

TRANSFORMATION OF THE AGE SYSTEM OF THE BORANA-OROMO PEOPLE OF SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA: SOCIAL CHANGES OF A PASTORAL SOCIETY WITH ITS INCORPORATION INTO A MODERN STATE

TAGAWA Gen

Faculty of International Studies, Hiroshima City University, Hiroshima 731-3194, Japan

E-mail: tagawa@intl.hiroshima-cu.ac.jp

This study examines transformations of the age system of the Borana-Oromo people, following their incorporation into the modern Ethiopian state. Many pastoralists in East Africa maintain age systems, and numerous classic ethnographic studies of such systems have explained them as traditional means of social organization. The Borana are Oromo-speaking pastoralists who inhabit southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. They maintain a complicated age system called gadaa.

The Borana live on Ethiopia's periphery. The Ethiopian Empire conquered the Borana in the late 19th century, but since the Borana are pastoralists who occupy semiarid lowlands that were of little interest to Ethiopian rulers, they did not actually come under the nation's administration until the middle of the 20th century. Thus, the Borana were able to maintain the gadaa system in their remote lowlands far from the political center, whereas among Oromo agriculturalists who inhabited the highlands, the gadaa system perished.

The Borana age system is not an administrative institution, but rather a ritual complex that relates and organizes clans, which are political units in the social structure of the Borana. The Borana perform a series of ceremonies at ritual sites that are scattered throughout Boranaland, according to a calendar. The cyclical performances at the ritual sites also represent the Borana's concepts of space and time.

In 1991, following the collapse of the socialist military government, the present Ethiopian government introduced a federal system, composed of nine states divided along ethnic lines. This policy effectively territorialized the administration of ethnic groups. At this time, the state of Oromia was constituted, and the Borana's territory was incorporated into this state as an administrative division. In political terms, the gadaa system was regarded as an indigenous democratic institution of the Oromo.

Consistent with this view, Oromo nationalists, local administrators, and non-governmental aid organizations, together with other actors connected with the contemporary global world, are attempting to utilize the gadaa system for political and administrative purposes. They also provide some aid that is necessary to the Borana in performing their rituals. Thus, the councilors of the gadaa system have taken on the tasks not only of performing the rituals but also of mediating between the Borana people, the modern state, and global actors. In other words, the gadaa system is becoming a ritual apparatus that is taking the Borana into the modern world of political participation in Ethiopia's Oromia state.

Keywords: Age system, Borana Oromo, Ethiopia, Modern state, Social change