

The Contested and Expanding Meaning of Democracy

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Abstract: *The meaning of democracy has been contested, limited or expanded because it has been culturally situated and changed with changing historical and politico-economic conditions. Historically speaking, democracy can be hierarchical, exploitative and exclusive or egalitarian and inclusive depending on a specific social system. In most cases, the privileges of democracy were not equally shared within a population group or among different peoples, and what was democracy for one group could be slavery, stratification of class and gender, exclusion, oppression, colonialism and dictatorship for others. Starting from ancient times, certain peoples such as Athenians, which were culturally and geographical connected in a limited geographical space began to practice forms of democracy. Such people had the challenge of working with culturally, economically and geographically diverse populations on the principles of democracy, equality, and equity. However, people like the Oromo of Northeast Africa had democracy known as the gadaa system and its subset female institution known as siiqee and overcame most of these problems through horizontal organization and specific social democratic policies. Some scholars recognize that the meaning of democracy expands when a people within and without a given political community struggle for further expansion of political, economic, and social rights and freedoms. The historical experiences of various democratic societies show that democratic conditions emerged because of internal or/and external political pressures. The paper addresses three major issues: First, it examines the cases of Athenian and Oromo democracies and explains their historical and cultural roots, essence, characteristics and principles. Second, the piece explains why the issue of democracy is open and contested. Third, it illustrates how the meaning of democracy can be limited based on certain sociocultural conditions or how it can expand through struggles, theoretical and practical knowledge, ideological innovations, and institutional and organizational transformations.*

Keywords: Meaning of democracy; Athenian democracy; *Gada/Siqee* (Oromo Democracy); Egalitarian democracy; colonization; history; culture; political community; socioeconomic rights and freedom; contested democracy; liberal democracy; Oromo; Athens

Introduction

The meaning of democracy is historically and culturally situated, limited, contested, and expanding with large-scale and long-term social changes. Starting from ancient times, some communities and people who were culturally and geographical connected in a limited geographical space began to practice forms of democracy. Such people had the challenge of

working with culturally, economically and geographically diverse populations on the principles of democracy, equality, and equity as the case of Athenian democracy demonstrates in this paper. Frequently the privileges of democracy were not shared within a population group and among different peoples, and what was democracy for one group could be slavery, stratification of class and gender, exclusion, colonialism and dictatorship for others. But, as I shall demonstrate below, Oromo democracy known as the *gadaa* system, and its subset female institution known as *siiqqee*, had overcome most of these problems through horizontal organization and specific social democratic policies. Of course, this democracy was suppressed/destroyed by the alliance of Ethiopian colonialism and European imperialism, which reduced the Oromo to the colonial subjects of Ethiopia starting from the era of the Scramble for Africa (Jalata, 2005 [1993]). Bulatovich (2000, 68) explains about the *gadaa* administration, and how it was destroyed by Ethiopian colonialism: “The peaceful free way of life, which could have become the ideal for philosophers and writers of the eighteenth century, if they had known it, was completely changed. Their peaceful way of life [was] broken; freedom [was] lost; and the independent, freedom loving [Oromo] find themselves under the severe authority of the Abyssinian conquerors.” Scholars of democracy have different opinions in explaining or defining the concept of democracy although they agree on some major democratic principles and various institutional forms. Consequently, some of them assert that democracy is a contested concept that can take different forms and expands with time and space while others assert that it can be clearly conceptualized and defined.

Until recently, the concepts of citizenship and democracy were restricted because various groups—slaves, women, property-less males, and colonized peoples—were excluded from certain democratic political communities. Most scholars recognize that the meaning of democracy expands when a people within and without a given political community struggle for further expansion of political, economic, and social rights and freedoms. The historical experiences of various democratic societies show that democratic conditions emerged because of internal or/and external political pressures as the cases of Athens and Oromo demonstrate below. Therefore, scholars can use this work as a model to study different perspectives of democracies on the global and historical systems. In this paper three interrelated issues are raised and discussed: First, it examines the cases of Athenian and Oromo democracies and explains their historical and cultural roots, essence, characteristics and principles. Second, the piece explains why the issue of democracy is open and contested. Third, it illustrates how the meaning of democracy can be limited based on certain sociocultural conditions or how it can expand through struggles, theoretical and practical knowledge, ideological innovations, and institutional and organizational transformations.

Athenian Democracy: A Contested and Compromised Political System?

Democracy gradually emerged in Athens through reforming an oligarchical and tyrannical political system that oppressed and exploited the lower classes and the poor. During the seventh century B. C., Athens faced deep political and economic crises because of factionalism and the severe exploitation of poor peasants by landlords and aristocrats (Starr, 1990). An aristocracy known as the Eupatrids (“the sons of good fathers”) (Wallace, 2007, 49) ruled Attica and Athens during this century. The Eupatrids were corrupt and greedy rulers

who dominated and exploited the poor and caused significant economic, political, and social problems. They expropriated public possessions and lived extravagant lifestyles by putting great economic pressure on the lower classes: “The Athenian polity was oligarchic in all other respects, and in particular the poor were enslaved to the rich—themselves and their children and their wives.... All the land was in the hand of a few, and if the poor failed to pay their rents both they and their children were liable to seizure” (Wallace, 2007, 50).

Consequently, those individuals and families who could not pay rents were sold into slavery. The politico-economic crises created a pressure for political change or reform. The council of the Areopagus, whose members were ex-archons was the most significant political force and held office for life, dealt with oversight of the law and appointment of magistrates and debated the issues of constitution and policy (Carey, 2000).

Before the emergence of a popular government, the city-state of Athens was ruled by nine archons who were elected by the council of the Areopagus annually from the aristocrats (Starr, 1990). In the 7th century B. C., there was also an assembly known as *ekklesia* (*ecclesia*), which excluded the lowest economic group called *thetes* (Carey 2000). The oppression and exploitation of ordinary people by aristocrats and landlords gradually resulted in social upheavals and ruptures that facilitated political reforms and later the emergence of democracy in Athenian society. In 594 B.C., to deal with the danger of the survival of the state, the council of Areopagus elected Solon as an “archon and reconciler” (Starr, 1990, 7). Solon was empowered by the existing socio-political conditions to introduce far-reaching reforms, which included the cancellation of rural debts, the creation of a council of 400, a law court in which the poor could serve as jurors, new laws, and constitutional reforms (Starr, 1990). He opened the political system for different classes; as a result, the laborers (*thetes*) were admitted to the assembly and the law courts (Carey, 2000). Solon came to power as a chosen lawgiver, mediator, and archon: he “worked to resolve Athens’ economic problems, wrote new laws and enacted remedies for judicial abuse, and established a new government that was equitable for all Athenians.

The Eupatrids accepted Solon’s mediation as he swore not to become a tyrant—anathema to the aristocracy—and his appointment defused a violent civil war. Over the next thirty years ... they may have outfoxed him, only to be trumped by the demos” (Wallace, 2007). To solve the economic crisis, Solon provided the poor farmers land by reopening publicly possessed lands, eliminated the dependent statuses of the poor (*pelatēs* and *hektēmoros*), and abolished all debts. As Wallace (2007, 59) states, “Henceforth no Athenian could legally be compelled to work at the bidding of another. Attica became a land of independent farmers, each working for himself. Possibly offering compensation to their owners from the public silver . . . Solon even summoned back Athenians who had been sold abroad into slavery.”

Solon promoted justice by making laws equal for everyone and by reducing the penalty of theft. He “transformed the structure of political authority from an informal oligarchy determined by heredity and traditional social class to a legally fixed government based on law, economic status, and a formal political role for all Athenians” (Wallace, 2007, 60). Solon established Athens’ first constitutional government through introducing seven reforms;

they included issues of social classes, the offices, elections, accountabilities, the assembly, and the people's council (Wallace, 2007). He changed the foundations of social classes from birth by abolishing aristocracy to statuses based on wealth and military service; in this process, even the poorest class was given civic responsibilities in the assembly and the court. Solon's political innovations allowed every citizen, regardless of class, to be involved in public affairs. He reformed the practice of selecting public officials only from the Eupatrids; consequently, the people from two or three upper classes elected Athens' public authorities such as archons, treasurers, and prison officials. Based on Solon's reforms, "the demos [people] elected forty candidates for the archonships, ten per tribe, and from these forty, nine archons were chosen by lot" (Wallace, 2007, 62).

According to Wallace (2007, 62), the elections of officials by lot in the 6th century B. C. "had three . . . consequences. It helped to insure diversity among archons. . . . [Second] it mitigated any threat of social violence . . . when powerful men lost elections. Finally, it diluted the force of political ambition and aristocratic tradition. This dilution inevitably increased the power of other political elements, whether or not this was Solon's intention." People also received the right or power to scrutinize public authorities after they completed their terms to have some measure of control over their officials.

Solon also "formalized the composition and functions of the people's assembly. Henceforth, all citizens had the power to participate in the assembly and vote . . . This equality of voting power, reinforced in every assembly as speakers appealed for the demos' support, must have had significant psychological consequences for the demos and for their leaders" (Wallace, 2007, 63). As a result, the lower classes, lesser landowners and laborers started to participate in the political process. Consequently, the Eupatrids lost the control of the assembly and the people's council of 400 (Wallace, 2007). Solon created the new Areopagus Council, which was "charged with protecting the popular government" (Wallace, 2007, 66-67). According to Wallace (2007, 68), "Solon's reforms created a mixed . . . democratic system of institutions, transferring power from an abusive aristocracy into the hands of an upper tier of men, as determined by wealth and military service, and to all Athenians, in the assembly . . . possibly under the guard of a council of *ex-archai*." The oligarchs and the rebellious people chose Solon to mediate the conflict between the upper and lower classes to help restrain the rebellious people, the new rich and the aristocracy (Wallace, 2007). Solon abolished debt bondage and prevented the people from engaging in violence to redistribute land. Through reducing oppression and giving significant powers to the council of 400, the assembly and the people's court, he "created the basic institutions of Athens' Democracy" (Wallace, 2007, 69).

As Wallace (2007, 72) argues, his "constitutional measures were a consequence of citizens' political awareness, their sense of responsibility and civic involvement, and the need for a new dispensation of power." Furthermore, the intellectual climate of the sixth and fifth centuries B. C. contributed to the development of Athenian democracy. According Carey (2000, 22), these "centuries in Greece were a period of rapid intellectual change, beginning with the Ionian physicists in the sixth century and culminating in the fifth with the activity of the sophists, travelling teachers who found in Athens a favorable environment for their courses on language and rhetoric and their speculation on the world."

The teaching of sophists was revolutionary because it promoted egalitarianism by attacking and discrediting the traditional aristocratic values and beliefs that claimed social, moral and intellectual superiority. Because of all these factors, the political culture of Athens began to change in the fifth century and a new kind of political leaders emerged along side of the political leaders from old families whose wealth was mainly in land; these new political leaders emerged from a non-landed background, though they were still rich and came from manufacturing and commerce (Carey, 2000). Wealth and family status played important roles in Athenian democracy, and generals were chosen from men of wealth and well-to-do families (Jones 1964). Athenian democracy evolved from aristocracy through “a protracted series of giant leaps interspersed with smaller steps, not in a single bound” (Carey, 2000, 12). Athenian democracy was not “discovered” or “invented” by individuals such as Solon and Cleisthenes though these and other “highly talented individuals responded creatively to what they correctly perceived as substantial changes in the Athenian political environment, and that these changes were the direct result of collective action. The responses of creative individuals had much to do with the shape of Athenian political culture but should not be simply equated with it. Democratic institutional practices emerged in Athens in response to a historical rupture” (Ober, 2007, 83). The Athenian people rose up to change their government in the 6th century B. C. (i.e. 594/3, 561/0 and 508/7) (Wallace, 2007). After Isagoras won the archonship in 508/7, Cleisthenes sided with the people and expanded citizenship rights for many by reversing the expulsion of noncitizens, by building and strengthening the army, and by establishing a democracy in local government (Wallace, 2007).

In 508/7 B. C. when the Spartan King, Cleomenes, and his quisling, Isagoras, tried to dissolve the Athenian government, the people revolted and emerged as a collective historical agent “by besieging a Spartan king for three days on the Athenian acropolis” (Ober, 2007, 84). The competition for power between two aristocrats, Isagoras and Cleisthenes, led to the search for an alliance to acquire and maintain power. When Cleisthenes proposed the introduction of constitutional reforms with the support of the demos, Isagoras invited his ally, the Spartan king, who ordered the expulsion of the former and many others. The forces of the archon Isagoras and his Spartan allies tried to control Athens (Ober, 2007). “Isagoras and his supporters sought to narrow the existing (Solonian/Peisistratean) ‘constitution,’ first by restricting the body of those entitled to citizenship, and then by turning over political power to a small and homogeneously pro-Spartan elite” (Ober, 2007, 86).

According to Ober (2007, 88), “Cleomenes attempted to abolish the existing council in favor of a body of three hundred supporters of Isagoras. But the councilmen refused to obey the dissolution order. Their resistance would have been futile in the face of Cleomenes’ soldiers, except that ‘the rest of the Athenians, being of ‘one mind’ now rose up in arms. Caught by surprise by this dangerous expression of popular solidarity, Cleomenes, Isagoras, and supporters quickly withdrew to the stronghold on the Acropolis”. The armed Athenians besieged Cleomenes and Isagoras on the Acropolis for two days and forced them to surrender on the third day. The armed people expelled Cleomenes and his forces and killed those who remained in Athens. Returning from exile, Cleisthenes introduced some changes to the constitutional order that were passed by the citizen assembly. As Ober (2007, 89) notes, “The

revolution was ... a necessary condition for the emergence of democracy . . . The energy released by the revolution was a key factor in Athens' subsequent political evolution: in short term in the 'Cleisthenic' innovations affecting citizenship, local authority, the advisory council, the army, and control over leaders." He also reformed the Athenian administration by redistricting it into a ten diluted local/tribal boundaries to reduce stiff rivalry among tribes and prevent domination (Ladha, 2003).

The development of Athenian democracy should be considered within broader contexts such as revolutionary social conditions, volatile mass and elite relations, Solon's and Cleisthenes' reforms, democratic political consciousness. Raaflaub (2007) identifies two major features in defining *dēmokratia* or Athenian democracy: (1) the claiming of political equality by people who were called citizens regardless of property and class statues, and (2) the making of final decision by the demos in the government through representation in the assembly, the council and the people's court. According to Claster (1967: 2), "The main institutions through which people ruled Athens were the *ecclesia* (the popular Assembly), the *heliaea* (the popular court), which were given increased importance by Cleisthenes at the close of the sixth century, and the Council of Five Hundred, which he established. It was particularly in the first two that the sovereignty of the people was most fully vested." Cleisthenes created a new council of 500; he divided his administrative areas into 10 tribes, and each tribe provided 50 members by lot. As a result of his reforms, "the mass of Athenian citizens developed sufficient political consciousness that" enabled them to exercise their new responsibilities (Starr, 1990: 15). Cleisthenes also instituted the system of ostracism as a policy of safety valve against would-be tyrants or dictators. Gradually the council started to have influence: First it ended tyranny and banned the use of torture through decrees. Second, it decided to have the power of electing 10 generals by open vote (Starr, 1990).

The council played a role of public auditor to minimize or eliminate various forms of corruption and mismanagement by public officials; "all officials were examined before entering office, were checked by the council as they performed their tasks, and could not lay down their posts at the end of the year until inspected and approved by the council" (Starr, 1990, 42). From the fifth to fourth century B. C., Athenians had established a political system known as *dēmokratia* (rule by the people) that allowed all male adult citizens of the age of eighteen and above to have equal political rights, freedom of speech, and the freedom to participate directly in their government by having popular control and self-determination. The Athenian democratic government rested on four major institutions; the four pillar institutions were the *ekklēsia* (*ecclesia*) or assembly of the people, the council of 500 known as the *boulē*, the board of 10 generals, and the *dikastēria* or people's court or the laws court (Blackwell, 2003; Starr 1990).

As one part of the government, the assembly included the generals, the council, and the popular law courts; however, "the council steered the assembly virtually as its master, 'an active and indispensable body,'" and the assembly took only matters presented to it by this body (Starr, 1990, 580). "The presidents of the council and the assembly," as Jones (1964, 3) notes, "were chosen daily by lot from the council to preclude any undue influence from the chair." The assembly, the council and the law courts were branches of the popular

government. “The assembly, assisted by the *boulē* and the law courts . . . decided upon policies, supervised every step of their execution, and held a tight control over the officials who were in charge of realizing them. Professional personnel’s involvement (whether in administration, religion, or the maintenance of public order) was minimal, mostly consisting of a few hundred state-owned slaves who served in specific functions at the disposal of various officials or as a rudimentary police force.” (Raaflaub 2007, 4).

The popular courts were considered the ultimate guardians of the Athenian constitution and “juries were empanelled by lot for each case from a body of 6,000 citizens annually chosen by lot, and decided not only private cases but political issues” (Jones, 1964, 4). The juries judged charges of malfeasance brought against magistrates, other government officials, and citizens accused of treason or of “deceiving the people” by speeches in the assembly or other private matters (Jones, 1964, 4). According to Josiah Ober (2007, 273), “Athenian government was organized across groups of 10 (boards of *archontes*), 50 (tribe-teams of *prutaneis*), 200 (*dikastēria*), 500 (*boulē* and *dikastēria* for public cases), 1500 (*nomothetai*), 6000 [jurors] or more (*ekklēsia*), and ostracism.” The assembly was a sovereign governing body, “holding forty regular meetings a year and extraordinary sessions as required, and not merely settling general questions of policy, but making detailed decisions in every sphere of government — foreign affairs, military operations, finance” (Jones, 1964: 3). It consisted of all adult males who were eighteen years old and above and considered citizens regardless of the class status. When this assembly was called the *dynamo* of Athenian democracy (Ferguson, 1913), the council was called “the administrative lynch-pin of the constitution” (Jones, 1964, 3).

The council of 500 was “annually chosen by lot from all the demes (wards and parishes) of Athens and Attica in proportion to their size, and thus forming a fair sample of the people as a whole. It had two main functions, to supervise and coordinate the activities of the magistrates, and to prepare the agenda of the assembly” (Jones, 1964, 3-4). According to Raaflaub (2007, 4),

The presidents of the assembly and council were elected by lot and essentially could not serve more than one day . . . The democratic ‘council of 500’ (*boulē*) — to be distinguished from the Areopagus council composed of former magistrates (archons) who were life-long members — was selected by lot; its five hundred members, limited to two (non-successive) years of service, represented, according to a sophisticated formula, the population of numerous districts in Attica (*dēmoi*, demes, consisting of villages and sections of towns and of the city of Athens . . .) This council broadly supervised the administrative apparatus . . . dealt with foreign policy issues, heard reports of officials, and deliberated the agenda and prepared motions for the assembly . . . The latter was free to accept such motions, with or without amendment, to refer them back to the council for further deliberations, or to reject and replace them with different ones altogether . . . The assembly passed decrees . . . on specific policy issues, while laws with general validity . . . were formulated by a board of ‘lawgivers’ (*nomothetai*) passed in a trial-like procedure, and, if challenged, scrutinized in the people’s court . . .

The Athenian democracy directly mobilized a large proportion of citizens through the assembly, the council and the law courts in order to control the entire political system and to involve the citizens in public business (Raaflaub, 2007). All citizens could speak at the assembly and voted on decisions by which they lived. The majority made decisions and promulgated laws by holding up their hands; they directly controlled institutions and the political process.

The assembly debated military and financial issues, organized and maintained food supplies, initiated legislation and political trials, decided to send ambassadors or envoys, signed treaties, voted to raise or spend funds, elected generals, discussed the issues of peace and war, and decided to ostracize powerful and dangerous individuals for democracy. Citizens who did not attend the assembly paid fines, and those who shirked their duties were marked with red paint as punishment. The *bouli* (council) was elected from upper classes by lot from 10 tribes (10 board of *archntes*) known as *phylae*, and 50 from each tribe-team of *prutaneis* (Blackwell, 2003). In addition to setting an agenda for the assembly, the *bouli* could make decisions without the assembly during the time of crisis and war. There was a term limit for the council and they could not serve more than two non-consecutive years; it acted as an executive committee of the assembly, and it also supervised administrative committees and officials on behalf of the assembly. The council was the full-time government that only served for one year at one time. Although the council could issue decrees on certain matters, it could not make laws without the assembly. The main roles of the council were deliberative, administrative, and judicial. The council made sure that laws and decrees were carried out, and it investigated candidates for office and was involved in their post-tenure scrutiny. Every councilor should be above 30 years old to serve on the council, and he was scrutinized to check his fitness to serve. “There was . . . an executive committee of the *bouli* which consisted of one tribe of the ten [tribes] which participated in the *bouli* (i.e., 50 citizens, known as *prytaneis*) elected on a rotation basis, so each tribe composed the executive once each year. This executive of the executive had a chairman (*epistates*) who was chosen by lot each day. The 50-man *prytany* met in the building known as the *Bouleuterion* in the Athenian *agora* and safeguard the sacred treasuries” (Cartwright, 2014, 5).

To prevent the domination of an individual or a group and to ensure that each locality or region was equally represented to have equal power, the mechanism of checks and balance was carefully established. All government officials such as generals, priests, advocates, heralds, and ambassadors who were elected went through the scrutinizing process before and after holding public offices (Blackwell, 2003). The generals were very essential officials and they could stand for office year after year; they played military, financial and foreign policy roles. Ten generals were elected for their military expertise from ten tribes. In addition to commanding the army, these generals were *ex officio* members of the council. Whether they agreed or not, the generals implemented the assembly’s decisions. While young men between the age of 18 and 19 served in military, citizens at the age of 30 year were elected to be members of the council, the juries and magistrates. The ancient Athenians understood the importance of professionalism in certain jobs such as the military. Above all, the autonomous or self-governing Athenian *polis* had precedence over that of individuals and subgroups.

Lakoff (1996, 37) explains that an aspect of democracy known as communal autonomy started in the Athenian *polis*: “The first efforts to replace monarchy and aristocracy by popular self-government were made among the ancient Greeks, who invented both the word ‘democracy’ and constitution it signified. The Athenians, who brought democracy to its highest early development, understood it to mean the self-government or autonomy of the community or *polis*.” However, Athenian democracy excluded slaves, women, and resident foreigners from the political process (Lakoff, 1996). There were different forms of slaves such as private and public slaves. For rich people, slaves were an investment, and they could work on fields or in mining for their owners. Public slaves worked for officials, and they also served on the police force. They worked as government clerks, too.

The dark side of Athenian democracy was its slave owing culture that practiced unfreedoms on war captives or people who could not pay their debts. Athenian democracy was established on the back of slaves (Jones, 1964). Also, women did not have equal political rights (Blackwell, 2003). Despite the fact that different social groups were excluded from ancient Athenian democracy, the principles of equal rights, accountability, and social justice were strictly implemented among people who were considered citizens. Athenian democracy acquired its characteristic from its setting called the *polis*: “To call the *polis* a city-state is to impose an anachronism: the term ‘state’ arose much later, in the sixteenth century” (Lakoff (1996, 40).

The Greek *poleis* as unified communities with urban centers had the highest forms of social interactions; these communities had their “governments which legislated, collected taxes, declared war and maintained boundaries excluding others from their territories” (Lakoff, 1996, 42). Gradually Athenian democracy was achieved through relative security and a civic way of life that provided political self-determination to citizens. “The *polis* . . . became the setting for the creation of a constitutional order in which justice could be dispensed in accordance with established laws, divinely ordained, customary, and statutory” (Lakoff, 1996, 42). The principle of popular sovereignty was implemented, and “Athenian government was made the function of the assembled citizens, and magistrates were given temporary responsibilities and held closely accountable by the citizenry” (Lakoff, 1996, 43).

Athenian democracy had two features for which it was praised and criticized. It had the principles of freedom and political equality for all the people who were considered citizens, which are the central features of democracy. Democratic freedoms protected the Athenian citizens from torture and execution without trial, except crimes against property in which a confessed perpetrator could be put to death (Carey, 2000). This democracy prevented the concentration power in the hands of a single person or a group by restricting the length of service usually for a year; officials came to power through lot or elections and evaluated for their fitness before they came to power and after their post-tenure to check whether or not they abused their power. As Carey (2000, 33) notes, “Equality consists in the right of access to the political process to all citizens without distinction of wealth or birth. This includes the right to hold office or to serve on a jury.” Because of an Athenian narrow definition of citizenship, all human beings were not treated equal, and most people were excluded from

having equal citizenship rights in this democracy. Women, foreigners, slaves, and conquered communities were excluded, oppressed and exploited, and the principle of autonomous human beings did not apply to them. The adult male citizens who engaged in democratic practices only “represented a small minority (perhaps between 10 and 20 percent),” and between 80 and 90 percent of the population were excluded from this democracy (Raaflaub, 2007, 11).

Although the Athenians bequeathed us their conception of equality and freedom—and they were themselves ‘confessors of the name’—the problem is to determine whether Athens ever had a viable democracy. There are two aspects of the problem. The first is to decide whether true democracy could exist when Athens had a slave population, when women were unable to exercise the franchise, when foreigners were unable to become citizens, and when the Athenians were willing to subjugate their allies and insist, even using brute force that they remain within their empire. These limitations on Athenian democracy could provide a basis for the argument that there was no democracy at all (Claster, 1967, 2).

Another problem of Athenian democracy was its “preoccupation with communal autonomy [that] prevented Athenians from recognizing the need to transcend their own parochialism. Instead of promoting democracy as an ideal suitable for all cooperating with other *poleis* to create a federal system that might have better protected them all, they enslaved those they considered natural inferiors and practiced naked imperialism toward other Greek *poleis*” (Lakoff, 1996, 64). This democracy was also criticized for being parasitic for depending on tributes from colonies and for depending on slave labor (Jones, 1964). It was a contested and compromised political system for the Athenian citizens (i.e., rich and poor), which were between 10 and 20 percent of the Athenian population. The majority of the population was excluded from this democracy. Therefore, the Athenian political system was an incomplete and limited democracy. Let me now turn to another form of the ancient Oromo democracy known as the *gadaa/siiqqee* system.

Oromo Democracy: A Near Egalitarian Political System?

The Oromo people were organized socially, culturally and politically using the institution of *gadaa* to democratically administer themselves and to maintain their wellbeing, security and sovereignty for many centuries until they were colonized by the alliance of Ethiopian colonialism and European imperialism during “the scramble for Africa” (Holcomb and Ibssa 1990; Jalata 2005[1993]). Although the *gadaa* system had cultural, social and political aspects, here I mainly focus on its political aspect known as Oromo democracy. The historical legacy of Oromo democracy is the sovereignty the Oromo people experienced under the *gadaa* government and its egalitarian framework. As I will demonstrate below, long before the issues of democracy and social equality were the norm in Western Europe and North America, the design of *gadaa* as a political institution worked to establish the rule of law and to prevent political domination and exploitation in Oromo society. Consequently, under the *gadaa* system, Oromo society enjoyed relative peace, stability, sustainable prosperity and political sovereignty. As Luling (1965, 191) asserts, before their colonization the Oromo “were dominant on their own territories; no people of other cultures were in a

position to exercise compulsion over them.” The organizational capacity of *gadaa* enabled Oromo society to maintain its freedom and sovereignty before colonization.

Although Oromo society lost its sovereignty, the Boorana Oromo group still practices certain aspects of the *gadaa* system. Today in the Boorana Oromo, *gadaa* has three interrelated meanings: it is the grade during which a class of people assumes politico-ritual leadership, a period of eight years during which elected officials take power from the previous ones, and the institution of Oromo society (Legesse, 1973, 2006[2000]). Describing how *gadaa* currently works in the Boorana region of Oromia, Asmarom Legesse (1973, 8) asserts that it “is a system of classes (*luba*) that succeed each other every eight years in assuming military, economic, political, and ritual responsibilities. Each *gadaa* class remains in power during a specific term (*gadaa*), which begins and ends with a formal transfer ceremony.” Male Oromo are recruited into age-sets, which is based on chronological age, and *gadaa*-grades, which is based on genealogical generations: “The first has nothing to do with genealogical ties. The second has little to do with age. Both types of social groups are formed every eight years. Both sets of groups pass from one stage of development to the next every eight years” (Legesse, 1973, 50-51). The *gadaa* system has a very logical structure, but because of the interlinking of the two concepts of belonging and responsibility that are at its core, it is not easily accessible at first glance.

Hinnant (1978, 213-214) says that *gadaa* divides the stages of life, from childhood to old age, into a series of formal steps, each marked by a transition ceremony defined in terms of both what is permitted and what is forbidden. The aspect of *gadaa*, which throws the concept of age grading into confusion is that of recruitment. A strict age-grade system assumes that an individual’s social passage through life is in tune with his biological development. An individual enters the system at a specific age and passes through transition rites at intervals appropriate to the passage from childhood through full adulthood to senility. However, recruitment into the *gadaa* system is not based upon biological age, but upon the recruitment that an individual remain exactly five stages below his father’s level. Recruitment is thus based on the maintenance of one socially defined generation between father and son.

The forty years gap between a father and a son in generation-sets or *gadaa*-grades was designed to avoid nepotism in holding political power. There have been five *gadaa*-grades; each has different names in different parts of Oromia as the result of the establishment of different autonomous administrative systems sometimes. For example, in central Oromia, these five grades are called *itimakko*, *daballee*, *foollee*, *dorooma/quoondala* and *luba*. Oromo males were involuntarily recruited to both age-sets and *gadaa* grades or parties. Male children become a part of age-sets as newly born infants. Males born in the same eight-year period belonged to an age-set, but they entered into the *luba* class 40 years after their fathers, and since one grade is eight years, fathers and sons were five grades apart. Male children included in generation-sets at birth, joining men or old men who were considered to be members of their genealogical generations. In these cross-cutting generation-sets, older men mentor young males in teaching rules and rituals, but the former treated the latter as equals since there is no status difference between the two groups in a *gadaa* class (or grade).

Between the third and fourth *age-sets*, boys become adolescent and are initiated into taking serious social responsibilities. The ruling group has responsibilities to assign senior leaders and experts to instruct and council these young men in the importance of leadership, organization and warfare. Young men are also trained to become junior warriors by taking part in war campaigns and hunting large animals; they learn the practical skills of warfare, military organization and fighting so that they can engage in battle to defend their country and economic resources. As Baxter (1978, 177) notes, the Oromo used age-sets for war because generation-sets could not “be an efficient means to mobilize troops, and a quite distinct organization based on closeness of age [and] exists for that purpose.”

Before the colonization of Oromo society, *Abbaa Gadaa* or *Abbaa Boku* was the president of Oromo society for eight years, and the *Abbaa Duula* (the defense minister) was also one of the leading figures in the *gadaa* government. He was the leader of *qondala* (army) and was elected by the people. His main responsibility included assisting the *Abbaa Boku*, especially during the time of war. The *Abbaa Boku* was also supported by a council, known as *shanee* or *salgee*, and retired *gadaa* officials. *Gadaa* laws were passed by the *caffee* (assembly) and implemented by officials. There was no taxation under this system except that *gadaa* leaders and their families were provided with necessary materials such as food. Despite the fact that kinship relationships were important factors in Oromo society, those who were elected to office were expected to serve without regard to kinship ties. Nobody was above the rule of law in Oromo society. Baissa (1993, 11) expresses the view that the *gadaa* system “as a whole provided...the machinery for democratic rule and enjoyment of maximum liberty for the people.” Discussing the philosophy of Oromo democracy, Legesse (1973, 2) notes: “What is astonishing about this cultural tradition is how far Oromo have gone to ensure that power does not fall in the hand of war chiefs and despots. They achieve this goal by creating a system of checks and balances that is at least as complex as the systems we find in Western democracies.” Sometimes all the Oromo branches lived under one *gadaa* administration (Baissa 2004; Jalata 2005).

According to Baissa (2004, 101),

Gadaa government comprised a hierarchy of triple levels of government: the national, the regional and the local. At the pan-Oromo level, the national government was led by an elected *luba* [leaders] council formed from [male] representatives of the major Oromo moieties, clan families and clans, under the presidency of the *Abbaa Gadaa* and his two deputies . . . The national leadership was responsible for such important matters as legislation and enforcement of general laws, handling issues of war and peace and coordinating the nation’s defense, management of intra-Oromo clan conflicts, and dealing with non-Oromo people.

The *gadaa* system of Oromo democracy had the principles of checks and balances (such as periodic transfer of power every eight years and division of power among executive, legislative and judiciary branches), balanced opposition (among five *gadaa* parties or grades) and power sharing between higher and lower administrative organs to prevent power from falling into the hands of despots.

Other principles the system had included balanced representation of all clans, lineages, regions and confederacies, the protection of women from abuse, the protection of women's economic resources, the accountability of leaders, the settlement of disputes through reconciliation, and the respect for basic rights and liberties. The rule of law was the key element of the *gadaa* system; those leaders who violated the law of the land or whose families could not maintain the required standard of the system were recalled before the end of their tenure in the office. Leaders selected under *gadaa* implemented the laws that were made by male representatives of the people (though women undoubtedly had informal/indirect influence). Oromo democracy allowed the Oromo people through their representatives or directly to formulate, change, or amend laws and rules every eight years. The *gadaa* system accepted the Oromo people as the ultimate source of authority and believed nobody was above the rule of law. *Gadaa* officials were elected according to established criteria by the people from the *qoondala* grade (i.e. from age 32 to 40) and received rigorous training in Oromo democratic philosophy and governance for eight years before they entered the *luba* grade (administrative grade); the main criteria for election or selection to office included bravery, knowledge, honesty, demonstrated ability to govern, etc.

Oromo religious leaders such as Abbaa Muda and *qaallus* promoted harmonious and democratic relations in Oromo society and opposed tyrants and supported the *gadaa* system (Jalata, 1998, 35-36). The *qaallus* were ritual leaders, and *gadaa* leaders took oath from them. *Abbaa Muda* was the leader and father of Oromo religion and his seat was permanently located at a central place unlike *Abbaa Gadaa* who changed his center every eight years. Starting from the 16th century, the center of *Abbaa Muda* was Madda Walaabuu. "The possession of institution of *qaallu* (the spiritual leader) and the common *gadaa* government seems to have been 'the special mark' of the Oromo nation" (Hassen 1990: 9). "All Oromo clans used to meet at common [religious] institutions once in every eight years. These institutions were known as *Abbaa Muda* or '*qaallu*' institution. *Qaallu* in Oromo *gadaa* system is the leader of Oromo religious institutions, whereas *Muda* is the pilgrimage to these religious institutions" (Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau, OCTB, 2011, 53). The *qaallu*'s "residence was considered politically neutral ground, suitable for debating controversial issues and for adjudicating highly charged disputes, although he himself might not take a prominent role in proceedings" (Kelly, 1992, 166).

Today, aspects of *gadaa* still exist in some Oromo branches such as Boorana (Oba-Smidt, 2016; Bassi. 2005). In the Boorana Oromo community, for example, the *Gumii Gaayyo* (assembly of multitudes) brings together almost all of the important leaders such as living *Abbaa Gadaas* (retired presidents of the assembly), the *qaallus* (spiritual leaders), age-set *councilors*, clan leaders and *gadaa* councilors, and other concerned individuals to make or amend or change laws and rules every eight years. In August 1996, the 37th *Gumii Gaayyo* Assembly, reflecting a tradition that began in 1708, was held to make, amend, or change three kinds of laws that the Boorana Oromo classify as cardinal, customary, and supplementary laws (Huqqa, 1998). The *Gumii Gaayyo* assembly has a higher degree of ritual and political authority than the *gadaa* class and other assemblies because it "assembles representative of the entire society in conjunction with any individual who has the initiative

to the ceremonial grounds,” and “what *Gumii* decides cannot be reversed by any other assembly” (Legesse, 1973, 93).

However, under the Ethiopian colonial system, the surviving *gadaa* does not have the sovereignty it used to have. As I explain below, with the political pressures from outside and with an increased population, different Oromo groups started forming autonomous *gadaa* governments (Baissa, 2004; Jalata, 2005). While establishing autonomous local governments, the Oromo groups formed alliances, federations, and confederations to maintain their political and cultural solidarity and defend their security and interest from their common enemies (Bulcha, 1996; Etefa, 2008).

The case of the Tuulama Oromo group demonstrates that “autonomous local governments were answerable to the overall *gadaa* of the main branch” (Etefa, 2008, 21). For many centuries, the Oromo effectively defended their country from the Christian Abyssinian and Muslim empire builders in the Horn of Africa. There is adequate evidence to indicate that the Oromo people dominated the areas from Abyssinia proper, the Amhara-Tigray homeland, to Mombasa and from Somalia to the Sudan (albeit there were no well-demarcated boundaries) before they were partitioned and colonized (Hambly, 1930). When *gadaa* was an all-encompassing institution of politics, military, defense, economy, religion, ethics, culture, and tradition, the *siiqqee* institution was used by women as a check and balance system to counter male-dominated roles in the *gadaa* system. The *siiqqee* institution gave a political and social platform for Oromo women to effectively voice their concern and address their social justice issues. The balancing of the domains of women and men and maintaining their interdependence were preconditions for keeping peace between the sexes and for promoting *safuu* (moral and ethical order) in society (Kelly, 1992). “By exercising a real day-to-day control over the disposition of the resources at every point of the decision-making process in ways that are protected by the value system of society,” Waqayyo (1991, 9) writes, “the woman wields determinative influence in the society as a whole.”

The *siiqqee* institutions helped maintain *safuu* in the Oromo society by enabling Oromo women to have control over resources and private spaces, social status and respect, sisterhood and solidarity by deterring men from infringing upon their individual and collective rights (Kumsa, 1997). If the balance between men and women was broken, a *siiqqee* rebellion was initiated to restore the law of God and the moral and ethical order of society. When there were violations of their rights, women left their homes, children, and resources and traveled to a place where there was a big tree called *qilxxu* and assembled there until the problems were resolved through negotiation by elders of men and women (Kumsa, 1997). According to Kumsa (1997, 126),

Married women have the right to organize and form the *siiqqee* sisterhood and solidarity. Because women as a group are considered *halaga* [non-relative] and excluded from the *gadaa* grades, they stick together and count on one another through *siiqqee* which they all have in common . . . in the strange *gosa* [lineage] where women live as strangers, *siiqqee* represents the mother and they even address each other as ‘daughters of a mother.’ They get together regularly for prayers as well

as for other important individual and community matters. If men try to stop women from attending these *walargee* (meetings), it is considered against *safuu*.

Oromo women were respected and considered to have sacred power. As Kumsa (1997, 127) comments, “because of their liminality, women wield a special religious power where they draw an enormous moral and ritual authority. Men, therefore, try to avoid their curse and seek their blessings . . . ‘Women in general are symbolically and politically liminal and correspondingly enjoy special sacred power as a class’ . . . people respect and revere a woman because *Waaq* [God] made her to be respected and revered . . . Interference with a woman’s sacred authority is regarded as violating *seera Waaq* [God’s law] and *safuu*.” A man who violated women’s individual and collective rights could be corrected through reconciliation and pledging not to repeat the mistakes or through women’s reprisal ritual: A group of women “ambush the offender in the bush or on the road, bind him, insult him verbally using obscene language that they would not normally utter in the direct presence of an adult male . . . pinch him, and whip him with leafy branches or knotted strips of cloth. In extreme cases, they may force him to crawl over thorny or rocky ground while they whip him . . . They demand livestock sacrifice as the price to cease their attack. If he refuses, they may tie him to a tree in the bush and seize one of his animals themselves. Other men rarely intervene” (Kelly, 1992, 187). The *gadaa* and *siqqee* institutions greatly influenced the Oromo value system in pre-colonial (pre-1880s) Oromo society.

However, the *gadaa* system excluded women from its politico-military-administrative structures, and they were only married to men in a *gadaa* grade (Kelly, 1992; Kumsa, 1997). At the same time, it prevented the transformation of gender-role-division into gender inequality, and women and men “had a functional interdependence and one was not valued any less than the other” in the system (Kumsa, 1997). Despite the fact that the *gadaa* system was an egalitarian social system, it excluded women from passing through age-sets and generation-sets. This exclusion denied women opportunities to gain knowledge in administrative and military matters. *Gadaa* effectively enforced a gender-based division of labor in Oromo society, although it allowed two equally important separate and interdependent economic domains.

Explaining how the *gadaa* system brought these two domains together by establishing mechanisms of balancing, regulating, and safeguarding these domains, Waqayyo (1991, 8) argues that:

Men have controlled the mobile resources—those that required going out from the homestead—herding, defense of livestock and land, tilling new fields, plowing, etc., women have controlled the stationary resources—the house, the grain and other products of the fields once they are brought into *gotara* for storage, etc. Even the cattle around the house are under their control; women milk them, decide how much milk goes to the calves, how much to the people in the household for drinking, how much for butter or cheese to eat or sell, how much to guests who bring valuable information, become friends in time of need.

How did Oromo democracy affect non-Oromo or immigrants? Discrimination was not allowed between Oromo and non-Oromo under the *gadaa* administration. Everybody was an equal citizen in the Oromo country. Despite the fact that the Oromo claimed that they descended from the same family stock, Oromo, they did not limit their kinships to biological ancestry. The Oromo kinship system was based on a biological and social descent. The Oromo recognized social ancestry and avoided the distinction between the biological and social descent. They had a long history of cultural contacts with non-Oromo through war, economic relationship, marriage, and individual and group adoption (Baxter 1994). When there were wars and conflicts between the Oromo and their neighbors on economic resources such as land, water, trade route, and religious and political issues, the former imposed specific cultural policies to structurally and culturally assimilate the conquered people in order to *Oromoize* them. Oromo laws strictly forbade the distinction between the social and biological descents (Megerssa, 1993).

Baxter (1994, 174) explains that “the adoption of adults, and often all their dependents used to be a common practice, which thereby incorporated them and their descendants into the family, and hence into the lineage [and] clan . . . These practices, though almost certainly widespread and frequent, took place despite the firm ideological contention that descent and inheritance were both rigidly patrilineal. Oromo social theory, like most others, was often very flexible in practice.”

Through the process of group and individual adoption known as *mogaasaa* and *guddifachaa* respectively, non-Oromo were adopted to Oromo *gosa* (confederation of clans), and were structurally and culturally *Oromoized*; these assimilated Oromo traced their descents to Oromo moieties and to the original Oromo (Braukamper, 1980). According to Bulcha (2016, 137), “The famous Oromo *guddifachaa* and *mogaasaa* institutions, the adoption and integration of ‘outsiders,’ reflect [the link among the household, the local community, and the nation]: children and non-Oromo groups were first adopted by families and descent groups to become *gosa* [clan] members. It was through *gosa* membership that they were integrated into the larger collective, nation.” Non-Oromo neighbors who were defeated in war or who wanted to share resource with Oromo groups were adopted to the Oromo *gossa*: “The adopted groups now become collectively the ‘sons’ of *gossa* . . . this arrangement was inspired by political, military and economic considerations, though clearly it is couched in the symbolism of kinship and affiliation” (Blackhurst, 1978, 243).

Oromo egalitarian democracy contradicted other democratic traditions that embrace social stratification based on race/ethnicity, gender and class and opposed their associated ideologies including racism, ethnocentrism, cultural universalism of domination and discrimination. There was only a single standard of law for all peoples who were living under the *gadaa* government.

When did Oromo democracy emerge, and how did it evolve? The Oromo people began to practice their democratic system more than 4000 years ago (Jaaraa and Saaddoo, 2011, 61). At this time, it is impossible to tell exactly when the system started, and how it originally evolved because of the paucity of historical data. Since the Oromo were an oral society, they

did not record the history of ancient *gadaa*. Foreign scholars started to write about the Oromo and their history and culture only in the 16th century. Oromo oral tradition indicates that the original center of *Abbaa Gadaa*, the president of the Oromo assembly known as *caffee*, and the center of *Abbaa Muda*, the leader of Oromo indigenous religion known as *Waaqefannaa*, was Abbaya or Mormor (ancient name for the Blue Nile) until it moved to Odaa Nabee in the 5th century A. D. (OCTB, 2006, 74). A few Oromo branches such as Galan and Yaya settled for many centuries on both sides of the Blue Nile, the northern part of the Shawa Plateau, before the Christian immigrants began arriving between the 11th and 13th centuries (Bulcha, 2016; Hassen, 2015).

The *gadaa* system evolved through the processes known as *cinna* (decentralization based on extended clan families) and *haroomisa* (renewal and reorganization of *gadaa* at national level) (OCTB, 2006). Currently, there is not enough information on the renewal of *gadaa* at Odaa Mormor and its movement to Odaa Nabee, near Finfinnee (central Oromo country). According to Oromo oral tradition, the central *gadaa* system (*caffee*/Oromo assembly) was practiced at Odaa Nabee from 5 century A. D. to 8 century A. D. (OCTB, 2006).

The 8th century A. D. was characterized as the year of *cinna gadaa* and the 1116 A. D. was called the year of *haroomsa gadaa* (OCTB, 2006, 52). “The rise of the Muslim sultanates beginning in the late 10th century and the consolidation of the Christian kingdom after the 13th century as well as the subsequent conflict between these two political forces created a great deal of instability in [Oromo country]. Above all . . . armed clash between the Muslim and Christian states made life very difficult for the Oromo people” (OCTB, 2006, 94-95). Furthermore, between the 13th and 14th centuries, the Oromo people were attacked by Abyssinian Christians from the North and by Muslim Somalis from the South East (Jarraa and Saaddo, 2011). Both groups wanted to dismantle Oromo identity, culture, religion, the *gadaa* system, and to take over the Oromo country. These external pressures created instability that negatively affected the efficient functioning of the *gadaa* system in the Tulama Oromo (Northern Shawa) and instigated the movement of the Oromo towards the south, and the decentralization of the *gadaa* system into clan-based autonomous administrations. These factors facilitated the transfer of the center of the *gadaa* system from Odaa Nabee (near Finfinnee) to Odaa Roba and then to Madda Walaabuu (the stream of liberty), located in Bale.

From around 1316 to 1378, Odaa Roba started to function as the center of an Oromo politico-religious system by replacing Odaa Nabee, and then the center was transferred to Madda Walaabuu in 1450. In the same year, the *Abbaa Muda*, the main Oromo religious figure, moved to Madda Walaabuu (OCTB, 2011). When the Abyssinian Christian kingdom attacked the Tulama Oromo, the Muslim Somali Empire builders also attacked the Oromo branches who were living in the area that is currently called Somalia (OCTB, 2011). After the decentralization of the *gadaa* system at Odaa Nabee because of the external pressure from the Christian kingdom, “the total *gadaa* revival was successfully completed at the Odaa Roba ‘caffee’ center in 1316. It should be noted here that . . . the movement of *gadaa* revival took place at Odaa Mormor, Odaa Nabee, Odaa Roba and Madda Walaabuu shows that two different institutions were working for a common goal. When *gadaa* revival was taking place

at Odaa Nabee, it served as the center of both politics and religion for the Oromo clans living in the area” (OCTB, 2011, 56).

The renewal movement of the *gadaa* system occurred at Odaa Roba in Bale by replacing “Odaa Nabee, which had been a political-religious center for several hundred years before the 14th century,” and “Odaa Roba had become a new holy politico-religious center of the Oromo people at large that had been periodically visited by the various representatives of Oromo groups from all directions for such celebrations like *Jilaa Gada* and *Mudaa*” (pilgrim) (OCTB, 2011, 90-91). Gradually the politico-religious center of Odaa Roba moved to Madda Walaabuu for reasons that are not clear at present. The Bale Oromo living around Madda Walaabu also started to reorganize and consolidate their power starting from 11th century (Jarraa and Saaddo, 2011, 104). The general assembly of Oromo was held between 1518 and 1519 for six months at Madda Walaabuu to discuss and deliberate how to liberate the Oromo country from the Christian and Muslim invaders; delegates from different parts of the Oromo country participated on this assembly (Jarraa and Saaddo 2011). Particularly, the Oromo from Tulama sent delegates of twelve people led by Dachaasa to Odaa Walaabuu (Jarraa and Saaddo, 2011).

The question Walaabuu Jiloo, Abbaa Gadaa of Madda Walaabuu, asked at the general assembly was “*Maal Taana?*” (“What are we going to be?”) After thorough discussions and deliberations for half a year, the assembly defined the enemies of the Oromo people as those Christian and Muslim empire builders who were attacking the Oromo people in their own country to kill them and take their land and other resources and to force them to abandon their culture, religion and identity. The assembly also passed resolutions to mobilize the entire nation to liberate their country (Jarraa and Saaddo, 2011). The Oromo people still have in their memory pool the name Madda Walaabuu because they started their defensive and liberation wars there; it is also believed that the more important renewal and reorganization of the *gadaa* system occurred there.

The history of Madda Walaabuu demonstrates that the most significant revival and reorganization of the *gadaa* institution occurred at the beginning of 16th century. Since the 16th century, the renewal and reorganization of the *gadaa* system involved fundamental changes; these changes included rules, regulations and objectives. There were two main objectives: “Firstly, it was aimed [at] defending the *gadaa* system and the Oromo people from the pressure of Islam. Secondly, the change was sought to reinforce the military power of the people and enable them to regain their old area of settlement lost as the result of the incessant wars of the Christian and Muslim states . . . The changes in...the formulation of new rules and regulations were, therefore actions of paramount importance in order to realize those objectives” (OCTB, 2011, 96). Consequently, the Oromo decided “at least one *Butta* military campaign to be launched every eight years in all directions in order to regain the old settlement areas of the Oromo people who were forced to desert and unite them with their kinsmen that remained behind. [It] was [also] decided to strengthen *Muda* religious pilgrimage made to the seat of the *Qaallu* every eight years” (OCTB, 2011, 96-97). In 1522, the Oromo started their resistance struggle to recover their lost homeland. This was before the Muslims seriously confronted Christian Abyssinia/Ethiopia in 1527.

The Muslims destroyed Christian rule and established their own under the leadership of one Ahmed Gragn for more than a decade in the Horn of Africa. The Oromo were caught in the wars of the Christian and Muslim empire-builders, and according to Darrel Bates (1979, 7), “The [Oromo] . . . had suffered in their time from both parties, and were waiting in the wings for opportunities . . . to recover lands which had been taken from them.” The wars between Christians and Muslims endangered the Oromo’s survival as a people. With the renewal and reorganization of *gadaa*, the Oromo carried out *butta* wars every eight years, when power transferred from one *gadaa* grade to the next. In the beginning of the 16th century, when they began to intensify their territorial recovery through the *butta* wars, all Oromo were under one *gadaa* government. This factor, according to Legesse (1973), and the ability of the *gadaa* system to consolidate the people both militarily and organizationally enabled them to recover their lost territories and accommodate their increased population and stock. Their movement and recovery signaled their survivability (Ta’a, 1986).

The Oromo fought twelve *butta* wars between 1522 and 1618, recovering and reestablishing the Oromo country that is called Oromia today (Ta’a, 1986). In the course of their continued movements and their liberation struggle, different Oromo groups established autonomous *gadaa* governments. Various Oromo groups kept their relations through the office of *Abbaa Muuda* (the father of anointment) (Ta’a, 1986) and formed alliances or confederations during times of difficulty. When we compare Oromo democracy with that of Athens, the former was near egalitarian and more equitable and democratic than the latter. These two cases illustrate that democracy has different forms, and it is also open and contested.

Democracy as an open and contested concept

As the cases of Athenian and Oromo democracies have illustrated above, democracy is socially invented and not automatically given. Depending on a given social system, democracy can be exclusionary and limited or expansive and inclusive of culturally, socially and geographically diverse population groups. James Cairns and Alan Sears (2012) see democracy as “one of those words that gets used so heavily that we do not often pause to think about what it means,” and they consider it as “an open question.”

Without addressing the historical, geographical and sociocultural limitations of democracy, Cairns and Sears suggest that people should engage in the process of “democratic imagination” to expand their knowledge of democracy by relating it to the issues of popular power and self-government, which are the prerequisite for a democratic collective agenda-setting and decision-making. I suggest that in the process of democratic imagination, the historical, geographical, and sociocultural limitation of democracy should be considered and critically examined so that the principles of the collective agenda-setting and decision-making should be inclusive and multicultural by demolishing the barriers of ethno-racial, gender, and class boundaries. Seeing democracy as an open question helps in understanding the contested definitions of democracy in relation to the discourses and practices of race, gender, and class as well as in relation to horizontal relations and egalitarianism. For those classes and ethno-racial groups that control the major political, sociocultural, and economic

institutions, democracy does not involve the collective struggle for popular power, true equality, self-government, and equity for all without class, racial, gender, and other forms of hierarchies and domination.

Scholars such as Beetham (1999) challenge the notion that democracy is essentially a contested concept. Beetham expounds that it is possible to clearly define and understand democracy based on the principles of popular control and human equality. The experiences of many democratic societies such as ancient Athens and modern societies such as Western Europe and North America show that in the name of popular control and equality, slavery and the exclusion of women, noncitizens, and the poor were practiced. We need to stop confusing social reality with ideal types and theoretical claims of modernity and liberalism. Political and social equality has been only a theoretical construct in comparison to social reality in Athenian democracy and classical and contemporary liberal democracy. Without actual equality, egalitarian multicultural democracy cannot be achieved.

For Cairns and Sears (2012), democracy emerges from everyday life and collective action to make institutions responsive to the needs of the people; they use the concept of democratic imagination to criticize liberal democracy and envision popular democracy or democracy from below. Cairns and Sears suggest that the democratic imagination must include a deliberate collective action “to improve the ways that human beings live together.” As we have seen above, despite the fact that Oromo society was not technologically developed, at least for 4000 years, it practiced near-egalitarian and inclusive democracy similar to what Cairns and Sear have imagined about democracy. Cairns and Sears assert that democracy from below aspires to empower all people to achieve collective self-government, attempts to fundamentally change society, and promotes the principle that real power emerges from genuine equity.

Depending on cultural and historical conditions and social and political practices of societies, democratic practices, principles, and institutions emerged, evolved, and developed. Fragmented historical records show that democracy in its different forms emerged in ancient Athens and other societies such as the Oromo, and later in Western Europe and North America. Recent research findings demonstrate that democracy existed in non-Western societies such as that of Oromo although it was suppressed or partially destroyed by colonialism and imperialism. The existence of democracy in Africa before its colonization can be paradoxical for people who do not know the existence of various complex ancient and classical African civilizations.

Looking back historically at the evolution and development of different forms of democracy in the world helps in clearly understanding how the meaning of democracy in its ancient and modern settings has been evolving and expanding for many centuries. Human beings have been collectively striving to improve their lives culturally, socially, economically, technologically, and politically by overcoming the challenges they have been confronting from nature and society. Despite the fact that all pre-class societies lived a subsistence egalitarian life without being oppressed and exploited by their fellow beings, they faced the vagaries of nature because of their technological and economic shortcomings.

With the improvement of the techniques of production or technology and the emergence and expansion of division of labor that accompanied the domestication of plants and animals and the development of agriculture, elites began to develop social control mechanisms and social hierarchies in which power and wealth were unequally distributed. Hunter and gatherer societies, despite the fact that they were poor, prevented the development of oppressive social hierarchies in order to maintain social equality through the process of horizontal organizations and collective decision-making.

Based on more than four decades of ethnological research findings of Anthropologist Richard Lee (1979, 1998), Trigger (2006, 25) notes, “social and political equality in hunter-gatherer societies was not direct expression of human nature. [Lee’s] evidence indicates that hierarchical behavior was actively suppressed in hunter-gatherer societies, where economic and political egalitarianism had great adaptive advantages, as well as in some of the more mobile middle-range societies. Contrariwise, in more complex societies competitive behavior was supported and reinforced by the state.” Although states in the forms of monarchies, oligarchies, tyrannies or dictatorship developed through the processes of command and control and social inequality by maintaining social order, communities such as those of the Athenian and Oromo peoples established forms of democracy to promote their individual and collective interests and rights through their collective decisions. How Athenian *polis* (city-state) and Oromo society practiced limited and egalitarian democracies respectively indicates that the meaning of democracy has been not the same and expanding. According to Markoff (1996, xvi-xvii), “Democracy is not some fixed set of procedures that, once achieved, remains in place unaltered. As long as social movements and governments make democratic claims, democracy will continue to be recreated.” While the rich and powerful classes and ethno-racial groups have struggled to implement limited democracy or dictatorship based on given conditions, progressive individuals and social movements have struggled to practice and expand the meaning of democracy, which includes equity, multiculturalism, and egalitarianism. Without true political equality and equal rights for all people regardless of class, gender, and ethno-racial background or other categories, all people cannot participate in the process of the democratic collective agenda setting and decision-making. Similarly without making collective decisions directly and/or through representatives all people cannot practice popular control of their governments.

The Expanding Meaning of Democracy

The complex histories of Athenian and Oromo democracies illustrate that democracy can be practiced in vertically organized and exploitative societies in which people are organized based on the systems of slavery and stratification of gender and ethno-class as well as in horizontally organized societies in which social inequalities are minimal or nonexistence. In Athens, between 10 and 20 percent of the populations were citizens that practiced democracy, and between 80 and 90 percent of the populations were slaves, noncitizens, women, and children. In Oromo country, all individuals and groups were citizens and non-Oromo groups were structurally and culturally assimilated through individual and group adoption in order to prevent exclusion and discrimination under the democratic rule of law. The *siqqee* institution

protected women's rights, and it allowed Oromo women to have control on their individual and groups rights and to have control of certain economic resources. Oromo democracy was not a perfect political system, and its restoration needs further improvement through renewal and reorganization to further improve it. Some may argue that the process of individual and group adoption forced non-Oromo people to abandon their cultural norms and languages to take that of the Oromo, and women were not elected to be leaders of *gadaa*. Women were also not allowed to enter age-sets and *gadaa*-grades or parties in order to receive informal education and military and leadership training. All these factors had prevented women from competing with men to achieve excellence in different activities.

In order to be a perfect egalitarian democracy, the *gadaa* system should avoid imposing the Oromo culture and language upon non-Oromo and it should allow women to equally participate with men in the *gadaa* system without any discrimination. Furthermore, the practices of democracy should overcome the limitation of cultural specificity and promote egalitarian multicultural democracy.

Democracy may not be perfect, but it promotes the idea that people are the best judges of their own interests. [It], then, becomes, a means to realize the public good because it allows the people to define what that good is, as well as to control the process whereby it is effected in practice. The procedures for doing so will never be perfect . . . The most we can claim, therefore, is that the outcomes of democratic decision-making are more likely to protect people's interests and secure the public good than those of any other decisional procedure (Beetham 1999, 13).

Democracy should ensure the equality and rights of every person and every group. Liberal democracy that allows the rich and powerful classes and certain ethno-racial groups to dominate and control others in name of democracy is a kind of limited or elite democracy. Beetham (1999, 33) argues that democracy should be a system “of decision-making about collectively binding rules and policies over which the people exercise control, and the most democratic arrangements to be that in which all members of the collectivity enjoy effective equal rights to take part in such decision-making directly—one, that is to say, which realizes to the greatest conceivable degree the principles of popular control and equality in its exercise.” The principles of egalitarian multicultural democracy must include: “(1) the moral ideal of individual autonomy; (2) a civic culture appropriate to democracy; (3) the coexistence in demarcated spheres of civil society and public government; and (4) a system of popular, constitutional government based primarily on elective representation but also on direct participation” (Lakoff, 1996, 155).

A successful complete egalitarian multicultural democracy requires the processes of critical education, accommodation, peaceful dispute settlement, and civic culture “that habituates citizens to perform civic duties and to accept democratically determined outcomes. The greatest dangers to democracy arise from failures to achieve the various forms of autonomy and to maintain a balance among them that accords with the practical needs of differing societies” (Lakoff, 1996, xi). The question of individual and group self-determination or autonomy is central to the issue of substantive democracy in the world capitalist system that

has been built by vanquishing the rights of people, except that of the dominant one. The basic premise of equal rights “is the idea of human worth or dignity, and its core value is that of human self-determination or autonomy: being in control of decisions about one’s life, rather than subject to another” (Beetham, 1999, 7). The three dimensions of self-determination or autonomy are individual, plural, and communal (Lakoff, 1996). “The democratic state is the sphere of civic or public authority in which all citizens join together as equals in establishing constitutional rules and addressing common purposes, such as security and the general welfare. The autonomy of the individual is a basic value experienced in both spheres” (Beetham, 1999, 24-25).

In liberal democracy, members of the dominant class and racial group exalt individual autonomy at the cost of communal rights because they have already achieved privileged class and group rights by dominating major institutions including the state, economy, and education. In the name of democratic discourse, the rich and powerful elites deny the class and group rights they enjoy to the powerless classes and groups. The self-determination of a communal entity deals with the self-determination of dominated groups such as an ethno-national group, which aspire to achieve social, economic and political freedoms. Plural autonomy involves accommodating and balancing the various interests of self-determining sub-groups such as linguistic, cultural, religious, ethno-national, and regional groups. Communal self-determination involves sovereignty of every national group.

Without the three dimensions of self-determination—communal, plural, and individual—democracy cannot be implemented fully. In liberal democracy, politics and economics have been artificially separated based on the assumption that citizens can achieve political equality without economic and social equality. Considering the dire consequences of political repression in dictatorial governments, having partial political rights is one step forward to democracy. However, there cannot be true political equality without economic democracy. Beetham (1999) identifies five indispensable elements of liberal democracy: (1) The freedoms of expression, of movement, of association or organization and so on; (2) separation of powers among executive, legislative and judiciary under the rule of law; (3) the election of representative assembly based on a geographical area; (4) the principle of limited government, and a separation between the public and private spheres; and (5) the absence of epistemological premise that there is final truth about what is good for society, and the only criterion for the public good is what people freely decide.

In reality, people only vote for elite political candidates who decide for the people based on technocratic or expert knowledge, and ordinary people cannot control their representatives in liberal democracy. In this democracy, the principles of popular control and self-determination are only a theoretical construct, and those who have money dominate politics, control the media, and decide everything for citizens in countries like the United States.

The classical liberal legacy is against “the control of collectively binding rules and policies by equal citizens” (Beetham, 1996, 36) because classical liberals did not consider all people equal citizens. The propertied class and rich males controlled the government. Classical liberal democracy excluded women from citizenship, and defended the social institutions of

private property and slavery. Although liberal democracy has changed its policies on the issues of women and slavery because of several reasons, still its foundation is based on protecting private property, which has been accumulated through dispossession of indigenous peoples and the exploitation of the labor of the working class. Liberal democracy does not fully recognize that political, economic, social, and cultural rights are elements of democracy. “Democracy in the contemporary age, in sum, has to be understood not only as political democracy, but also as social democracy and as a committedly pluralist democracy as well” (Beetham, 1999, 114). In full democracy, people should be involved in democratic agenda-settings and making collective-decisions through direct action and representation in order to have popular control over their government. If equal members of the relevant bodies or associations make binding collective decisions, these decisions are democratic.

Popular control and political equality are the core principles of democracy . . . They are most fully realized in small groups or associations where everyone has an equal and effective right to speak and to vote on policy in person. In larger associations, and especially at the level of a whole society, whose members have not decided for reasons of time and space to entrust decisions to elected representative, democracy is realized to the extent that they exercise control, not over the decision-making itself, but over the decision makers who act in their place; control is mediated rather than immediate (Beetham, 1999, 5).

In liberal democracy, people have limited control of their representatives and governments because their involvement is limited to elections, which make citizens passive participants in democracy. Effective control over the decision-makers through political equality can be realized by establishing the following procedures: (1) All citizens should have the right to stand for membership of the assembly (local or national); (2) the assembly be subject to regular authorization and accountability by universal equal suffrage; (3) it should itself be representative of the electorate in relevant aspects; (4) it be responsive to a variety of organs of public opinion and citizen bodies; (5) citizens should have the opportunity for political participation directly through membership of political parties, voluntary associations, self-management bodies, neighborhood groups, and so on, and through personal access to their political representatives; (6) they should themselves approve the terms of their surrender of decisional competence to their representatives, and any modification of them, in a referendum (Beetham, 1999, 23-24).

The basic principles for defining democracy are “collective binding rules and policies for any group, from the family or group of friends to larger associations. This sphere of collectively binding decisions, or decisions for a collectivity, is the sphere of the political in the broader sense, and should be distinguished from those individual decisions and personal choices which are not binding for others” (Beetham, 1999, 4). The other principles for definition of democracy should include economic equity and egalitarian multicultural democracy, which can dismantle all forms of social hierarchies. Beetham (1999, 155-156) identified the process of popular control over government into four parts:

- The election of legislature or parliament and the head of government [is the first dimension]. In the electoral process, there must be free and fair elections, inclusiveness of all parties, candidates and voters, and the media in respect of registration or voting, fairness as between parties, candidates and voters, independence from the government, and the respect of the democratic law.
- The principle of open and accountable government is the second dimension of popular control. This control requires continuous openness and accountability of government in addition to free and fair elections. The elected representatives of the people must set agendas and justify their policies through open and democratic deliberations. There must be the *political* accountability of government to the legislature or parliament for the content and execution of its policies; its *legal* accountability to the courts for ensuring that all state personnel, elected and non-elected, act within the laws and powers approved by the legislature; its *financial* accountability to both the legislature and the court. Accountability in turn depends upon public knowledge of what the government is up to, from sources that are independent of its own public-relations machine.
- The third dimension of popular control over government is guaranteed civil and political rights or liberties such as the freedoms of speech, association, assembly and movement, the right to due legal process and so on.
- The arena of civil society is the fourth dimension of popular control over government. The civil society is ‘the nexus of associations through which people organize independently to manage their own affairs, and which can also act as a channel of influence upon government and a check on its powers.

Discussion and Conclusion

Democracy is an open political project in progress. In developing and implementing this project, there is contestation between powerful classes and dominant ethno-racial groups on one side and lower classes and dominated ethno-national forces on the other. In this process, the essence of democracy is achieved through compromise rather than facing a political crisis and perpetual conflict. In the case of Athens, there was a political compromise between the ruling classes and the laborers and poor farmers during the socioeconomic crises. This compromise led to the development of limited democracy. In the case of the Oromo, democracy primarily developed to maintain social equality as well as in response to external political pressures that mobilized the society to establish a popular government by implementing near egalitarian democracy.

Despite the fact that there are different forms of democracy, all of them are better than monarchical, oligarchical, or dictatorial governments because democratic societies accept the democratic rule of law and change their governments through periodic elections without violence or revolutions. Democracy allows people to collectively make decisions about their political and social choices. However, since the majority of people benefit less from liberal democracy, they need to build their progressive social movements and institutions to expand the essence of democracy. The expansion of democracy empowers all citizens in a given country to use their “dispersed knowledge,” which is “the original sources of democracy’s

strength” (Ober, 2008, 2). Unfortunately, as Ober (2008, 1) notes, liberal “political practice often treats free citizens as passive subjects by discounting the value of what they know.”

Liberal democracy excludes the knowledge and experience of ordinary citizens by depending on expert knowledge in formulating policies and making-decisions. The chance of ordinary citizens to be elected as representatives is very limited because of the lack of economic and cultural resources and social capital and networks. The poor in general and the working class, women and minority groups in particular in countries like the United States have only the right to vote for a limited set of candidates from two major parties. Once they have voted for powerful political candidates, they do not have control over them, and the elected politicians manipulate them through the media and expertise knowledge. Therefore, citizens have no popular control over their governments and their right of political equality almost theoretical and not practical. There cannot be true popular control of governments and human equality in societies where citizens do not have their democratic agenda-setting and decision-making power. People need to struggle to integrate their “dispersed and latent technical knowledge with social knowledge and shared values” to overcome the domination of elites and “like-minded experts” (Ober, 2008, 18) who dwarf the effectiveness of democracy.

Democratic societies can only improve their institutions by bringing together their dispersed knowledge and innovations and by challenging the monopolization of power by a small elite or a bureaucracy. This is only possible by creating and building progressive social movements and organizations. According to Cairns and Sears (2012, 4), “The idea that human beings deserve freedom, meaning that they ought to govern their own lives and communities, has indeed emerged from the resistance, in the form of collective action, and not simply the power of idea, that has led to the development of different forms of democracy at key moment in history. Regardless of the particular ways in which democracy is imagined, it is fundamentally about the daily practice of living together as humans. Safeguarding or improving democracy, therefore, involves action in the real world.” Human beings have invented democracies through constant struggles to live together and improve their lives collectively. They also have the knowledge, wisdom and collective capacity to overcome the political game of the ruling classes and dominant ethno-racial groups and to build egalitarian multicultural democracy by minimizing or destroying the ideologies of racism, sexism, and classism as well as other oppressive ideologies. In promoting and building equity and egalitarian multicultural democracy, we can learn a lot from various forms of indigenous egalitarian democracy such as that of the Oromo by going beyond the ideologies and practices of Euro-American centrism and modernity.

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