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Why Some Natural Areas Are Sacred? Lesson From Guji Oromo In Southern Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Current researches show that there are considerable sacred natural sites among Gujii Oromoo of southern Ethiopia. Nevertheless, the significant weight was not given to explore why some natural areas are sacred while others are profane. Hence, this article aims at addressing this question by exploring the traditional bases for classification of sacred and non-sacred/profane land among Gujii Oromo in Adoola Reedde and Annaa Sorraa districts in Gujii Zone. Concerning methodological approach, methods of data gathering employed were in-depth and key informants' interviews, transect walk and focus group discussions. The analysis of data was carried out through qualitative description and explanatory approach. The findings of the study demonstrate that dedication of some natural places to rituals of Gada system and adoring of waaqa in the area, are identified as the traditional grounds for sacredness of some natural sites. In addition, the symbolic connection of topographical features and agro-climatic condition with Guji cultural practices, on one hand and myths entrenched in the people's tradition on the other are basic grounds for the classification of sacred areas from profane. Generally, some natural sites are sacred in the study area, not because of land's unique feature or other aspects, but because of dedication to rituals in Gada system and worship of waaqa, symbolic implication of the area to Guji culture and related traditionally deep ingrained myths handed down from preceding generation.

Key words: Natural area, sacred, Guji, southern Ethiopia

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Introduction

In yearlong course of human-environmental interaction, human societies have developed different environment-based cultural practices (Eliade, 1959; Martin, 2013). The identification and categorization of natural places into sacred and profane¹ areas are the global wide experience of human societies resulted from the human-environmental interaction. (Eliade, 1959; Jost, Kay, & Thorisdottir, 2009; Midgley, 1992). Scholarly, sacred natural site is explained as socially reserved, holy or venerated areas that are connected with social traditions, worship, remembrances and belief systems of the local communities (Oviedo et al., 2005; Verschuuren et al., 2010). It is further stated that 'sacred natural sites consist of all types of natural features including mountains, hills, forests, groves, rivers, lakes, lagoons, caves, islands and springs (Verschuuren Bas et al., 2010:2).

The classification of sacred and profane natural sites is based on local people praxis, belief system, cosmos and entrenched socio-cultural traditions handed down through generations. The traditional grounds for classifying some areas as sacred and other as unconsecrated are very diverse across different cultures. In Guatemala, labeling a certain place as sacred sites was based on the mythical story connected with the ancient Mayan kingdom (Delgado, Escobar, Verschuuren, & Hiemstra, 2010). In Janavale of India, the myth of deity abode in the area and legend of chicken-hunting leopard was ground for the sacredness of their land (Godbole, Sarnaik, & Punde, 2010). The belief system that considers some areas as the residence of deities is also other traditional bases for classification of sacred and profane areas among many world communities (Greene, 2002; Wild, McLeod, & Valentine, 2008). In addition, the tradition of dedicating some places to deities (Bhagwat & Rutte,

2006), commemoration of the ancestors, Heroes and martyr (Amiji, 1975; Seal, 2007) and propitiation of deity and need for supernatural protection (Prince, 1967) are identified as traditional factors for categorization of some sacred natural sites while others are profane.

Such classification-based sacred natural sites are evident in many East Africa countries, including the tomb of Mawlai Fakhr-ud-Din² where Bohras group of East Africa gather at the center every year to commemorate the death anniversary of their religious martyr (Nelson, 2003) and Makurwe-wa-Gathanga the highly venerated place as the mythical origin of the Gikuyu people in Kenya (Wamue, 2001). These all shreds of evidence demonstrate that the traditional bases for categorization of some areas as sacred are very diverse and culture-specific.

In the context of study area among Guji Oromo, there are various sacred natural sites usually used for different traditional rituals and practices in the Gada system (Desalegn, 2013; Hinnant, 1977; Jemjem & Dhadacha, 2011; Van De Loo, 1991). As indicated by Tadesse (1995) sacred natural sites among *Gujji Oromoo* are respected like churches of Christians and Mosques of Islam. This indicates that the local communities give due respect and reverence to the sacred natural sites believing as their sacred shrines. According to previously conducted studies the sacred natural sites in the area are inextricably linked with the traditional practices of the Gada system (Debelo, 2017; Jemjem & Dhadacha, 2011). The basic cultural information on how some areas are sanctified by the tradition of local communities has to be empirically investigated to answer the question why some natural sites are sacred while others profane in the study area. Therefore, this article attempts to answer this question taking cases from *Gujji Oromoo*

¹ Profanity in this case refers to the natural areas without social reverence and contrary to sacred (socially reserved land as consecrated area).

² Mawlai Fakhr-ud-Din is a religious martyr of Bohras group (Nelson, 2003).

living in *Adoolaa Reedde* and *Annaa Sorra* districts of *Gujji* Zone, southern Ethiopia.

Methodological approach

Study area

This study was conducted in two districts of *Gujji* zone namely *Adoola Reedde* and *Anna Sorraa* where various sacred natural sites exist among Guji Oromo. The community of the areas is *Gujji* Oromo who speak *Afaan Oromoo* (Oromo language) and predominantly live in southern Oromia region in Guji, West *Gujji* and Boorana zones in southern Ethiopia (Hinnant, 1977; Jemjem & Dhadacha, 2011; Tadesse, 2004). According to Jemjem and Dhadacha (2011) Guji people are not only dwelling in these three zones under current structures of political administration, but they also live around western parts of Bale Zone and Wondo district of West Arsi zone in Oromia regional state as well as in South Nations Nationalities and Peoples, region around Dilla, Gamo Gofa, Wondo Genet and around lake Hawassa.

Guji people have well established indigenous institution known as Gada system that embodies socio-cultural, economic and political aspects of Guji since time immemorial (Jemjem & Dhadacha, 2011; Tadesse, 1995; Van De Loo, 1991). Presently the Gada system is being practiced as customary governance system in which five Baallii (culturally arranged parties in Guji tradition) ritually and peacefully transfer the socio-cultural power of being a leader (Gada) in the system to the successive parties. These *Baallii* are *Muudana*, *Halchiisa*, *Harmuufaa*, *Roobalee*, and *Muudana*. The term of office for each baallii is eight years and the power transition ceremony is held at *Me'ee Bokko* sacred natural site in *Anna Sorra* district. Guji consists three phratries named *Uraaga*, *Maattii* and *Hookku* with strong social bondage. In the Guji tradition, *Adoolaa* and its environs are believed to be the point of origin of the *Gujji Oromoo* (Hinnant, 1977; Jemjem & Dhadacha, 2011). In terms of altitude, the Guji land is divided into three distinct zones: lowland, middle altitude and highland (Tadesse, 1995).

The highlands are located in the northern part of Guji covering present-day *Adoolaa*, *Annaa Sorraa*, *Booree* and *Uraagaa* areas (Desalegn, 2013). As noted by Tadesse, (1995) these areas have an altitude of over 2500 meters above sea level. Generally, *Gujji* are rich in cultural diversities and natural resources in the southern Oromia region, in Ethiopia.

Methods

Data was gathered through in-depth and key informants' interview, focus group discussion and transect walk. In-depth interview was made with community elders, practitioners of the Gada system and experts of Culture and Tourism offices from *Gujji* zone and two aforementioned districts. Key informant interview was made with three *Yuubaas* (retired Gada councils). The focus group discussions were made in *Adoola Reedde* and *Annaa Sorraa* districts with active practitioners of the Gada system and other community elders. Transect walk is another tool for data collection used in the study. This had been used to practically observe the situation and land topography of sacralized land with the help of local people. Data collected by the abovementioned tools were analyzed through a qualitative approach.

Result and Discussion

Ethno-Ecological Knowledge of Land Classification

Guji people have diversified ethnoecological knowledge pertaining to their environment and natural resource conservation. Ethno-ecological knowledge is basically a cumulative body of knowledge that depicts the belief system, and practices through which local people have been classifying, perceiving and managing natural features on their localities (Turner, Ignace, & Ignace, 2000). This kind of knowledge is handed down through generations by cultural transmission. As clearly indicated in the previous researches, there have been ethnoecological knowledge of Guji Oromo in the study area among which the forest

conservation (Desalegn, 2013; Nagesa, 2011) and rangeland management system (Abate, 2016) are apparently investigated. Particularly Debelo (2017) noted that ethnoecological knowledge of Guji Oromo is very diverse and can be reflected in the various field of their social life. However, in the context of this article, the area concerned is ethnoecological knowledge of classifying sacred and profane land based on the existing traditions as the concept of ethnoecological knowledge embodies the traditional classification of land topography for various purposes. Based on this traditional knowledge, the entire Guji land is divided into two as *Woyyuu* and *Faanshoo* areas, where *Woyyuu* represents sacred and *Faanshoo* profane/non-sacred.

Categorization of *Woyyuu* and *Faanshoo*

There have been old-age ethnoecological knowledge and practices whereby Guji people classify and manage natural places as sacred and profane areas. *Gujii* elderly informants noted that the entire Guji land is classified into two broad categories as *Woyyuu* and *Faanshoo*³(profane or non-sacred). Informants underlined that *Woyyuu* areas are a sacred or holy place dedicated to rituals in the Gada system and revere of supernatural deity (locally known as *Waaqa*) whereas *Faanshoos* are profane areas openly accessed by local communities without any restriction imposed by sacredness. As a researcher I further questioned, why Guji community of the study area have classified their land as *Woyyuu* and *Faanshoo*, when did they categorize their entire land and who did the classification, during fieldwork to capture the concrete background of the *Woyyuu* and *Faanshoo* classification. According to information obtained from *Yuubaas*⁴ and other community elders, the

logic behind the classification of natural places as sacred and profane is to differentiate the places of worshipping *waaqa* and performing various rituals in the Gada system from the open access land that commonly inhabited by the local people. This implies that the places of worshipping *Waaqa* are *Woyyuu*, whereas the rest areas of the land are *Faanshoo*. Similarly, Taddese (1995) stated that *woyyuu* areas are highly revered and respected among Guji being equivalent with churches of Christians and Mosques of Islam in the value of sacredness. *Woyyuu* places are where *Gujii* people perform their prayers to *waaqa* (Taddesse, 2000).

Concerning *Woyyuu* and *Faanshoo* labeling in the study area, one elder informant (interviewed at Daraartuu, in February 2018) also stated the following narration:

We are created by *waaqaa* (supernatural deity) on this land. *Waaqaa* gave us this land and then ascended to the sky. To propitiate him we need to have places, which are not manmade but made by *waaqa* himself. To worship him and keep our social wellbeing through the performance of rituals in Gada system, our ancestors categorized the land into two as *Woyyuu* and *Faansho*; where the *woyyuu* is dedicated to *waaqaa* and *Faanshoo* is to the peoples' settlement and subsistence strategy.

This explanation depicts that the ground for ethnoecological knowledge of classifying land as *Woyyuu* and *Faanshoo* among *Gujii* Oromoo, is to maintain the relationship with supernatural power and keep social wellbeing through performing rituals in the Gada system.

For the second question says when did they do this category, almost all informants agreed that the classification period is not precisely known, but it has a long history with the *Gujii* culture and Gada system. And also some informants have associated the categorization with the beginning of the Gada system before long century (FGD, February 15/2018 at Daraartuu). Moreover, the informants noted that this

³. *Woyyuu* is *Afaan Oromoo* (Oromo language) term that refers to the sacred, revered or holy place in this context, whereas *Faanshoo* is an area that has no value of sacredness according to Guji tradition.

⁴ *Yuubaa* is Oromo language term that refers to the individuals in Gada cycle development stage next to *Abba Gadaa* and other

elders in the same rank. And also it refers to the retired *Abbaa Gadaa* and his councils

categorization was made by Guji ascendants in the distant past in different times and occasions. Still, deep investigation is needed from historians and anthropologists to further investigation of this case.

During focus group discussion in the *Dararatu* peasant association, participants denoted that Woyyuu areas are places identified for three most important things among Guji Oromo. These things are *waaqa* (supernatural deity), *aadaa* (culture) and *horii* (cattle). This means *woyyuu* areas are only open for worshipping of *waaqaa*, performing Gadaa ritual practices and cattle herding practices, while *faanshoo* is open land for every economic and social activity of local people. Based on the data obtained from the informants the specific traditional grounds for categorization of *woyyuu* and *faanshoo* areas are discussed as following:

Agro-ecological Zone

There is agro-ecological zone-based classification of sacred and profane areas among the community of the study area. Regarding agroecological zone-based categorization of places, one key informant explained that in most cases sacred places of *Gujii* are found in highland and relatively green areas of Guji land rather than semi-arid lowland (Key informants interview made at Adoola, February 2018). Moreover, when illustrating the logic behind why highland areas are considered as the domain of sacred natural sites, the informants underlined two narrations as the following. First, they noted that the areas are more fertile and green that symbolizes the prosperity, fertility and good omen in the *Gujii* tradition. From this point of view, the suitability of land topography and climate condition is vital elements in the sacralization of land and there have been symbolic links between land physical features and traditions in the Gada system. Similarly, Nagesa (2011:63) also states that “most of the *woyyuu* and ritual places in *Gujii* culture are found in highland areas where dense forest and abundant trees are found than in low lands”.

Second, the informants stated that *Gujii* ancestors had sacralized the central areas of their territory where the then local adversaries could not reach during the intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic conflict and raids from the peripheral and neighboring areas, because, there is belief system that states if ethnic conflict and war have happened at the sacred areas and places despoiled by bloodshed, the areas would have been lost the power of sacredness (In-depth interview made at Daraartuu, February 2018). These central areas are predominantly found in the highland area of the Guji settlement.

The availability of sacred natural sites (Gada shrines) like *Me’ee Bokkoo*, *Daraartuu* and *Biluu* that have been commonly used for rituals and managed by three Guji confederacy – *Uraagaa*, *Maattii*, and *Hookkuu* demonstrate how the central land of Guji Oromo had been sacralized by Guji ascendants in the distant past and given due respect in the tradition.

Myths

There are myths that had been used as bases for the classification of sacred and profane areas by the *Gujii* ancestors. With reference to myth-based labeling of sacred and profane land, one of the key informants noted that:

Before creating the creatures, *waaqa* was lying down and taking rest at the present day Guji land. During his rest time, he stretched his leg to semi-arid plain areas and pillowed the highland areas particularly around the present day *Adoolaa* and *Annaa Sorraa* districts. The bolster area of *waaqa* is considered as *woyyuu* (sacred), while the part where he put leg is *faanshoo* (profane).

According to this explanation, the labeling of sacred and profane territory is based on the myth of supernatural deity’s rest on the area. This also depicts that the Gada shrines (*woyyuu* areas) found in the *Adoolaa* and its environs in general and five sacred natural areas selected as study sites were sacralized based on the myth states that *waaqaa* bolster is

believed to be Adoolaa and its surrounding. Correspondingly with this myth, Jemjem & Dhadacha (2011) put that Guji believes that human societies at large and Guji in particular were created from the soil of Girja which is neighbor to Adoola district where elderly informants narrated about the deity rest before creating all creatures.

Mythically, some of the sacred areas of the study area such as *Me'ee Bokkoo* and *Daraartuu* shrines have their own distinct background information whereby they obtained the power of sacredness. With reference to *Me'ee Bokkoo*, one of my elder informants' described:

Once upon a time, a man came to cut down *Me'ee* tree from present-day *Me'ee Bokkoo* shrine. That tree spoke to the man saying do not cut me down because I am woyyu. Then a man turned back to his home and told the case to other Guji community elders. Then the Gujii community elders ordained the area as a shrine and that areas gained the power of sacredness as of that day (key informants interview made at *Me'ee Bokkoo*, February 2018).

On the other hand, *Daraartuu* one of the shrines in the study area nearby Adoola Woyyu town has a distinct myth of origin. As elaborated by one of the informants from the *Daraartuu* peasant association (kebele):

The ancestors of *Gujii* who were living in *Daraartuu* land, had dug two wells of water for their drinking. One well gave them water, while the other gave milk. One day a wife of the ancestor man called *Haada*, put her leg into the well of milk negligently. Then the milk well was immediately changed into the water well. As of that day, *Daraartuu* is believed to be sacred land among *Gujii Oromoo* (In-depth interview made at *Daraartuu*, February 2018).

This story shows the mythical origin of the sacred places or Gada shrines is diverse on one hand and specific to the places on the other. Generally, from the informants' vantage point, *Me'ee Bokkoo* and *Daraartuu* Gadaa shrines obtained the power of sacredness

based on the myths besides the agro-climatic condition and centrality of the area.

Topographical Feature

The *Gujii* people do not sanctify a land from whatever topographical feature based on only agro-climatic conditions and myths, but there are exceptional topographical areas that would be preferred to ordain as sacred places. According to the informants, based on a certain topographical features of the land, *Gujii* people categorize sacred and profane land (FGD, February 25/2018 at *Daraartuu*).

First, the place to be sacralized should naturally be demarcated by different riverbanks or valley (*basa ykn muummee lafaa*) in all directions, because in the *Gujii* traditions and belief system *waaqa* created the first man and woman in the naturally demarcated topographical area by valley and streams. Therefore, the areas naturally demarcated by the valley or small stream could be sanctified due to the myth of origin and belief system that consider these places as possessing good omen for the multiplicity of the humankind. This indicates that the symbolic connection of land topography with *Gujii* cosmos is the basis for of classification of sacred and profane areas. Second, the land to be sacred should be on the area that gets morning sun directly, because *Gujii* people make supplication and offer thanks to *waaqa* always turning their face to the eastward direction from where the sun rises. This indicates that symbolically the sunrise in the morning and eastward direction in general; imply the beginning of new life, peace, hope, fertility, and good omen. This idea can be understood in the context of symbolic interpretivism that considers every activity and action as intrinsically meaningful and that meanings are offered by the people (McGee and Warms, 2008). Therefore, due to this symbolic meaning, the sacred natural sites that predominantly found in the naturally demarcated area and land easily gets morning sun among *Gujii* people no longer exist in the gorge or lowlands, but they should always be

on easily observable culturally relevant areas. According to the informants, the Gadaa shrines identified in the study area fulfill these criteria. During my transect walk with local community elders around *Me'ee Bokkoo*, *Daraartuu*, *Gombobaa*, *Damboobii* and *Biluu*, I assured that all these places get early morning sun and are also demarcated by natural features like small valleys and rivers. Third, the areas to be sacred should have abundant natural features important for the Haaganaa⁵. Abundance, in this case, implies the existence of important trees, forests and other landraces needed for ritual and cultural events. Hence, when myths, land topography and agro-climatic conditions are bases for categorization of sacred and profane areas among Guji Oromo, who are responsible bodies to differentiate and ordain the areas?

Who is a responsible body?

Categorization of the land as sacred and profane is not simply carried out by any person, but it has traditions rooted in the Gada system and only performed by responsible bodies. Almost all informants noted that the *Yuuba* (retired Gada leaders) come together in some culturally relevant places and ordain the areas through the ritual of libation and supplication to sacralize sites (FGD, February 25/2018 at Daraartu). As explained by the informants' even though mythical basis, land topography and agro-climatic conditions discussed above are traditional grounds for classification of sacred and profane areas, some places are ordained through libation and supplication made by *Yuubaas*. Guji elders stated that since the ancient time, *Yuubas* have been sacralizing some selective areas based on the abovementioned bases of identification.

Yuubaas are the legitimate body of the Gada structure to sacralize the areas along with the other Gadaa councils because they have rich

⁵ *Haaganaa* is Oromo language term that can be explained in a different context; but in this case, it refers to mystical power in the *Gada* system

experiences than the others Gadaa councils (key informants interview made at Biluu February 2018). The informants denoted that *waaqa* respect supplication and libation of the supplicants in need of sacralizing proposed areas by endorsing the request of *Yuubaas* and other Gada councils. Once a certain place or object is sacred, it would be powerful in the mystical power to call upon the curse or offer blesses on the people in case of the violation and respect to the sacred natural sites respectively. On the same manner, Van De Loo (1991) who conducted the study among *Gujji* stated that if something is *woyyuu* among *Gujji Oromoo*, symbolically it is associated with the serpent which is also an ambivalent symbol of life and death. This researcher underlined according to *Gujji* belief system everybody need to properly treat the *woyyu*. As briefly explained by key informants, there have been two traditional rituals that are performed to make a given area sacred. The First is Korma *bokossuu*⁶ that refers to the preparation of the local wine called *daadhi*⁷. *Yuubaas* and other Gadaa councils take this local wine in their mouth and puff it saying “ ardaa kana haxxiyoomi, nami si tuqe hin galin, hin hobba'in” which is literary mean “this area, be unique in the power of sacredness, let a person who touches you violently, not turn back to his/her home in peace, let he/she not escape from the potential evil” (Key informants interview made at Adoolaa February 2018).

The second is Korma *Hariirrataa*⁸, which refers to supplication ritual performed before the slaughtering of a bull prepared for the event. Traditionally *Yuubaas* and other Gada councils bring a bull on the area would be ordained; then they slide the *Bokkuu* (scepter stick) on the back of the bull from back to head making their

⁶ Korma bokossu is Oromo language metaphorical word that refers to the process of making a local wine called a daadhi

⁷ Daadhii is local mead made up of honey

⁸ Korma hariirrata is Afaan Oromoo term that refers to the practices conducted before the slaughtering rituals of the bull. When performing this ritual Abbaa Gadaa or Gadaa councils slide the ritual stick called Bokkuu on the back of the bull from head to tail.

supplication to *waaqa*. After this supplication ritual and request of *waaqa* to convert the area into sacred they slaughter the bull on the land. After all, they believe that starting from that time the land would be sacred and local inhabitants need to carefully revere it. Generally, the foregoing discussion demonstrates that the responsible body for sacralizing natural areas among *Gujii Oromoo* is *Yuubaa* along with other Gada councils through performing traditional rituals.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it is possible to draw a conclusion that the traditional grounds for categorization of some natural areas as sacred while other are profane among Guji of the study area are diverse and deep-rooted in the traditional practices and belief system. Apparently, the dedication of the natural places to rituals in Gada system and adore of *waaqa*, symbolic implication and connection of places with agro-climatic conditions and topographical features as well as myths linked with supernatural deity are used as traditional ground of categorization. Some natural areas are sacred not because of their distinct land feature or other physical phenomena, but because of the dedication of the land to rituals of Gada system and worship of *waaqa*, the symbolic connection of the land with *Gujii* cultural traditions and different myths. This process of dedicating some places to a deity based on the existing traditions implies that there has been an inextricable connection among physical environment, local traditions and supernatural power in the *Gujii* belief system. Culture plays a pivotal role in connecting the physical environment and supernatural power together since it gives mythical and local belief-based meaning to nature and supernatural deity. It is through a culture that the natural places get sacred. Hence, the root ground for categorization of sacred and profane areas is the yearlong ethnoecological knowledge and interconnection of nature, culture and supernatural power in the

view of *Gujii* since time immemorial. Generally, the case study conducted among Guji evidently indicates that the link between local traditions, symbolic connection, and meaning of some natural areas and myths are identified as traditional grounds for categorization of sacred natural sites from profane land.

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