initiate ideas. In addition to women, social groups like the Amarican were underrepresented in the tradition of Yejoka. The Amarican were marginalized from the socioeconomic and political affairs of the Gurage.

Although they were not represented historically in governance roles, there are currently some women and Amaricans represented in the Yejoka system. More recently, women have also been allowed to attend Yejoka meetings and present their cases to the court of Yejoka. Therefore, the patriarchal nature of the Yejoka system has been diminished in Gurage land, and the derogatory labelling of the Amarican as slaves and migrants has also changed.

Conclusion

Our findings indicate that Yejoka Qicha incorporates elements of democracy. Within this governance system, leaders are selected through the direct participation of all mature male members of the community. The selection of leaders is guided by well-specified criteria, including a sense of justice, generosity; specialized knowledge of custom, tradition, and customary laws; protection; honesty; and ability to help reach a compromise on divergent interests. After being selected by the people, leaders were expected to act as administrator, judge, and representative of the people in every aspect of Gurage

life. Their words, decisions, and orders are respected by the community because they are believed to be the true representatives of their people.

Furthermore, leaders' decisions are usually accepted and respected because the leaders use social values in administration. Social values have been employed to settle wars, reconcile controversial issues, and solve family issues. The traditions of teya, beriche, tihur, gurida, and heterat are the most frequently used social practices in the administration and conflict resolution systems of Yejoka Qicha. These social practices are used to govern social relations in the local community; settle inter-Clan, intra-Clan, and personal conflicts; and are used by Yejoka Qicha leaders to reconcile divergent interests. With the exception of heterat and teya, which are curative mechanisms, the rest of these social practices are used by the local community and Yejoka leaders to prevent conflicts.

Within the tradition of Yejoka Qicha, administration has been hierarchical. This structure allows for the decentralization of decision-making and division of power in administering sociopolitical activities. The Gurage sera were employed by local Elders to govern communal affairs including personal and family issues. Complex social affairs such as inter-Clan and intra-Clan conflicts were administered and settled by the leader of Yejoka Qicha, who referred to the principles of Qicha in decision-making. In addition, the decisions of local Elders were subject to appeal to the Yejoka leaders if one of the parties was not satisfied with the verdict. The verdicts of Yejoka leaders were final and binding. They were expected to be accepted and respected by all members of the community. The failure to accept and respect leaders' decisions led to one of the most severe punishments within the Gurage society—social ostracization.

Although the system of Yejoka Qicha is praised for its democratic elements, it is criticized for the exclusion of women and members of the Amarican Clan from participation in decision-making processes. Gurage society is patriarchal, and, as such, it prevents men and women from engaging equally in public and private matters. Women are not allowed to own property, and they are forced to marry without their consent. The Amarican Clan was also excluded from participation in Yejoka meetings and were prohibited from social relations with other Clans of the Gurage because of their professions. Most recently, however, the system of Yejoka Qicha has allowed these formerly marginalized groups to participate in meetings and bring forward ideas that contribute to solving social problems.

Given that Yejoka Qicha possessed important features of democracy and its leaders are believed to be the true representatives of the local people, the national government needs to implement initiatives to recognize and encourage its role in economic and political development efforts of the country. Local Elders and Yejoka leaders are valuable assets in informing the central government about the interests of local communities as well as in mobilizing the people for active engagement in development activities. This is partly because they share interests with and think like their people, making them better equipped to know how to mobilize local people towards these common interests. Thus, the government should increase its partnerships with Yejoka leaders to promote cooperative State–society relations. This would promote democracy and development, which is aspired to in this country.

The relationship between the State government and Indigenous governance institutions can be improved through the adoption of appropriate policy frameworks. The government needs to enact a policy framework that recognizes the role of Indigenous institutions in the political development of the country. Indeed, the Constitution of the country, under Article 34(5), recognized the role of these

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institutions in adjudication of disputes relating to private and family matters (Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995). However, as empirical findings show, the tradition of Yejoka Qicha settles social problems beyond private and family matters. Thus, clear and detailed policy frameworks are needed to recognize Indigenous institutions' roles in governing matters related to ethnicity and religion. Moreover, these policy frameworks should be supported by empirical investigations by scholars. Through empirical investigations, researchers can identify the attributes of Indigenous governance institutions that can be used to promote democratic governance, as well as those aspects that are oppressive and need to be modified. Thus, the government should encourage research on Indigenous governance institutions in order to devise policy frameworks.

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