

Research Article

Gadaa as a Model of Democratic System: The Peaceful Transfer of Power (Alangee) of Tulama Oromo

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Abstract

The Gadaa system of the Oromo people represents one of the world's most enduring and sophisticated indigenous democratic governance systems. This article examines the recent peaceful transfer of the Alangee (ceremonial baton of authority) from the 70th Gadaa leader, Abbaa Gadaa Goobana Hoolaa (Gadaa Meelbaa cycle), to the 71st Abbaa Gadaa of the Tulama Oromo, Geetuu Taliilaa (Gadaa Muudanaa cycle), which occurred at the sacred site of Ardaa Jilaa Dhaka Koraatti in June 2026. Drawing on documentary analysis and scholarly literature on the Gadaa system, this study analyzes the democratic principles embedded in the Gadaa system, particularly its mechanism for peaceful power transfer, term limits, checks and balances, and popular participation. The findings demonstrate that the Gadaa system offers valuable lessons for contemporary democratic governance, including the routinization of peaceful succession, the separation of powers, accountability mechanisms, and the subordination of rulers to customary law (Seera). The article argues that indigenous governance systems like Gadaa should be recognized not as relics of the past but as living democratic traditions that can inform and enrich modern political practice in Ethiopia and beyond. By engaging critically with questions of power, legitimacy, and the limitations of liberal democratic frameworks, this study contributes to decolonial political theory and offers a theoretically grounded analysis of how indigenous institutions address the universal problem of constraining political authority.

Keywords

Gadaa System, Alangee, Peaceful Power Transfer, Indigenous Democracy, Tulama Oromo

1. Introduction

The Gadaa system, recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2016, is an indigenous democratic governance system that has governed Oromo society for generations. As Asmarom Legesse (2000, 1), the preeminent scholar of Gadaa, observed, it is "one of the most astonishing and instructive turns the evolution of human society has taken." The system operates on eight-year cycles, with five Gadaa classes (parties) rotating through positions of political, military, judicial, and ritual leadership over forty years

[36]. The recent transfer of the Alangee is particularly significant because it occurred at a time when Ethiopia is grappling with fundamental questions about democratic governance, political transitions, and the integration of diverse cultural traditions into national political life [37, 38]. The peaceful nature of this transfer where the outgoing leader steps down voluntarily and the incoming leader assumes office through ritual consensus rather than force stands in stark contrast to the of-

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ten-violent political transitions that have characterized Ethiopian national politics [39, 40].

This article addresses three central questions: First, what are the democratic principles embedded in the Gadaa system's power transfer mechanisms? Second, how does the recent Tulama Gadaa transition exemplify these principles? Third, what lessons can contemporary democratic theory and practice draw from the Gadaa system, and what are the limitations and challenges of integrating indigenous governance into modern state structures?

The article makes several original contributions to the existing scholarship. First, it provides a detailed, theoretically grounded analysis of a specific transfer event, moving beyond general descriptions of the Gadaa system to analyze the mechanisms through which principles are operationalized in practice. Second, it directly addresses the question of power a dimension often undertheorized in Gadaa scholarship by analyzing how the system institutionalizes constraints on political authority through ritual, cultural practice, and constitutional principles. Third, it contributes to the literature on peaceful transfer of power by documenting a case where peaceful transfer has been routinized for centuries without interruption, challenging the assumption that such practices are exclusively Western inventions [41, 42]. Fourth, by engaging with recent critical scholarship on the incorporation of Gadaa symbols into state rhetoric [43], it acknowledges the challenges and complications of integrating indigenous governance into modern state structures.

This study is grounded in a critical engagement with democratic theory, specifically interrogating the Eurocentric assumptions that have historically marginalized indigenous governance systems. We draw on three interconnected theoretical streams to frame our analysis of the Gadaa system's power transfer mechanisms: (1) legitimacy and the social contract, which examines how the Gadaa system operationalizes consent through cyclical renewal rather than a single founding moment; (2) power, authority, and the question of force, which analyzes how the system subordinates raw power to normative constraints through ritual and constitutional principles; and (3) indigenous democracy and decolonial political theory, which challenges Western definitional hegemony over what constitutes democracy. Through this theoretical lens, the article demonstrates that the Gadaa system offers distinctive solutions to the universal problem of constraining political authority solutions that have enduring relevance for contemporary democratic practice in Ethiopia and beyond.

2. Literature Review

On June 14, 2026, at the sacred site of Ardaa Jilaa Dhaka Koraa, the Tulama Oromo witnessed a historic yet routine event: the peaceful transfer of the Alangee the ceremonial baton symbolizing legitimate authority from the outgoing Gadaa Meelbaa cycle to the incoming Gadaa Muudanaa cycle. Abbaa Gadaa Geetuu Taliilaa Tufaa received the Alangee and was

inaugurated as the 71st Abbaa Gadaa of the Tulama Oromo, succeeding Abbaa Gadaa Goobana Hoolaa. This ceremony, known as the Walharkaa Fuudhinsa Alangee (the formal transfer of the baton of office), represents the culmination of an eight-year cycle of governance a cycle that has repeated itself for centuries, if not millennia [1, 2].

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streams to frame our analysis of the Gadaa system's power transfer mechanisms.

Contemporary democratic theory, following Locke and Rousseau, posits that legitimate political authority derives from the consent of the governed. Tyson argues that the peaceful transfer of power is a foundational element of the social contract, representing "a shared commitment to constitutional procedures that transcend particular rulers" [4]. The Gadaa system operationalizes this principle through the Caffee assembly, where community consent is ritually enacted and periodically renewed [5, 6]. However, Gadaa extends the social contract tradition by embedding consent not in a single founding moment but in a cyclical, intergenerational process of renewal [7]. Every eight years, the community reaffirms its commitment to the governing order a practice that Bassi describes as "democratic repetition" that prevents the ossification of political authority [8].

Drawing on Weber's distinction between traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational authority, we analyze how the Gadaa system synthesizes these forms in a manner that subordinates raw power to normative constraints. As Bassi and Megerssa demonstrate, the Gadaa system stands in stark contrast to the Ethiopian imperial state, where "brute force emerges as the sole source of State power" [9]. In the Gadaa system, authority is not imposed through coercion but earned through demonstrated competence and moral standing (*safuu*) [10, 11]. Leaders do not command they persuade; they do not rule they serve [12]. This represents what Jalata terms a "classical African civilization" in which power is institutionalized but not personalized [13]. The system's ability to survive centuries of state repression, as documented by Tolessa and Kumsa, testifies to the deep legitimacy it commands among Oromo communities [14, 15].

Nicolas challenges "Western definitional hegemony regarding what democracy is" by positioning Gadaa as a political ideal that asserts a "constitutive sameness between democracy and gadaa" [16]. Sirna similarly argues that Gadaa offers a model of "consensual democracy" that moves beyond liberal democracy's focus on majoritarian competition toward deliberative, consensus-based decision-making [17-19]. Jalata contends that the "contested and expanding meaning of democracy" must include indigenous models like Gadaa, which offer "alternative frameworks for understanding political participation, accountability, and legitimate authority" [20]. This theoretical intervention is crucial for our analysis: we do not seek to measure Gadaa against Western democratic standards but rather to understand it on its own terms as a sophisticated political philosophy that offers distinctive solutions to enduring problems of governance.

Berisso provides a foundational argument for why the Gadaa system should be considered democratic, identifying "the principles of checks and balances, the separation of powers, the rule of law, and the peaceful transfer of power" as its defining characteristics [21]. Dinagde extends this analysis by examining how the Gadaa system embodies "separation of

powers, rule of law, and fundamental rights" comparable to modern constitutional principles [22], while Daraje and Kyi Phyu emphasize the system's "participatory method" of decision-making that ensures "leadership is held accountable to the people" [23].

The Gadaa system has been defined by multiple scholars from various perspectives, each emphasizing different dimensions of this sophisticated indigenous governance structure. Legesse, in his foundational work *Oromo Democracy: An Indigenous African Political System*, describes Gadaa as a system of classes that succeed each other every eight years in assuming political, military, judicial, legislative, and ritual responsibilities [24]. This definition captures the cyclical nature of power rotation that lies at the heart of Oromo governance.

Berisso offers a complementary perspective, arguing that the democratic character of the Gadaa system is rooted in "the principles of checks and balances, the separation of powers, the rule of law, and the peaceful transfer of power" [21]. Jalata similarly describes Gadaa as "an example of classical African civilization" that embodies democratic principles "long before the emergence of modern Western democracies" [13]. Daraje and Kyi Phyu define the system as "an indigenous political and administration system" that has governed Oromo society through "community elections for leaders" and "participatory decision-making" [23].

Sirna situates the Gadaa system within the context of Ethiopia's federal experiment, arguing that the system's principles of "power sharing, checks and balances, and peaceful transition" offer valuable lessons for "bridging indigenous institutions of governance to modern democracy" [17]. Demmeksa provides a comprehensive constitutional analysis, reconstructing the unwritten Gadaa Constitution (*heera Gadaa*) as a "sophisticated, participatory, and morally grounded system of governance" that integrates law, ritual, generational order, and social harmony [25]. Dinagde further elaborates this constitutional dimension, examining how the Gadaa system embodies "separation of powers, rule of law, and fundamental rights" comparable to modern constitutional principles [22].

Bassi, in his long-term study of the Gadaa system, identifies institutional differentiation as "one of the system's most sophisticated features," arguing that it represents "an indigenous solution to the universal problem of preventing tyranny." He demonstrates that the Gadaa system functions effectively "not as a relic of the past but as a dynamic institution responsive to changing circumstances" [8].

Scholars debate the precise origins of the Gadaa system, but there is broad consensus that it predates the 16th-century Oromo expansion. Hinnant provides compelling evidence from Guji Oromo oral traditions, indicating that this subgroup alone has been ruled by 74 Abbaa Gadaas from 5 Luba (parties) over approximately 665 years, dating back to the mid-14th century [26]. This chronology places the establishment of the Gadaa system long before European colonial contact, positioning it as an indigenous African contribution to democratic thought.

Schlee examined the origins of the Gadaa system through comparative linguistic and ethnographic analysis, suggesting that the system's roots may extend even deeper than the 14th century. He argues that the structural similarities between Gadaa and other East African age-set systems point to a common ancient origin [27]. Kassa supports this view, stating that while precise dating remains difficult, "it is reasonable to think the Gadaa system existed well before the 16th century" and that it represents one of Africa's most enduring governance institutions [28].

Roba provides a nuanced analysis of the generational dimensions of Gadaa, explaining that the term Luba refers not simply to an age group but to a "generational set" with specific rights, duties, and responsibilities. His research demonstrates that the system's antiquity is preserved not only in written records but in the living memory of Oromo communities, where genealogies of Abbaa Gadaas are maintained through oral tradition [29].

Hassen situates the Gadaa system within the broader history of Oromo resistance to imperial expansion, arguing that the system's resilience its ability to survive the military conquest of Oromo territories in the late 19th century testifies to its deep embedding in Oromo social consciousness [30]. Tolessa and Kumsa have documented how Gadaa cultural practices, including the transfer of the Alangee, continued throughout periods of state repression, often conducted secretly in remote areas [14, 15]. This continuity demonstrates that the Gadaa system is not a relic of the past but a living tradition that has adapted to changing political circumstances while maintaining its core democratic principles.

Scholarly literature has identified multiple democratic principles embedded in the Gadaa system, principles that bear striking resemblance to those of modern constitutional democracies. Legesse identifies six core democratic features: (1) periodic elections and term limits; (2) separation of powers; (3) checks and balances; (4) popular participation; (5) accountability mechanisms; and (6) the rule of law [24].

The Gadaa system operates on fixed eight-year terms for all leadership positions. As Jalata notes, the system enforces "strict term limits" where "leaders serve for a fixed eight-year term and cannot extend their rule" [13]. This principle was dramatically demonstrated at the recent Dhaka Kora ceremony, where Abba Gadaa Meelbaa Goobana Holaa voluntarily stepped down after completing his term, and the Alangee was transferred to Abba Gadaa Muudanaa Geetuu Taliila. Daraje and Kyi Phyu emphasize this feature as central to the system's democratic character, noting that "leaders are elected for eight years and held accountable" through mechanisms that "promote community involvement in governance" [23].

The Gadaa system distributes authority across multiple institutions, preventing the concentration of power in any single individual or body. Baxter describes how the system divides responsibilities among the Abba Gadaa (executive leader), the Caffee (legislative assembly), and various judicial officers [31]. Roba adds that power is also shared across generations,

with different Luba holding different types of authority at different stages of the forty-year cycle [29]. Bassi identifies this institutional differentiation as "one of the system's most sophisticated features," arguing that it represents "an indigenous solution to the universal problem of preventing tyranny" [8]. Jalata elaborates on how the separation of powers operates in practice, demonstrating that no single institution can dominate the others [12].

The Gadaa system includes formal mechanisms for holding leaders accountable, including the possibility of impeachment (*buqqisuu*) for those who fail to fulfill their duties. Gutema and Chala document how the *lukaa-lukee* system among the Kuttaayee Oromo provides additional checks on executive authority [32]. Jalata argues that these accountability mechanisms demonstrate that "African indigenous governance was not based on blind obedience to chiefs but on negotiated consent and continuous oversight" [13]. Daraje and Kyi Phyu confirm that the system ensures "leadership is held accountable to the people" through "a participatory method" of decision-making [23]. Namera argues that the Gadaa system provides a method for "realizing the rule of law and citizens' equality" that predates and in some respects exceeds modern legal frameworks [11].

The Caffee (general assembly) represents perhaps the most directly democratic element of the Gadaa system. Deti and Jebessa describe how community decisions are made through consensus, with even a single dissenting voice able to halt discussion using the word "*qabadhe*" (stop discussion) [33]. Teso, Hamado, and Chalenka, in their investigation of the Manbadha general assembly of the Arsii Oromo, document how "participatory governance" is embedded in Gadaa practice through "open deliberation, collective decision-making, and respect for minority opinions" [5]. Sirna positions this consensual model as offering a distinctive alternative to liberal democracy's majoritarian logic, arguing that Gadaa's "consensus-based approach" provides better protection for minority voices and community cohesion [19]. Gutema argues that this participatory dimension is central to Gadaa's role in democratization through indigenization [6].

In the Gadaa system, no individual stands above the law. Debele emphasizes that "leaders were subjected to the same punishment as all other individuals if they violated laws" [10]. The constitution of the Oromo people embedded in custom (*Seera*), tradition, and moral philosophy (*Safuu*) is considered supreme. Demmeksa reconstructs the unwritten Gadaa Constitution as comprising "fifty constitutional principles and five hundred fifty laws" that are "preserved through oral transmission, periodically audited and amended by the Caffee, and safeguarded by senior legal scholars" [25]. Dinagde argues that the Gadaa system represents "an indigenous unwritten constitution" that demonstrates the possibility of constitutional governance without formal written documents [22].

The peaceful transfer of power known as *baallii dabarsuu* in Afaan Oromo or the transfer of the Alangee (ceremonial staff) is arguably the most remarkable democratic feature of

the Gadaa system. Gutema notes that "the power transferring process in Gadaa System is awfully peaceful where the incoming and the outgoing Abba Gadaas take and leave the office with blessings" [6]. This stands in stark contrast to many modern political transitions, which are often characterized by violence, contested results, or the refusal of incumbents to cede power.

Aliye explains that the *Baallii* (the ceremonial baton or symbol of office) carries profound significance. It is not merely a physical object but a representation of legitimate authority derived from the community. The transfer ceremony is not a political rally characterized by attacks on opponents or expensive campaigns. Instead, it involves ritual, tradition, blessing, and the solemn transfer of authority from one generation-grade to the next [34]. Gutema notes that political competition in the Gadaa system ends with a "win-win outcome," where both leaders are promoted to the next set of leadership responsibilities: the outgoing Abba Gadaa becomes an elder advisor, while the incoming leader begins his eight-year term [6].

The peaceful transfer of power has been the subject of extensive scholarly attention in political science, particularly in relation to democratic consolidation. Yongping examined the peaceful transfer of power between the UK and the US as a model of democratic transition [35], while Jang and Kreiss analyzed threats to peaceful transfer in contemporary American politics [36]. Tyson argues that the peaceful transfer of power is foundational to the social contract, representing a "shared commitment to constitutional procedures that transcend particular rulers" [4, 51]. Gibler and Tir demonstrate that peaceful territorial transfers correlate with democratic consolidation, suggesting that the routinization of peaceful transitions is a hallmark of stable democratic governance [37].

However, the Gadaa system offers a distinctive contribution to this literature: it routinizes peaceful transfer not through formal constitutions and legal enforcement but through ritual, tradition, and deeply embedded cultural practice. As one elder explained during the 2026 ceremony, "When I hand the Baallii to the next grade, I am not losing anything. I am completing something." This framing of power transfer not as loss but as fulfillment represents a profound psychological and cultural shift from competitive to cooperative political culture [38, 39].

Comparative scholarship on peaceful transfer of power is instructive. Marchick, Tippet, and Wilson documented American presidential transitions, highlighting the fragility of peaceful transfer even in established democracies [40]. Naas examined the philosophical foundations of peaceful power transfer in Aristotle and Derrida, arguing that it requires a "different understanding of sovereignty" one that "does not locate sovereignty in a single individual or office but in the ongoing process of governance" [41]. Singh analyzed peaceful transfer from a global and Indian perspective, identifying "democratic resilience" as a key factor in sustaining peaceful transitions [42].

Masabo examined electoral democracy and peaceful transfer in Tanzania, noting that "the routinization of peaceful transfers is a key indicator of democratic consolidation" [43, 48]. Benashvili analyzed peaceful transfer in Georgia's 2012 parliamentary elections [44, 49], while Graham, Gyampo, Faanu, and Yobo documented Ghana's third peaceful transfer as evidence of democratic consolidation in Africa [45]. These comparative studies highlight the exceptional nature of the Gadaa system: where modern democracies struggle to institutionalize peaceful transfer, the Gadaa system has practiced it for centuries without interruption.

Tasgara situates the Gadaa power transfer within the broader context of indigenous peacebuilding, arguing that the system offers valuable lessons for conflict resolution in contemporary Ethiopia. The predictability of the transition the fact that everyone knows when power will transfer and to whom eliminates a major source of political instability [46, 50].

Recent scholarship has examined the Gadaa system not merely as an anthropological curiosity but as a living political philosophy with relevance to contemporary governance challenges. Jalata argues that the "contested and expanding meaning of democracy" must include indigenous models like Gadaa, which offer "alternative frameworks for understanding political participation, accountability, and legitimate authority" [20]. Sirna has written extensively on the potential for "bridging indigenous institutions of governance to modern democracy" in Ethiopia's federal system, arguing that Gadaa principles could be integrated into contemporary governance structures without losing their integrity [17-19].

Gutema examines the role of Gadaa in "democratization through indigenization," arguing that the system offers a path to "reducing political conflicts" in Ethiopia by providing indigenous models of conflict resolution and power sharing [6]. Hineu analyzes the "potentials and challenges" of integrating Gadaa values into Ethiopia's mainstream political system, identifying both the opportunities and obstacles to this process [47]. Bassi, in his long-term study, argues that Gadaa has demonstrated "remarkable adaptability" across domains, functioning effectively "not as a relic of the past but as a dynamic institution responsive to changing circumstances" [8].

Aliye argues that Gadaa's "intersectionality with Ubuntu" the Southern African philosophy of communal personhood positions it within a broader African democratic tradition. He contends that indigenous governance systems offer "alternative models of democracy" that challenge Western hegemony over political thought [38]. Jalata and Harwood similarly argue that the Oromo nation's "mental liberation and empowerment" requires engagement with indigenous knowledge systems like Gadaa [39, 53].

However, critical scholars have also identified limitations and challenges. Daraje and Kyi Phyu acknowledge that the Gadaa system faces "challenges with adaptability" and "gender inequality," noting that "women are frequently excluded from political leadership and decision-making positions" [23].

Hinew identifies "wider opposition to indigenous institutions from neo-liberals" who claim "indigenous governance is inherently defective and incompatible with democratic values," as well as challenges from "a long-established hegemonic and homogenization system" rooted in Ethiopia's imperial history [47, 54].

Chala and Choroke offer a cautionary perspective, demonstrating that the incorporation of Gadaa symbols into state rhetoric has often been superficial "simply promoting the symbols alone without regard for the basic principles enshrined in the Gadaa system." They warn that "political parties have used the same symbols to contend for their respective political agendas and interests," and that the promotion of the system is "part of the post-Cold War retraditionalisation endeavors common elsewhere in the world" [3, 55]. This suggests that meaningful integration requires more than symbolic recognition it requires genuine engagement with Gadaa principles.

The presence of President Shimallis Abdiisaa and other Oromia Regional Government officials at the June 2026 Alangee transfer ceremony demonstrates the contemporary political significance of the Gadaa system. As the President told the assembled crowd, "Today we witness the living proof that our traditions are not relics of the past but vibrant systems of governance that continue to guide our people." This official recognition represents a significant shift from previous eras, when the Ethiopian state actively suppressed Gadaa institutions [14, 15].

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative documentary research design. Accordingly, a systematic review of available literature on the Gadaa system was conducted, encompassing peer-reviewed journal articles, books, academic theses, and policy documents. Specifically, the analysis focused on sources addressing the democratic principles of Gadaa, power transfer mechanisms, and the role of the *Baallii* ceremony.

To capture the recent transition event, reports from multiple news sources covering the June 2026 Tulama Gadaa ceremony at Dhaka Kora were reviewed. These reports provided primary descriptions of the ceremony, including participant observations, quotations from elders, and details concerning ritual procedures. Additionally, secondary sources on the historical development of the Gadaa system, its UNESCO recognition, and scholarly debates about its relevance to contemporary democratic theory were analyzed.

Using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework [1, 2], recurring democratic principles were identified across sources: peaceful power transfer, term limits, and separation of powers, popular participation, accountability, and the rule of law [52]. To ensure reliability, findings were triangulated across academic, journalistic, and policy sources.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1. Peaceful Transfer of Alangee at Dhaka Koraatti

On June 13, 2026 (Waxabajjii 6, 2018 E. C.), the Tulama Oromo conducted the Walharkaa Fuudhinsa Alangee (formal transfer of the baton of office) at the sacred site of Ardaa Jilaa Dhaka Koraatti. The ceremony marked the transition from the 70th Gadaa cycle, known as Gadaa Meelbaa led by Abbaa Gadaa Goobana Hoolaa, to the 71st cycle, Gadaa Muudanaa, now led by Abbaa Gadaa Geetuu Taliilaa Tufaa.

The Alangee-the ceremonial baton or sceptre symbolizing legitimate authority was transferred through established ritual procedures. According to reports from the site, "Elders presided. The community witnessed. The Caffee assembly gave its consent. And Abbaa Gadaa Geetuu Taliilaa Tufaa stepped into his role not as a conqueror, but as a servant. Not as a king, but as a caretaker."

This transfer did not occur spontaneously. In the days leading up to the ceremony, members of the Gadaa Meelbaa and Muudanaa grades had embarked on a pilgrimage to the Gafarsa Korma River, performing irreecha (thanksgiving prayers) and asking for safe passage and successful completion of their journey. The pilgrimage, known as the Jila Tuulama Sadeen, involved walking on foot, sleeping under the stars, and enduring natural elements demonstrating devotion to the Gadaa tradition (Geda 2015; Sagni 2020).

4.2. The Democratic Principles Manifested

The Alangee transfer ceremony embodied several core democratic principles that we analyze through the lens of our theoretical framework.

The transition occurred without violence, coercion, or contestation. The outgoing leader, Abbaa Gadaa Goobana Hoolaa, voluntarily stepped aside after completing his eight-year term. This peaceful succession aligns with what Tyson identifies as foundational to the social contract a "shared commitment to constitutional procedures that transcend particular rulers" [1]. However, the Gadaa system goes beyond mere compliance; it embeds peaceful transfer in ritual and moral obligation. As one elder explained, "When I hand the Baallii to the next grade, I am not losing anything. I am completing something." This reframing of power transfer not as loss but as fulfillment represents a cultural and psychological mechanism that prevents the attachment to power that so often leads to political violence in modern democracies [2, 3].

The ceremony occurred precisely at the conclusion of the eight-year Gadaa cycle. Leaders do not extend their terms, seek re-election, or attempt to abolish term limits. This routinization of leadership transition stands as "a guarantee written not in a constitution but in the hearts and minds of the Oromo people" [4, 56]. The enforcement of term limits with-

out formal legal enforcement demonstrates the power of cultural and ritual mechanisms in constraining political ambition a phenomenon that contemporary political theory often overlooks in favor of institutional and legal approaches [5, 6].

The Caffee assembly the general assembly of the community gave its consent to the new leadership. The Gadaa system operates on the principle that "no one ascends to power without consent of the people," and violating this norm would render one an outcast [7, 8]. This practice directly addresses what Bassi describes as the "legitimacy problem" facing contemporary African states: "the disconnect between state institutions and the people they are meant to serve" [9, 57]. By locating legitimacy in ongoing community consent rather than in a single founding moment, the Gadaa system maintains a continuous connection between rulers and ruled.

The transfer was accompanied by blessings, prayers, and ceremonial procedures that confer legitimacy on the new leadership. This ritual dimension reinforces the moral authority of leaders and reminds them that authority comes from the community and must be exercised for the community's benefit. Nicolas argues that this ritual dimension is not merely ornamental but constitutive of power itself: "In the Gadaa system, authority is not a possession but a performance, continuously enacted and re-enacted through ritual" [10]. This challenges Weberian distinctions between traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational authority, demonstrating how these forms can be synthesized in practice.

The Alangee (also called the Baallii) represents not domination but responsibility. "It is a symbol of responsibility a reminder that authority is granted by the community and must be exercised for the community's benefit." This symbolic framing of power as service rather than privilege represents what Sirna terms "consensual democracy" an approach that "prioritizes community welfare over individual ambition" [11].

4.3. The New Leader: Abbaa Gadaa Geetuu Taliilaa

Abbaa Gadaa Geetuu Taliilaa emerges from within the Gadaa Muudanaa grade a cohort of men who have been preparing for leadership for years or decades. The Gadaa system does not allow anyone to simply declare themselves a leader; one must be born into a Gadaa grade, grow through its ranks, learn its laws, participate in its rituals, and be recognized by elders and community members as ready to lead [1, 2].

The new Abbaa Gadaa will preside over the Caffee assembly, mediate disputes using *Seera* (customary law) and *Safuu* (moral principles), lead rituals including the annual Irreecha thanksgiving ceremonies, represent the Tulama Oromo in relations with other Gadaa groups, and prepare the next grade to receive the Alangee when his term ends [3, 4].

Notably, Abbaa Gadaa Geetuu Taliilaa "will not have a palace. He will not have a salary. He will not have a security detail. He will walk among his people, listen to their concerns, and carry their burdens." This reflects the Gadaa principle that

leadership is service, not privilege a principle that has profound implications for how power is exercised and constrained [5, 6].

4.4. Gadaa Values for Democratic Governance

The literature review identified specific Gadaa values relevant to democratic governance, which can be categorized into three domains [1, 2]:

These include *dhala namaa* (human dignity), respect for identity, inclusiveness, and accommodation practices such as *guddifachaa* (adoption) and *moggaasaa* (naturalization), which allow non-Oromo individuals to integrate into the community [3, 4].

These include term limits (eight-year single terms), pre-testing of candidates through years of preparation, separation of powers across government branches, accountability mechanisms including impeachment, and periodic peaceful transfer of authority [5-7]. These include fair distribution of resources, communal ownership of certain resources, and the principle of *qixxee* (egalitarian access to resources and decision-making) [8, 9]. These values, scholars argue, "can strengthen democracy and good administration" and "cannot be relegated."

5. Discussion

The peaceful transfer of Alangee at Dhaka Koraa demonstrates that the Gadaa system is not a relic of the past but a living, functioning democratic institution. As the report notes, "The same rituals performed today were performed by the 1st Abbaa Gadaa, and the 20th, and the 50th. The continuity is not broken. The cycle has never stopped not during the expansion of the Ethiopian empire, not during the Derg years, not during the periods of greatest repression" [1, 2].

This continuity challenges narratives that portray democracy as a Western import to Africa. The Gadaa system represents what Nicolas calls "indigenous democracy" a political philosophy that asserts "a constitutive sameness between democracy and gadaa" and challenges "Western definitional hegemony regarding what democracy is" [3]. Jalata similarly argues that the "contested and expanding meaning of democracy" must include indigenous models that offer "alternative frameworks for understanding political participation, accountability, and legitimate authority" [4].

This study contributes to the existing scholarship in several significant ways. First, it provides a detailed, theoretically grounded analysis of a specific transfer event, moving beyond general descriptions of the Gadaa system to analyze the mechanisms through which principles are operationalized in practice. While previous studies have documented Gadaa principles [5-7], few have examined a specific transfer ceremony through the lens of democratic theory and decolonial analysis.

Second, this study directly addresses the question of power a dimension often undertheorized in Gadaa scholarship. By analyzing how the Gadaa system institutionalizes constraints

on power through ritual, cultural practice, and constitutional principles, we demonstrate that the system offers distinctive solutions to the universal problem of preventing tyranny [8, 9]. This moves beyond descriptive accounts to engage with the political philosophy underlying Gadaa practice.

Third, this study contributes to the literature on peaceful transfer of power by documenting a case where peaceful transfer has been routinized for centuries without interruption. The comparative literature on peaceful transfer [10-17] has focused almost exclusively on modern democratic states, largely ignoring indigenous systems that have practiced peaceful transfer far longer. This study begins to fill that gap, demonstrating that the peaceful transfer of power is not a uniquely Western achievement but a human political achievement with multiple origins.

Fourth, by engaging with recent critical scholarship on the incorporation of Gadaa symbols into state rhetoric [18], we acknowledge the challenges and complications of integrating indigenous governance into modern state structures. This nuanced approach moves beyond the celebration of Gadaa as an "ideal" practice to engage with the political complexities of its contemporary relevance.

Fifth, this study contributes to decolonial political theory by demonstrating how indigenous governance systems offer distinctive solutions to the universal problem of constraining political authority [19, 20]. Rather than measuring Gadaa against Western standards, we have analyzed it on its own terms as a coherent political philosophy with its own internal logic and justification.

5.1. Addressing the Question of Power Directly

The Gadaa system's approach to power offers distinctive insights for contemporary democratic theory. Three dimensions are particularly significant: In the Gadaa system, power is not a possession to be held but a responsibility to be exercised. The Alangee symbolizes this: it represents authority granted by the community, not seized by the leader. This framing fundamentally alters the relationship between rulers and ruled, creating a presumption of accountability and service rather than domination [1, 2]. As Jalata argues, "The Gadaa system institutionalizes the principle that leaders are servants of the community, not masters over it" [3].

As Nicolas argues, authority in the Gadaa system is continuously performed and re-enacted through ritual. This means that power must be constantly justified and demonstrated, preventing its ossification into permanent hierarchy. The system's emphasis on walking among the people, listening to concerns, and carrying burdens ensures that leaders remain connected to those they serve [4, 5].

The five-party system ensures that power rotates through predetermined cycles, preventing any single group from accumulating permanent advantage. This approach to power sharing what Sirna terms "consensual democracy" offers an alter-

native to competitive party politics that often entrenches division and conflict [6]. Bassi demonstrates how this rotational principle has enabled the Gadaa system to maintain stability over centuries while adapting to changing circumstances [7].

5.2. Lessons for Contemporary Political Practice

The Gadaa system offers several concrete lessons for contemporary democratic governance, particularly in Ethiopia: Ethiopia's national political history has been characterized by violence, coups, and contested transitions from the murder of Haile Selassie to the Derg's seizure of power to the armed struggle that brought the EPRDF to power. The Gadaa system demonstrates that peaceful transitions are possible and can become normalized through institutional design and cultural practice [1, 2].

In many African countries, leaders have sought to extend or abolish term limits, leading to political crises. The Gadaa system's eight-year single term with no possibility of extension or re-election to the same office eliminates this source of instability [3, 4]. President Shimallis Abdiisaa, addressing the gathering, explicitly linked this practice to contemporary democratic values, stating that "the peaceful transfer of the Alangee today reflects the same principles of accountability, term limits, and democratic transition that modern governments strive to achieve."

In the Gadaa system, leaders are subjected to the same punishment as all other individuals if they violate laws. The possibility of impeachment (*buqqisuu*) ensures that leaders remain accountable to the community rather than above the law [5-7].

The Caffee assembly allows for minority voices to be heard, with the principle that one dissenting voice (*qabadhe*) can halt the most drastic actions. This contrasts with majoritarian democracy, where minority rights are often insufficiently protected [8, 9].

5.3. Challenges to Integrating Gadaa Values

Despite these democratic potentials, significant challenges impede the integration of Gadaa values into Ethiopia's mainstream political system. Scholars identify both external and internal factors.

Externally, there is "wider opposition to indigenous institutions from neo-liberals" who claim "indigenous governance is inherently defective and incompatible with democratic values and fundamental human rights principles" [1]. Critics also argue that indigenous governance does not support gender equality and that its decision-making processes are time-consuming. Regarding gender, it is worth noting that the formal Gadaa leadership positions have historically been held by men, though the *Siinqee* institution provides a parallel framework for women's influence a limitation that contemporary Gadaa practice may need to address [2, 3].

Internally, the integration of Gadaa values has been "challenged by a long-established hegemonic and homogenization system" rooted in Ethiopia's imperial history. The state historically "prohibited any gathering by the name of Gadaa in fear of the solidarity of the people for self-determination," and there was "contempt for the Gadaa system and the Oromo culture in general without understanding its nature" [4, 5].

Chala and Choroke offer a cautionary perspective, demonstrating that the incorporation of Gadaa symbols into state rhetoric has often been superficial "simply promoting the symbols alone without regard for the basic principles enshrined in the Gadaa system." They warn that "political parties have used the same symbols to contend for their respective political agendas and interests," and that the promotion of the system is "part of the post-Cold War retraditionalisation endeavors common elsewhere in the world" [6]. This suggests that meaningful integration requires more than symbolic recognition it requires genuine engagement with Gadaa principles.

5.4. The Way Forward

Despite these challenges, there are genuine prospects for recognizing and incorporating Gadaa values. The UNESCO recognition of Gadaa as Intangible Cultural Heritage provides international legitimacy. Scholarly research continues to document and analyze the system's democratic principles. The Ethiopian government has, in some contexts, engaged with Gadaa institutions through careful attention is needed to ensure that state intervention does not distort or co-opt the system [1-3].

Speaker of the Oromia Council, Addee Sa'aadaa Abduramaan, addressed the gathering at Dhaka Koraa, stating: "What we see today is not a symbolic performance it is functional governance that has maintained peace and order among the Tuulama for generations." This recognition from within the regional government suggests a growing appreciation for Gadaa's governance value.

I recommend several strategies for moving forward: First, Gadaa values should be documented and integrated into educational curricula. Second, policymakers should study Gadaa principles for potential application in local governance, conflict resolution, and transitional justice. Third, the Oromo Gadaa system should be recognized as one of Ethiopia's democratic heritages alongside other indigenous governance systems. Fourth, research should continue on how Gadaa principles can be adapted to contemporary challenges while respecting the system's integrity [1-3].

6. Conclusion

This article examined the peaceful transfer of the Alangee from Abbaa Gadaa Goobana Hoolaa to Abbaa Gadaa Geetuu Taliilaa Tufaa the 71st Abbaa Gadaa of the Tulama Oromo at

Ardaa Jilaa Dhaka Koraa in June 2026. This ceremony represents the continuation of a democratic tradition that has endured for centuries, surviving imperial expansion, military dictatorship, and intense repression. The Gadaa system embodies enduring democratic principles: peaceful periodic power transfer, meaningful term limits, separation of powers, accountability, popular participation, and the rule of law. The peaceful transfer of the Alangee demonstrates that orderly succession is not a Western import but an African indigenous achievement.

This study has contributed to the existing scholarship by providing a theoretically grounded analysis of a specific transfer event, directly addressing the question of power, contributing to the literature on peaceful transfer, and engaging with critical perspectives on the challenges of integrating indigenous governance into modern state structures. By analyzing how the Gadaa system institutionalizes constraints on power through ritual, cultural practice, and constitutional principles, we have demonstrated that indigenous governance offers distinctive solutions to the universal problem of preventing tyranny.

As Ethiopia navigates its democratic transition, policymakers and citizens should study the Gadaa system not as a replacement for modern institutions but as a complementary framework rooted in Ethiopian soil. The Alangee has been transferred peacefully. The question is whether Ethiopia's national politics can learn to do the same.

Abbreviations

E. C.	Ethiopian Calendar
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defense Force
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
GIS	Geographic Information System
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
OLA	Oromo Liberation Army
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

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Author Contributions

Megersa Tolera Abdi: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, writing review & editing

Data Availability Statement

All data analyzed in this study are derived from publicly available academic, journalistic, and policy sources cited in the reference list. No new empirical data were generated.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted independently, and the author has no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the interpretation of findings or the conclusions drawn in this study.

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