

# Change and Continuity of Traditional System of Governance: The Case of *Oget* among the *Qebena*, South Ethiopia

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**Abstract:** This study was aimed at assessing the Change and Continuity of Traditional System of governance in Ethiopia taking an example of *Oget* among the *Qebena*, South Ethiopia. Qualitative research methodology was applied to describe its change and continuity in the three regime of Ethiopia. The findings reveal that the *Qebena's* traditional system of governance revived a lot during the current government and contributing a great in maintaining social order and enhancing local economic, social, political and cultural life of the people.

**Keywords:** *Qebena*, *Oget*, Change and Continuity, Traditional governance, Ethiopia

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## I. BACKGROUND OF OGET

Every society has its own way of administering or managing itself beginning from ancient time or early time. The mechanism of the people to administer it may not happen immediately. Due to the fact that, with the absence of education and literacy, there is scarcely written material/records on the existence of such administration system of the people which existed early time. This reality of the world will also become true for the people of the *Qebena*.

The *Qebena* people have long been known in having traditional institution which has different level of authority. The village(keye),the clan(Debo), the Bobbeny (include all *Qebena*).The *Qebena* people discuss and solves problems related with their economic,social,political and traditional /customary way of life by formulating rules and regulations by its assembly or gathering .This assembly or Council of elders' of *Qebena* is known as *Oget*.The Assembly, which is the representatives from all thirty nine clans of *Qebena*,is responsible for the implementation of rules and regulation. The word *Oget* is *Qebena* word which means in *Qebenigna*,Tepi'iti or Bergensheta or chimiti<sup>1</sup> means gathering for a discourse on some issue. All rules and regulations which formulated in this assembly are equally implemented by all *Qebena* people regardless of their wealth and other status. This rules and regulations are commonly known as *Bobbeny Galtita*"/*Qebenni Bobbeny Galtita*"<sup>2</sup> which is the customary law of the *Qebena*.It was gradually derived from Islamic Sharia law,Quran(QDA,1987EC).

With regard to the time of establishment of *Oget*, the informants could not come to a consensus on the period, with the exception of few elite.

Based on the information gathered from informants, the origin of *Oget* is not precisely known. But they give different interpretation of *Oget* establishment. Accordingly, One of the informants<sup>3</sup>said,*Oget* was established around 700 years back by connecting the history of the people with its traditional system of administration. The *Qebena* and Alaba left Harar and went to Bale (around Shirka Gedeb) in which this peoples had had their own traditional administration system. The response of the informant may be substantiated by the present reality in their respective locality especially in naming this indigenous institution .Today, these people's uses the same word, *Oget* and Ogate in *Qebena* and Alaba for this indigenous institution respectively. It might have began before the separation of *Qebena* and Alaba at Mafed<sup>4</sup>.The *Qebena* and *Alaba* separated around 1815.A.D (Braukamper, 1973).based on this, it might began long before 19<sup>th</sup> c.

But Most of the informant stated *Oget* was initiated by Hassen Enjamo,who was the leader of Independent State of *Qebena*, beginning from the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> C.The most important factor that said have for the beginning of this Indigenous institution at that time was the expansionist policy of Menelik II.It was at this time that Hassen Enjamo mobilized the people to discuss how to maintain their territorial independence, religion and how to defend this external forces and finally to declare war of Jihad against the Central government. It was

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<sup>1</sup> .informant like Haji Nureidin,Musema Bedewi,Haji Bulbula, Emam Ahmed ,Haji Ahmedelhadi Seid ,Shiek Ahmed

<sup>2</sup> .QDA,1997EC;Tariku,2011

<sup>3</sup>.Informant,Musema Bedew

<sup>4</sup>.Informant(Haji Nureidin Kedir),a place where today Enemor,but other informant( like Emam Ahmed and Haji Ahmedelhadi Seid, Alaba and *Qebena* separated at Mugo,regarding the specific time for the separation ,Braukamper(1973) in 1815 A.D.

said Hassan used to gather all peoples of *Qebena* from all areas where *Qebena* resides in two places (areas). His seat or political center was at Sa'ba now in Muhur and Aklil Woreda of Gurage zone. He used to gather the people of *Qebena* from different part of the states at that time in two places/Kebeles (Dekenshimolla and Hijira Gerbaja).

The first political gathering was took place at Dekenshimolla<sup>5</sup> Kebele, one of the twenty three Kebeles of the district today. Initially it was in Shefat village under Aba Gurach Shelichu but latter on shifted to Dekenshimolla village under Sa'aba tree<sup>6</sup>).

The second gathering place was at Hijira-village under Lega and Wanza tree, it was formerly known as Gerbaja, but latter on become Hijira<sup>7</sup> (flight) because Hassen Enjamo, made a flight from Saba to this Kebele connecting the flight of prophet Mohammed (Peace be up on him) from Mecca to Medina by the advice of his Sheik<sup>8</sup> Abdulaziz and Sheik Zeynie from Wollene and Wollo, respectively. It was after this time that Hassen Enjamo declared Jihad against Menelik II opposing the incorporation of *Qebena* state under the latter.

But this day the meeting place is not specific, rather it always took place in different Peasant Association monthly because of two factors<sup>9</sup>:

- ✓ There is a great difference between people of the previous time and this day, at that time people were very dedicated to their people, had horse, mule, power, and they were also courage as a result they move for their community a very distant area/Kebeles. But peoples of today are lazy/has no power and less dedicated for their community. So, it is difficult to call them to come /gather to specific area as time of Hassan Enjamo.
- ✓ The changing of place also has its own advantage in two ways:
  1. To minimize misdemeanor (misconduct) in the respective locality.
  2. The people of different locality will inform each other. eg. The case of harmful traditional activities at this time.

One of my informants<sup>10</sup> said that Hassan Enjamo began *Oget* after he become the member of Gogot<sup>11</sup>. In this regard and connecting the establishment of *Oget* with Gogot, the informant, stated:

*"Gogot was established during the time of Zara Yacob, he organized the people of Gurage (who were originally the people of south), under Abegaz Sebehat who was from, North (Tigran) at Muhur, the initial members of Gogot were Siltie, Eneqor, Wuriro, Mesqan, Wollene, Gedebano, and Dalocha. The objectives of Zara Yacob in organizing this seven groups of Gurage was to attack and destroy Muslim Hadiya (i.e Qebena). But later on, when Hassen Enjamo came to power in 19<sup>th</sup> C. in Qebena and heard about the unity of the group asked to Fitawrari. Hamdino Sugato from Wuriro. this organization is to attack and destroy me, how you, my brothers isolated me? Then Fitawrari Hamdino, said to Hassen Enjamo oh!, sorry we forgotten you, now you can meet us by signing our agreement then Hassen said to Fitawrari Hamdino, my brothers are left at Alaba, Fitawrari. Hamdino said bring them, Hassen went to Alaba and Emam Anodo, came representing Alaba, finally both Fitawrari Hamdino and Hassen Enjamo representing Alaba and Qebena respectively signed the agreement and included within the formerly signed and formed member of Gogot increasing the number of the group to nine."*<sup>12</sup>

Even he added that when Menelik II, an expansionist from central, set out an attack on the southern states for which was aimed at incorporating into central government, the nine group who signed the former agreement were against Menelik II force like at the battle of Jebdu in 1889. From this time onwards the Sebat bet, The *Qebena*, and the Wollene were incorporated into the central government. According to an informant, only, we *Qebena* left in the North having *Oget*, and the rest member of former Gogot used Sera<sup>13</sup> for their traditional system of administration.

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<sup>5</sup>. It is *Qebenigna* word which derived from two *Qebena* words Dekenshi and Molla, "*Dekenshi*" means meeting and "*Molla*" means an area or field or a place where meeting took place.

<sup>6</sup>. informant Mohammednur Muzemil

<sup>7</sup>. It is an Arabic word means flight or movement from one place to another

<sup>8</sup>. an Islamic title given to religious scholars of Islam

<sup>9</sup>. Haji ahmedel hadi

<sup>10</sup>. informant, Hajji Ahmedelhadi Seid

<sup>11</sup>. *Gogot* means in Siltigna language alliances for waging war between ethnic group (Ronny meyer, citing Hussein Mohammed, 1997:813) in Encyclopaedia Aethiopia, V.2, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005, p:828) For Denberu. It was originated after a unity-treaty or assembly of several Gurage groups. Denberu et al, 1987EC:218).

<sup>12</sup>. hajji Ahmedel hadi

<sup>13</sup>. it is a word that different societies of the south explain or manifest their traditional administration system. (Alebachew, 2010; citing Bahru and Pausang, 2006).

In contrary to the above, Denberu et al. 1987 EC, Gurage were one of the Ethiopian ethnic group who affected by the crisis of Zemene Mesafint quarreling (war) on the use of cattle raiding, usage of land (boundary issue) and religious campaign among themselves and with neighboring ethnic group (Denberu et al. 1987:216).

In the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> c, Menelik II began his expansion to South and South East Ethiopia. The feud of the people helped him to subdue this group. Here, it is the importance of peace assembly was necessary and Solla Oda, a man from Sodo Kistane persuaded most of the Gurage and succeeded in unifying them to take part a peace assembly of all Gurage –speaking groups at mount Zebidar but Siltie and Mesqan, probably at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> c. The assembly was named Gogot (ibid. 219).

Another informant<sup>14</sup> suggested, *Oget* normally began before Hassen Enjamo during the time of Emam Bekisa, when Emam Bekisa imprisoned Hassen Enjamo, claiming the latter abnegated the Gurage. It is this time that famous leaders and heroes of *Qebena* began to discuss by gathering the way how they could remove Emam Bekisa from his power. Finally they succeeded in dethroning him by coup d'état by burning his house and elected Hassen Enjamo as Emam.

Even if there is disagreement between informant and literature on the date of beginning of Gogot, that is the cause for the beginning of traditional institution of *Qebena*, *Oget* as the informant, what makes them similar is that it began before 19<sup>th</sup> c. As to some informant, before *Oget*, there was a group of people who administer, the people that was similar to present day of cabine. The people of *Qebena* beginning from the population movement of 13<sup>th</sup> c. had strong political base and administered by Islamic Sharia law known as Bobbeny Hukme<sup>15</sup> to solve its own problem (economic, social, and political). But after they settled in the Sebat - bet area before their settlement to their present day, this cultural administration system began to mix with them and other neighboring ethnic group as the result of cultural interactions (QDA, 1994:59).

The nature and role of *Oget* for the society under different political system of Ethiopian government based on the data collected during field and some literature are as follows.

#### ***Oget during the reign of Emperor Menelik II***

As pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, most of the informants<sup>16</sup> confirm that *Oget* established in the time of Menelik II by Hassan Enjamo. The major function of *Oget* during this time was mobilizing people for jihad against central government. For every aspect of the society's problem. Hassen Enjamo had his advisee or sheiks (Abdul-Aziz of Wollene<sup>17</sup> and Zeynie<sup>18</sup> of Wollo) for any decision regarding to any mention problem of the communities. So, at the time of Hassen Enjamo, the Sharia law had its own dominance than traditional administration.

After receiving letter from Sudanese governor<sup>19</sup>, that inspired Hassen Enjamo to declare war against Shown government, Hassen Enjamo, went to Wollene to talk about the issue and finally they Hassan with the two sheiks reached an agreement to declare war on central government and went to Ziyara (pilgrimage) to Gerbaja, imitating the flight of prophet Mohammed (Peace Be Upon him) from Mecca to Medina in 622 (Worku, 1991). It was said Hassan mobilized a jihadist from *Qebena*, Gurage, Wollene and other Muslim areas<sup>20</sup> different conflict took place and initially Hassan Enjamo had an upper hand over the Shown leader but finally Hassan Enjamo was defeated by the forces of central government at the Battle of Jebdu Meda in 1889 (QDA, 1983).

There were two types of policy towards states incorporated and subjugated. In areas where ruler's submitted peacefully to the central government, the rulers were retained, no property looting, low tax. But in areas of resistance and incorporated by force the treatment was harsh, heavy tax levied, appointment of rulers from north. The Muslim petty state of *Qebena* under Hassen Enjamo, submitted in to the central government after fierce resistance. As a result, the response of Menelik to *Qebena* people was very harsh.

After the Battle of Jebdu Meda, a new structural development (neftegna-gabbar)<sup>21</sup> relationship in which most of the *Qebena* lost their land to the naftagna. Even if *Qebena* lost administering his own land, traditional system of governance was practiced<sup>22</sup>. The gabar neftegna system which began in the reign of Menelik continued

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<sup>14</sup>. informant Emam Ahmed

<sup>15</sup>. It is customary law adopted from Sharia law in which the *Qebena* used to use for his administration different purpose beginning from 13<sup>th</sup> c. (QDA, 1996).

<sup>16</sup>. Informant like Hajji Hassen Nuga, Emam Hayatu, Abdulhay Nuga, Haji Nuredin, Haji ahmedelhad,

<sup>17</sup>. The former teacher or ustaz and advisee of Hassen Enjamo for any administration regarding to Sharia law.

<sup>18</sup>. Shiek Zeynie of wollo migrated to *Qebena* with a group of people after Yohannes' declaration of religious council of Boru Meda.

<sup>19</sup>. Seyyid Teyib, was the leader of Mahdist Movement in 1880s who sent a messenger to Hassen Enjamo, whose name was Mohammed (a hadiya origin live in Sudan) and this movement inspired Hassen's ambition (worku, 1991 and also in Getnet, 1992)

<sup>20</sup>. external forces from Muslim areas of Ellubabor, Ifat, Arssi, and Argoba, (QDA, 1987 EC, p:97).

<sup>21</sup>. A land lord tribute payer's relation ship

<sup>22</sup>. QDA, 1996, *Woma*

even in the time of Haile sellasie. The administration system of Haile sellasie was centralized and the treatment of Haile sellasie to indigenous governance was very strict and highly limited.

#### **Oget and military regime**

The reign of Derg ruled Ethiopia for seventeen years .It was imposed absolutism and central rule from Marxist- Leninist ideology. Democratic ideology was unthinkable and administration was by force. The 'revolutionary approach' of the Derg government, by grounding itself in a negation of the socio-cultural order of local societies, produced a serious rupture in patterns of leadership and authority. It prevented local people from combining their traditional cultural commitments with new ideas and practices of development and administrative reform. It created a revolutionary bureaucratic command structure that became the conduit of totalitarian policy, by passing local needs and sensibilities. <http://webcache.google>,date of accessed 26/07/2012. One of my interviewee<sup>23</sup> who was eye witness of Derg regime, stated the situation like this one

*“Until I know Oget set out in the time of Hassan Enjamo for jihad against Menelik,the condition, type and function of Oget is continuously changing from time to time based on the change of government. Initially it was for jihad, but latter in the time Derg regime, such type of gathering was not allowed, and there was no question of right .people fear for them, if a man had boy/young he was enforced to give his boy for Zemechas or for military and they were subjected to involuntary displacement to leave out from their house saying ‘Meseret’. But the situation changed after the coming to power of EPRDF.Here, People get their right to administer themselves through their representatives and which also gave the opportunity for the people to engage in development aspects and enjoy’s the fruits of development and as a result allows development of such indigenous government because they minimize loads of its responsibility in different ways”.*

In the pre-text of Ethiopian Tikidem (Paulos, 2005) and its radical modernization drive, the Derg succeeded, more than Haile Sellassie ever did, in removing the traditional chiefs from the political arena, replacing them with peasant-association chairmen, a new style of politicized and dependent local leadership was substituted .<http://webcache.gdate> of access 20/03/2012.under the reign of Derg not only indigenous institution of governance but also the ethnic identities were under suppressed (Paulos,2005).

#### **Oget and EPRDF**

The incumbent government came to power in 1991 after the struggle of all Ethiopian people under the leader of TPLF.According to Article 39 of the Constitution of FDRE,a new constitution, which gave right for nations and nationalities of Ethiopian people including self –determination(FDRE,1995).With this right, the *Qebena* people who have strong feeling of having been suppressed and subjugated through decades of external political domination become one of the beneficiaries of Federal structure of the present government, began to raise self- administration question in the early period.

The functions of indigenous institution and cultural practices of, for instance; *Oget* of the *Qebena* people began to revive and exercise more freedom. The elders of *Oget* council having been given a freedom raised self–determination question and widening their scope for the development of the society. The elders established Development Association (*Qebena* Development Association in 1984EC.

With the changing of the world with globalization, the socio, economic, cultural values of society is also changing continuously.

#### **Dynamic Contribution of this traditional governance, Oget**

With social change, the traditional roles of the *Oget* of the *Qebena* also changing and it seek to be incorporated into developmental activities. In its current situation *Oget* is charge of participating in different activities in the following area:

**HIV:** In the recent time *Qebena* were not given an emphasis for a couple while marriage took place. But now no elders will entwines the Nikha, before testing whether the partners are free or not from this disease.

**Female Mutilation:** As culture our society used to mutilate the girls. Mutilation of Female which is a harm full traditional activity was being adopted and practiced among the *Qebena* without having any base /reason in terms of religiously and other aspects of the society. On this issue, Haji Taju, the teacher or Ustaz and Emam of Fikado Mesjid, state that:

*‘The circumcision practices not obliged even in religiously, but cutting the tip of the clitoris will reduce her sense and makes her to have ‘adab’/silent her. But cutting in more than the tip will be harm and dangerous to the girl.’*

Enhancing status of women: Customarily male children were entitled to their father’s property especially when they are about to break-off from the family to start their own homes.Previously, in contrarily to male the women’s were not entitled for such right. But now, it is changed and women can share their deceased parents’ property. This is the result of the attitudinal change of *Oget* elders for equality of sex.it also increases their status.

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<sup>23</sup> .informant (Emam Hayatu)

### Promotion of Modern Education

In the past, the community was not aware of the role of education in general and girls' education in particular. Formerly the society gave an emphasis for only traditional Islamic education. But now the level of awareness of the community about the value of modern education is increased and all parents will send their children to school regardless of their sex (informant). As a result, the rate of enrolment has shown a remarkable increase for the last ten years.

For instance the increment of enrolled number of student in the Woreda in 1992 EC was 4,490 of these 2400 male and 2090 Females. But in the 2003 academic year these number is increased 10, 829, of these 5794 male and 5034 females (QWAO, 2003).

The change is possible with the combination of various factors among which the decision of the traditional council of *Oget* that called for community commitment for modern education. According to Hajji Ahmedel hadi, an informant:

*Today the council will control the communities schooling through members of elders of council at each locality. Oget elders levied a punishment of 500 birr on those who sent their children to the cities. This will be managed and controlled through Qeye Balike/village elders at each village level".*

### Using Punishment money for development activities

As the researcher himself observed in each council in different Kebeles there have been punishment money which collected from the misdemeanors, collected money from those who violate the rules and regulations of *Oget*. According to hajji Ahmedel hadi, one of the most known elders of *Qebena* said

*'The Qebena elders used to collect money as a punishment from misdemeanors slaughter bulls, heifer, lamb and calf but now no one do this, the money that collected from punishment will be under the cashier and when doing things become necessary we will give it for administrators of the Woreda. Then they will use it for different development. For instance, in 2003EC, we have granted a total 15,000birr for Qebena Development Association, when symposium of the Qebena, culture, language and history prepared.'*

#### ➤ Saving

Council of *Oget* began banning unnecessary extravagances which is setback for the development of a nation. Prohibiting the preparation of the lavish bride wealth on the occasion of marriage (wedding ceremonies) and Arefa (ajawoja<sup>24</sup>) by preparing various rules and regulations that guides the society. For instance, the amount of bride payment to wed-locking or Nikha decreased to 50 birr from 600 birr.

### Critics of *Oget*

Traditional administration is one the earliest institutions in both in our continent and in the rest of the world and it represents earlier form of social organization. The researcher pointed out the critics and challenges of this indigenous institution of *Qebena*, *Oget* for the society.

### Exclusion of females from the participation in *Oget*

Gender relations in Africa in general, and women's participation in decision-making in particular, vary from one community to another and it is not clear how much of the variation is associated with differences in the traditional political systems that prevail on the continent (ECA, 2007). Similarly, Gender issue becomes the central to development policies for the socio-cultural attribution of the society (Tebarek, 2007; Citing world bank, 1992). Their number, For instance, according to the CSA, 2007, Female constitute about half of Ethiopia population and it is also true for *Qebena*. Females can play a greater role in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the society, but in practical sense their role in this indigenous system of administration, especially participation in formulating, implementing customary law of the *Qebena* is nothing (Muzemil, 2000). i.e. it simply marginalized them from the participation.

As far as, Bobbeny Ada, customary law of *Qebena* has great potential in the society's life. Its contribution and value is being modified and changing due to dynamics of the world, which also influenced locally. With this changing environment, the customary law is being changing. Here, there is yet no *Qebena* females who participated in modification or formulation of the customary law of *Qebena* (Bobbeny Ada) though the rules and principles are practical for all clans and sex of the society (ibid). Consequently, they are less beneficiary when compared with male counterpart especially at the level of decision making.

### The Challenges of *Oget*

**Lack of permanent financial sources:** This indigenous institution certainly has a low financial resource base. This is a development constraint to sustainability of the organization and implementation of their programmes. It is vital that any capacity building process incorporates financial capacity building. For instance according to the secretary of *Oget*, hajji Alemu

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<sup>24</sup>. It is the process of going of couple with their children to the house of their parents as visiting the following day of Arefa. These families will give some amount of money as *hirifo* or gift (mostly ranges from 1 birr to 20 birr) to the father and mother but they consumes more than what they give. But now this activity is being prohibited by *Oget Assembly*.

*'We don't have any fixed financial source. The only source is obtained from punishment misdeanor. As a principle we have decided each clan members has to contribute 5 birr per year through their chiefs or clan leader yet we haven't began collecting it.'*

**The effects of globalization:** The globalization process poses a challenge as well to the ethnic culture contained within each nation. It frequently invades and transforms the forms of indigenous culture which were established by ethnic groups and nations. When successful, the cultural contact of internationalization promotes mutual understanding among discrete nation-states and ethnic groups, and while certain transformations in each culture might coincidentally result, the process of internationalization itself is possible without such transformations. The process of globalization, however, tends to be incompatible with the maintenance of indigenous cultures.):<http://www.Qebena> as a nation or society of the world cannot escape from such influence of global interconnection.

**The dying of known elders:** According to the informant and the eye witness of the researcher, each time an old man or women dies a libraries is lost. Since the history, culture of the people is not recorded, but recorded in the elders as oral tradition.

**Others like:** Lack of military power to enforce in case for disobediences as it is a consented rule implemented by social sanction not force. Lack of Permanent Office, efficient logistics, communication, transportation, furniture, written and well organized recorded documents are the challenges for this indigenous institution as they are seen by the researcher.

## II. CONCLUSION

The findings from this study shows that there is a great change and improvement in terms of recognition of the contribution of this indigenous governance with the coming to power of the current government, hence a duality in governance and supplementing each other to an effective and sustainable change at local level, where both formal and indigenous institutions are co-existing. Formal state institutions are coexisting positively with their indigenous counterparts.

In *Qebena, Oget* elders has roles to mobilizing the population for any development projects designed by the government including sustainable development goals, the Millennium Development Goals and the Growth and Transformation Plans and dynamic development issues like Females, HIV, modern education and saving.

### Recommendations

- The *Oget* institution's knowledge and practices need to be recognized and given full support in order to attain sustainable development and ensure economic and socio-cultural development. Hence, there is a need to empowering rural communities by promoting awareness of the values of their institutions and their stakes in democratic process and peace-keeping and protecting cultural diversity.
- Females constituted more than half of the population in the study area (50.2%). However, as most indigenous institutions do, females are not allowed to participate in the indigenous institution of *Qebena- Oget*, and no female member represented in the council's of elders. Thinking development without the involvement of females is unthinkable. Therefore, enhancing their participation in this indigenous system of administration is important and necessary.

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