

# The Significance of Indigenous Knowledge and Institutions in Forest Management: A Case of Gera Forest, in Southwestern Ethiopia

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**Abstract:** *Indigenous/customary knowledge that once considered as “traditional”, backward, and inefficient has been started to be seen as rational response to local environmental conditions. Many researchers have argued that sustainable natural resource management cannot be realized without considering the perceptions and culture of local people living in or near the resources. This article, therefore, endeavors to contribute the significance of local perceptions and customary institutions of local people to Forest Management with particular reference to Gera Forest Priority Area of Jima Zone, Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia. The study was based on the field research conducted in Gera district for two months. Different tools of data gathering mechanisms were employed; structured and unstructured interviews, focused group discussions, and observation were utilized in order to obtain relevant and reliable data. The findings of the study revealed that the perception of local people about ecological, economic and socio-cultural values of forest in the study area were remarkable. The study also indicated that customary institutions of the local people have played a significant role in forest management. Moreover, this article implied the importance of incorporating perceptions and existing customary institutions of resource users by policy makers during the formulation forest management policies.*

**Keywords:** local perception, customary institutions, indigenous knowledge, forest

## 1. Introduction

Traditional (conventional) approach to natural resource management in general and common pool resources like forests in particular has been subject to criticism as it failed to alleviate resource degradations and deforestation. Many scholars from the different disciplines of social sciences have tried to demonstrate the limitations of top-down approach which totally disregards traditional local knowledge and indigenous rights of local people who have had historical connection with their resources. Top-down approach to resource management dominated the world, especially developing countries until 1980s. The paradigm shift involved in the reconceptualization of "development" as individual and community fulfillment requires not only greater devolution of power and authority to the local community level but also greater validation of traditional or popular knowledge. It has been noted that when local or popular knowledge and modern (scientific knowledge systems) meet, the latter tends to suppress the former, either by denying its existence or validity or by incorporating it without any acknowledgment (Howes and Chambers, 1980). Hence, in the last decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century, political ecologists and common property theoreticians strongly challenged the conventional approach and influenced the minds of many stakeholders towards the advocacy of community-based management approach to resources as an alternative. Ignoring the knowledge, institutions and livelihoods of the local people has been found to be the major problem that has hindered the implementation of effective common pool resources management (see Ostrom 1990).

In Ethiopia too, natural resource management like forests has been under the monopoly of the government, and as a result, the state has been accounted as stewardship in forest management and its conservation. This has posed a problem in forest management from the emperors' era up to the

present government. This has never stopped the depletion of forest resources and the forest has increasingly been deteriorating. Besides, local forest users have been alienated from the resource use. The protectionist approach of forest management has adverse effect on both the resources and the people who depend on the forest for their domestic subsistence.

Discerning the problem of protectionist approach, management approach to resources like forests has been undergoing paradigm shift towards the ends of 20<sup>th</sup> and in the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century in developing countries. Decentralizations of power, participatory management approach, considering indigenous institutions, rights and perceptions are some to mention. Ethiopia is not unique in this regard at least at discourse level although its realization has been questioned. The concept of institution has been forwarded by some scholars depending on either formality of the rules or levels of operation. North (1990) is the most frequently cited author in this regard. According to North, institutions can be categorized into formal and informal relying on the idea of “formality of the rules”. Recently, informal institutions can be used interchangeably with customary institutions, indigenous institutions, and ‘traditional intuitions’ with insignificant change in meaning unless it is politicized. North (1990) also classified institutions into local and beyond local depending upon the levels of organizational operations. Rules at local level are operational ones. Since the term ‘local’ is relative concept, in the context of this study it refers to institutions both at community level (customary institutions) and district (local government organizations) levels. Thus, in this section, the nature of customary institutions and formal institutions are discussed in relation to their contribution to sustainable forest management.

This article, therefore, endeavored to explore the significance of local knowledge and institutions in forest management in relation to subsistence mechanisms of local people. The focus of the study was Gera Forest Priority Area, Jimma zone of Oromiya regional state. Different tools of data gathering mechanisms were employed; structured and unstructured interviews, focused group discussions, and observation were utilized in order to obtain relevant and reliable data.

## 2. Background of the Study Area

### Location and Climate

This study is concerned with the management of Gera Forest Priority Area, 150,000ha in size (JFCEC 1998), found in Jimmaa zone of Oromia Regional State. The forest consists of two disjoint forests, namely Gera Forest and Belete Forest situated in *Gera* and *Seka-chokorsaa* districts respectively. Hence, Gera Forest area is the focus of this study. Gera Forest is situated in Gera district, Jimma Zone of Oromiya Regional State, Ethiopia. It is about 430 km away from Addis Ababa, the capital of the country, and 93km far away from Jimma, the administrative center of Jimma Zone, in Southwestern direction (See Fig. 3.1 and Fig.3.2 for the location of Gera and Jimma zone). Gera district has a total land area of 14430ha within which 29 rural *Ganda* administrations and one urban *Ganda* are situated.

Information regarding land use system indicates that 56 percent of the total area of land in Gera district has been covered by natural forests. The remaining 25.39 percent is farmland and 5 percent is grazing land, whereas uncultivable land, arable land but not cultivated yet, and land reserved for construction comprises 2.99, 4.87, and 1.88 percents respectively and natural coffee covers about 3.89 percent of the total land area in Gera district.

According to the data from Gera district Information Office, Gera district is bordered by Shabe Sombo district to the east, Gomma district to the north, Guma, Setema and Sigimo districts share borderlines to the west, and SNNPR demarcates to the south (see map of Jimma zone in fig. 3.3). The altitude of the district ranges from about 1400m to 3000m above sea level. It has three climatic zones that can be categorized as *Baddaa* (highland), *Badda-daree* (mid-altitude), and *Gammoojjii* (lowland) which constitute about 46.11, 50.19 and 3.7 percents respectively of total land area in the district. The area is characterized by humid climate of heavy annual rainfall that ranges from 1800mm to 2084mm, and the mean annual temperature lies between 14<sup>0</sup>c and 24<sup>0</sup>c.

### Soil Type

According to the study carried out in Gera forest priority area by (JFCEC 1998), the types of soils in the study area are generally fine textured. *Nitisols* and *Cambisols*, often more than 100cm deep, occur in areas with gentle slopes and forest cover. *Leptosols* are found on mountain peaks, steep slopes and stream banks where soil is shallow (less than 30cm deep). *Luviosols* dominate in depressions such as marshes and low lands along rivers.

### Water Resources

Furthermore, the district is endowed with many streams of water fall which are situated in different *Gandaa Administrations* of the area. These waterfalls include; ketch kimo in Gaara Naso kebele which is found 15km away from *Chira*; *Deda I and Deda II* in *Ganji-Caalla Gandaa* located 2km away from Chira, *Naso Bodiya* found in *Sadiloya Gandaa*; *Asebo* in *Gure Daco Gandaa*, *Hono kilo*, *Hareri* and '*Loogaja*' in *Timba Gandaa*.

Gera district has also ample rivers that flow throughout the years without interruption. This might be attributed to the suitable climatic conditions prevailing in the district as a consequence of relatively dense natural forest resources found in the district. Some of the rivers in the district include; *Dacho*, *Naso*, *Cherico*, *Andaracha*, *Etta Naniya*, *Gicho* and *Bore*. Mountains like *Waara kimbibit* and *Timba* are also the other resources of the district. The district has also been endowed with natural caves such as *Biche Wara* caves, *Amushe* in *Secha Gandaa*, *Kol-kata* in *Gara- Naso Gandaa*, and *Choroto* in *Timba Gandaa*.

### Vegetations and wildlife

Gera forest is one the remnants of broad leaf moist forest in Ethiopia. Vegetation like *Bakkanniisa*, *Kereyo* (*Polyscias ferruginea*), *Kararo* (*Aningeria adolfi friedertel*), *Baddeessaa* (*Acacia nubica*), *Ibicha* (*Vernonia amygdolina*), *Buttoo* (*Schefflera abyssinica*), *Sonboo*, *Sesa*, *Omi/Omacheessaa* (*Pygeum africanum*), *Birbirsaa*, *Getema*, *heexoo*, *Waddeessaa* (*cordial africana*) and *Hambabeessa* (*Albizia gummifera*) are some of the most common species of trees found in the area.

Within the dense natural forest, there are some wild animals that are most probably under threat by different human activities carried out either in or near the forest of Gera district. The major wild lives in the study area include: Lion (*Leenca*), Buffalo (*gafarsa*), Colobus monkey (*Weennii*), Vervet monkey (*Qamalee*), leopard (*Qeerransa*), Warthogs (*karkaroo*), Bush pigs (*booyyee*), Porcupine (*dhaddee*), Civet Cat (*xirinyii*), Fox (*sardida*), Antelopes (*kuruphee*), bush buck (*bosonu*), hyena (*warabeessa*), anubus baboon (*jaldeessa*), and ant-eater (*awwaaldiigessa*). Elephants have disappeared with the disturbance of the forest.

### Research Site

*Ganji-Caalla* is one of the 29 rural Gandas in Gera district. This *Ganda* is situated adjacent to *Chira* town, the locus of district administration, and the administrative center of *Ganji-Caalla* is located to the east of *Chira* at not more than 1.5km distance. This ganda is named *Ganji-Chaalla* after combining two Gandas, *Ganji* and *Caalla* as one Ganda in 1999.

According to the information from Administration of Gandaa Office, *Ganji-Chaalla* has a total inhabitant of 2945, out of which 1578 individuals are males and 1367 are females. The data from the office also confirmed that there are about 440 households, as the local people call it, *Abbawarraas*. Out of those *Abbawarraas* only 32 of them are female headed

where as the remaining 408 are male headed households. This dominance of males implies the significance of gender differences and its contribution to the development of socio-economic activities of the area.

There are different ethnic groups residing in *Ganji-Caalla Ganda*. Oromo ethnic group constitute majority, which is 75 percent of the total inhabitants whereas *Amhara* is the second largest ethnic group comprising 22.5 percent. Concerning religious background, there are different religious groups of which Muslims are the dominant, encompassing 74.73 percent of the total population in *Ganji-Callaa Ganda*. Christians come the second comprising 21.73 percent of *Ganji-Caalla*. The remaining are some other religion followers like protestant (*Ganji-Callaa Ganda* Administration office).

The total area of land in *Ganji-Caalla Ganda* is estimated to be about 4010.75 hectares. In proportion, more than half of the land area in the *Ganda* is covered by natural forest *baddaa duudaa* (dense forest) and/or *bosona haphataa* (degraded forest). Hence, a dense and degraded natural forest constitutes 728 and 1455 hectares of land areas respectively. The remaining 1827.75 hectares of land area is occupied by *qe'ee* (homestead) and *lafa qonnaa* (farmland).

The *Ganda* has been categorized into three zones whereas each zone is also divided into Garees. Each Garee is again divided into homestead (*qe'ee*) then household (*Abbaawarraa*).

### Socio-economic Background

Although there are some other ethnic groups residing in the study area, Oromo are predominantly the permanent dwellers for a long period of time. The historical foundation of Oromo in Gera district may be traced back to the Oromo occupation of Gibe region in the sixteenth century. The Oromo in this area belong to *maccaa* Oromo branch of *Maccaa-Tuulama* division who expanded originally from *Madda-waalabuu* to southwest and west parts of what we call today 'Oromiya Regional State'. As Mohammad (1994) indicates, Oromo pastoralists first arrived in Gibe region in 1570s. When they arrived in the area for the first time, they were unable to take maximum advantage of economic potential of the new environment. It was mainly after the transformation of their mode of production from pastoralism to sedentary agriculture that they were able to do this. They changed their political institutions, ideology, and mode of production to meet the demands of new conditions (Mohammad 1994). Hence, agriculture was the material foundation of Gibe region including Gera.

Oromo of the study area share common cultural heritages and speak the same language. *Afan Oromo* (Oromo language) is a widely spoken language with little variation in dialect. It belongs to Cushitic language family, which extends over most parts of East Africa. Moreover, *Afan Oromo* has been used as an official language of administration since 1991, after the collapse of Derg regime. This is, of course, true in every parts of Oromiya Regional Administrative State. In the study area, however, *Afan Oromo* is not the only means of communication among the

local people. Amharic is also spoken by some individuals who are either literate or non-educated.

With regard to religion, until the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Oromo in the study area was followers of Oromo indigenous belief system called *waaqeffanna*. The Oromo in the Gibe region in general and of Gera in particular were practicing their *Qalluu* and *Gada institutions*. However, Oromo traditional belief system, including *Gadaa institution* had already been losing its strength by the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the internal "stratification" and development in coping with the existing situations (Guluma 1984). Then, Islam gradually became the religion of Oromo in Gibe region including Gera. The spread of *Islam* in the study area was the phenomenon of the nineteenth century (Mohammad 1994). This does not mean, of course, that the other Oromo were not exposed to *Islamic* influence before that time. According to Mohammad (1994), contact between Islam and some Oromo groups may be traced back to six or seven century. Furthermore, Mohammad asserted that the spread of Islam among Oromo was a gradual process usually related to trade and state formation in the then Gibe region, now called Jimma Zone of Oromiya Regional State. Oromo of Gera, the study area, accepted Islam religion in the late 1840s. Today, the religion of Oromo in the study area is predominantly *Islam*.

### Kinship System

Every kinship system identifies blood relatives (biologically related or socially constructed) and relatives by marriage. In other words, except for married couples without children, all groups of relative residing together consists of "*consanguineal*" relatives, but married couples are usually regarded as "*affinal*" relatives since marriage relationship is socially the most important bond between them (Johnson 2007). Hence, kinship system is fundamental for the social organizations of Oromo in general and Oromo of Gera, in particular. Like other Oromo groups, Oromo group in the study area trace their descent through father's line. Oromo of the study area become the member of certain clan through *patrilineal descent*. There are different clans (*gosaa*) in Gera. They include *Sayyoo*, *Sadachaa*, *Dagoyyee*, *Dooyyuu*, *Qoree*, *Hawaas*, *Agalo Algaa*, *Karrayyuu*, *Awulani* and others. For individuals who are born into these groups, knowing their kin groups in the line of their fatherhood is very important for various reasons. First and for most, property right is claimed through *patrilineal descent*. Inheritance of farmland or forest land, for example, is through father's line. Second, since intra-clan marriage is exclusively impermissible, they clearly identify their *cosanguineal* kin groups of their father. Hence, the marriage type of this society is exclusively exogamous. However, there are some exceptions. There are traditional social groups such as *Tumtu* (blacksmith) and *Faaqii* (tanners) who were culturally despised as a result of their daily activities. In these kin groups, endogamous marriage was common although this trend has been subject to change in recent time. Last but not least, persons to whom they relate by kinship system may normally look for emotional support and various kinds of help in case of need. Thus, kinship system plays important role in rights of access to resources, formation of



marriage and other social organization among the Oromo of the study area.

### Marriage

The formation of new household (*abbawarraa*) is marked by marriage. Johnson (2007) defines marriage as “a stable relationship in which a man and a woman are socially permitted, without loss of standing in the community, to have children.” This definition is very narrow for it cannot be applied to a marriage that involves two or more spouses. Basically, there are two forms of marriage: monogamy and polygamy. *Monogamy* is the form in which a person is institutionally allowed to have only one spouse at a time. On contrary, *polygamy* is the form of marriage in which a person is institutionally permitted to have two or more spouse. Polygamy can be categorized into two: *polygyny* (the institution of marriage that allows a man to have two or more wives at the same time) and *Polyandry* (the institution that permits a woman to have more than one husband at the same time).

In the context of the study area, *polygyny* has been the most common form of marriage until recent time. As the elders indicate, *polygyny* was the dominant marriage type as they attached it with *shar'a* law in Islamic religion that permits man to have up to four wives. But, this trend has currently been discouraged by the government and by new generation. Moreover, the marriage relationship among the Oromo of the study area has been exclusively exogamous for intra-clan marriage is not allowed. For instance, a man from *Agalo* kin groups can get married to a girl from *Hawaas* kin groups, but he never gets married to a girl from *Agalo* groups.

### Afoosha

*Afoosha* is the local social organization which is formed by the consent of local people residing in the same village or sub-village. There are three to five *afooshas* in a village usually based on the number of residents in that locality and social relations among those residents. Within a single *afoosha*, there are about 30 to 40 individual members. As any other social organizations, this local organization has fundamental roles for the execution of different social, cultural and economic activities in that specific area.

Although kinship system is not the criteria to be a member of an *afoosha*, individuals in the same *afoosha* are usually from the same kin groups either related by blood or social constructions. It is common for one kin group to be dominant in the organization, and the executive committee of the *afoosha* is chosen from this dominant group. Nevertheless, although the social executors of *afoosha* are selected from the dominant groups of the members, individual merits of social capital and acceptance are the major criteria employed in opting them.

Each members of this local institution contributes money in cash as per agreement among the members. The contribution is usually carried out at the end of each month. Through these trends, they accumulate and save money that may be used in time of hardships. Moreover, *afoosha* institutions are important in controlling social misbehaving such as adultery

and gossip, executing funeral ceremony in cooperation with *abbaa lagaa*, and preventing conflict among individual/group members.

### Livelihood Strategy

Agriculture is the major economic activity of the local people from which they make their living. From the moment of settlement in the study area, agriculture has been the material foundation of the local Oromo. As most of them own farming land, they cultivate various crops such as *Teff*, *Maize*, *Sorghum*, twice a year. They sow maize, for instance, in February and harvest it in July, and they sow *Teff* in July/August and harvest it in November. This is made possible as rain prevails throughout the year at little intervals. Of course, the cultivators are not only those who have possessed their own land, but also those who cultivate by renting farmland from those groups who possess ample farmland.

There are also individuals who rely on both farming and coffee plantation as their major economic activities. These people plant coffee seedlings in their homestead, in addition to crop production, which serves them as cash crops. In the study area, these social groups are wealthier than those who rely only on cultivating crops. They do not buy anything related to food crops as they have farmland, and the cash income obtained from coffee plantation is considered as extra income which they sometimes deposit in the nearby bank, *Agaro* town.

Livelihood of local people in the study area is also manifested in relation to Gera Forest. Some social groups are dependent upon forest and forest products directly or indirectly. Although they may plant coffee in their homestead, they also earn their income from coffee beans gathered from natural forest. Moreover, they hang traditional beehives on the trees and obtain honey produce in the natural forest. These social groups buy crops for food from the market by selling coffee or honey. They do not have farmland of their own because they are not permanent dwellers in the area. Rather, they have come to Gera for searching alternative life from different parts of the country. However, they also produce crops sometimes by renting farmland from those who have ample plots of farmland.

Livestock is another livelihood supporting economic activity in the study area. Animals like cattle, goats, sheep, donkey, mules and horse are indispensable for subsistence. In the study area, every *abbaawarra* (household) could have one or more cows in their homestead. Cows help by giving milk and milk by-products which can be sold in the nearby *ciraa* town, which is about 1.5km away from the villagers. This helps, especially women to get income with which they buy some household items. On the other hand, these animals are source of labor. Oxen, for instance, support the economy because local people use oxen for farming. Besides, oxen can be fatten and sold in the market for large amount of money. Making them fat is easy because grass is available throughout the year without interruption. This may be attributed to the availability of abundant rainfall in that locality. Sheep or goats are also means of generating income as they can be sold in the nearby market. Mules, donkeys and

horses, support the livelihoods of the local people by providing transportation. They are important for the economic activities of the local community as it may be tiresome to bring agricultural products, honey, and coffee to the market center without the labor of these animals. Since labor is the most important means of production, these animals provide labor force for transporting their products from one place to another. In short, the livelihoods of people in the study area are so diverse in kind.

### 3. Results and Discussions

#### 3.1. Local Perception on Ecological Importance of Forest

It seems apparent that the role of local community in development activities in general and natural resource management in particular was completely neglected before 1970s. Hardin's "Tragedy of the Commons" misunderstood the role of local communities in governing their own common property. Hardin (1968) perceived local people as "irrational", irresponsible to conserve natural resources. It is this wrong conclusion that made local people's contributions in conserving their environment blurred, and led governments and other stakeholders to ignore local people from the responsibility of protecting their own natural resources, especially common pool resources like forest.

Thus, the response of government in many developing countries has been the creation of "Protected Area" Institutions (Johnsons and Nelson 2004). However, some scholars have started to understand the knowledge of local community, particularly indigenous community in all development activities including natural resources. Forest management is one of them. It is apparent that forest management was completely under the monopoly of state under "Protectionist Approach". The State usually considers itself as custodianship for the management of forest resources. The effectiveness of this protectionist model of forest conservation, however, has been also criticized in recent years. Advocates of protectionist approach perceive that humans and conservation of natural resources are incompatible with each other. As a result, local people are completely excluded from forest management and utilization of forest products from protected area. Hence, protectionist strategy disregards the human needs that they derive from resources and ignores the possibility that the protected resource may have adapted to human use.

There is, however, an understanding that natural resources and local (indigenous) people have been coevolved. "Current resource use is often the product of thousands of human history, and some natural systems may in fact have coevolved with social system" (Norgaard, 1994). This implies the long history of relations between humans and their surrounding natural resources like forests. The long historical relations of local people with their natural environment made them know more about the effects of forests in their area.

According to the perception of local people in the study area, forest (*baddaa daggala*) has great contribution in maintaining the stability of weather conditions. They know that the existence of forest made them enjoy abundant rain

fall almost throughout the year. The sufficient availability of rain in turn provides the opportunity to harvest their crop at least twice a year. They underscore that in the absence of forest there is no rain fall, and when there is scarcity of rainfall, the possibility of cultivating crops ceases. Moreover, they know the fact that streams of waterfall are the direct and indirect consequences of existence of forest resources in their locality. Streams and rivers like Deda 1 and Deda 2 flow because of the existence of forest. Besides, key informants told me that "if we dig down the ground about 3-6 meters, with no doubt water comes out." On the other hand, this water is the base for their livelihood because it is used by humans both for drinking and cleaning, as well as for domestic animal use.

Forest is habitat not only to wild life, but also it has been the place where local people keep their animals during dry season. Besides, historical and cultural experience, majority of households in the study area have some connection with the external world through different mechanisms such as listening to radios, visiting market, or local government officials, and they were well aware about the ecological values of forest. According to the household survey carried out in the study site, all the sampled households strongly agreed on the ecological values of the local forest. This survey also coincided with the perceptions of other local people interviewed. They required forest conditions to be improved more for its non-economic benefits such as cleaner air, soil conservation and water retention rather than improving forest for economic reason such as fodder, fuel wood and timber. In this case, 54 percent of households wanted the forest to be improved for non-economic reason, whereas only 45 percent of them wanted the forest condition to be improved for economic reason out of 44 sampled households surveyed in *Ganji-callaa Gandaa Administration*.

#### 3.2 Local Perception on Economic Importance of Forest

Forest resources are important not only for ecological values they provide, but also they are imperative in supporting livelihoods of local people living in/near forest who depend on them either totally or partially. Hence, people-forest interactions that stemmed from the issue of livelihood captured the attention of many scholars and other political activists to integrate forest resources into the development of national economy. Generating income from forest resources at the expense of ecological disturbance is possible but this may end up in environmental disturbance as a result of deforestation. The economic motivation towards forest resource by local people is the direct influence from national and market economy.

Local people in the study area were well aware about the fact that forest provides money as the source of income by selling individual trees, fuel wood or timber production. Before *Amharas* settled in the area, the culture of Oromo people did not allow cutting tree for timber or for charcoal. Moreover, the perception of local people on economic imperative is related to the belief that the existence of forest directly or indirectly affects their subsistence economy. For instance, in the absence of forest, they perceive that life is impossible or difficult because they have strong connection with the forest

for their subsistence. One of the key informants stated the importance of forest conservation as follow;

*First there was no forest in this area. Drought, famine and disease all together adversely affected people and made them evacuate from home land. It is in response to that problem that our ancestors planted trees by bringing them from other areas. That problem was controlled by planting trees. The same fate awaits us if forest is completely destroyed. That is why we value forest and have conserved Gera forest until now.*

This perception about the importance of forest was what almost all my informants reflected in the study area. Forest has been everything for them. One of my informants also explained the importance of forest for Gera people, metaphorically as, “*Like Fish never sustain without water, Geras never sustain without forest.*” This is clear manifestation of the relation of local people’s livelihoods to the forest resources in the study area.

Of course, local people have substantial awareness about both the ecological and economic values, but the question lies on prioritization. According to the views of key informants, ecological benefit should be given priority as other benefits such as economic as well as socio-cultural are the consequence of friendly environment. Climate change, which is threatening the world today, is the direct consequence of environmental disturbance, usually deforestation and natural resources degradation. The global consequence of deforestation is even understood at local level as this case study reveals.

### 3.3 Local Perception on Socio-cultural Importance of Forest

Forest also provides cultural or social values. It is clear that forest is important for recreation, walking through, religious and other purposes. Many trees are perceived as sacred forest. Sacred trees are conserved for they provide scene for worships under their shades. Blessed trees are not only important for the place of worships but also they function as place where conflict resolution takes place by local elders (*jaarsa biyyaa*). In the study area, for instance, *qilxuu* (*Ficus vasta*) is well known tree species under which mediation (*araara*) of two individuals or groups in conflict has been carried out. Others consider planted trees as their “child”, especially if they could fail to get children in their life time. Out of the total 44 sampled households, 81.8 percent of them believed that forest is somewhat important for cultural values. They were also well aware about the importance of forest as a source of “traditional” medicine (*qoricha aadaa*). Workneh (2001) rightly argued that Ambo Oromo have a considerable knowledge of indigenous medicines usually extracted from different plants (forest) for the healings of both humans and animals. This view is equally true with the Oromo of the study area as I have confirmed through my field research.

Broadly speaking, the economic and ecological importance of forest is socially and culturally constructed, and, therefore, the perception of local people about the forest importance was holistic rather than isolated entities. This kind of

perception made the local people more responsible on forest conservation than any other external agents.

### 3.4. Abbaa Lagaa, Shanee and Forest Conservation

Natural resource management institutions exist throughout all Oromo areas including Gera, the study area. However, their development over time, organizational structure and functions is spatially and temporally subject to change. In this study I focus on customary institutions of Oromo people in Gera district based on the information obtained from key informants. They are known locally by variety of names; *Abbaa Jigaa*, *Abbaa Lagaa* and *shanee*. The name *Abbaa Laga* is the most frequently used in conjunction with local social and economic affairs including conservation of natural resources. In the past, *Abbaa Jigaa* also called *Abbaa Tuulii* was the higher authority to which complaints appealed if they were dissatisfied by the decision made by *Abba Lagaa* and *jaarsa biyyaa* (mediators). At present *Abba Jigaa* is not functioning and hence it is not discussed in this article.

The extent (if any) to which *Abba Laga* had played a role in the traditional Oromo Gadaa system of administration prior to the Menelik conquest in the late 19th century remains unclear. The Gadaa system of public administration was itself brought to the then Gibe Region (now Jimma Zone) during the Oromo expansion to the area in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries although its form and application varied from place to place. It was essentially a traditional socio-political institution in which the male members of each community progressed through different life ‘grades’, each with its own associated rights and responsibilities.

Within the system, one grade ruled for 8 years, before being replaced by another and, within each 8-year period, an *Abba Gadaa* (father of power), *Abba Dula* (father of war) and *Abba Sera* (father of the law) were elected (Mohammed Hassan, 1994; Watson, 2003). Whilst there is no documented evidence on *Abba Laga* playing an essential role in the *Gadaa* administration, it is probable that *Abba Laga* was a title instituted when and where the need to coordinate land use occurred. In the present day Borana zone in southern Ethiopia, where remnants of the *Gadaa* system still exist, Watson (2003) reports that *Abba Konfi* (father of the well) regulates access to water, yet there is no indication that the title is intrinsically linked to the *Gadaa* life grades system.

Eventually, in western Ethiopia, the *Gadaa* system was gradually eroded as a result of internal socio-economic development and the emerging local warlords (Guluma 1984, Lewis 1964). Hence, the administrative system of *Gadaa* institution disappeared some years before Menelik’s conquest of the then Gibe region. The origin of *Abba Laga* is, therefore, uncertain, and necessitates further investigation. What appears different to the traditional *Gadaa* administrative roles, however, is that the title *Abba Lagaa* is now used to describe both the institution itself that is made up of participating local people, and the appointed head of the institution, rather than just the latter as during the *Gadaa* era.

According to the perceived views of local people, *Abbaa Lagaa* has been the powerful customary institution



accountable for the life situations of all local people grouped under the same 'laga'. Laga, here, refers to both the specific spatial area and the people living in such territory. In other words, *Lagaa* means local people who belong to the same village in specific territory and share the same leader (*Abbaa Lagaa*). Literally, *Abbaa Lagaa* is the 'father' of all individuals in his territorial area (village), and therefore it is assumed that *Abbaa Lagaa* is respected among the villagers as the father of the family is respected among his family members. *Abbaa Lagaa* institution can be best comprehended in the same way "abbaawarraa" institution is perceived among the local people of the study area. In the study area, *abbaawarra* (household) refers to both household head and household unit (institution) itself.

*Abbaa lagaa* institution performs its duties and responsibility in collaborating with other lower structures called *Shane*. There are three to four *shanes* in a single *Abba Lagaa* (village) and three to four *Abbaa Lagaas* in *Gandaa* Administration. In the specific research site of this study, *Ganji-Caallaa gandaa*, there are three *Abbaa Lagaa* and each *abbaa lagaa* has three *shanes* with which they work. Thus, *shane* refers to smaller groups of *abbaawarraas* (households) organized as sub-unit of *Abbaa lagaa*. Each *Shane* has one representative with whom *Abba Lagaa* communicates about the social affairs of his village (*laga*).

*Abbaa lagaa* performs the following social functions that indirectly contribute to the forest management: executing the burial ceremony of the dead; mobilizing the local people for constructing home for a person whose home is destroyed by fire; constructing houses for poor powerless persons; and resolving conflicts among individual or groups. Because of his social capital and capacity to persuade people, local people respect any order that comes from the *abba lagaa*. Hence, in the practice of constructing houses, the role of *Abbaa lagaa* is great in deciding on the kind of house to be built, and what type of tree species is used for the construction. Tree species such as *Buttoo* (*Schefflera abyssinica*), *ibicha* (*Vernonia amygdolina*), *baddeessaa* (*Acacia nubica*), *Omacheessaa* (*Pygeum africanum*), *qararoo* (*Aningeria adolfi-friedera*) are very valuable because they are used for honey production. Therefore, they are not used for the purpose of house construction and other domestic uses. This implies that these trees are preserved for their invaluable economic contribution to the livelihoods of the local people. According to my key informants, before Coffee was well known as income generating crop, honey was the basic income generating produce for Gera people. For this reason, some trees in the forest as well as in their homestead area have been valued among the local people. The respect (*safuu*) given by people to those trees makes them stay and expand by natural regeneration. *Safuu* is an important concept in the beliefs and practices of Oromo (Workneh 2001). The Oromo believe that *Safuu* involves avoiding embarrassment, bad conversation, lying, stealing and working on holidays. Hence, *Safuu* is respecting one another or giving respect to other things like river, mountain, and trees. for their valuable importance. That is why trees like *Buttoo* (*Schefflera abyssinica*), *Bakkanniisa* (*Croton macrostachys*), and *Qararoo* (*Aningeria adolfi-friedera*) are abundant and sustained until now in the study area.

Other species of trees such as *Qilxuu* (*Ficus vasta*) are valuable for they symbolize peace as local people sit down under their canopy and mediate people who are in conflict. The other equally important culturally adopted mechanism of tree conservation is that some trees are important for coffee shade. Those tree species have characteristic features of shadings leaves during heavy rainy season and growing leaves during the dry season when coffee plants need shade. Hence, trees species such as *Gaattiraa* (*juniperus procera*), *Kombolcha* (*maytenus ovatus*) are used for the construction of houses and/or fences or other domestic materials.

Other equally interesting issue is that some trees are important for burial ceremony in the study area. According to the culture of local people, the dead body is put into the grave and covered with *leedii* to protect the soil from leaking into the grave. *Leedii* is thus trees prepared for burying the dead. Local people do not use other valuable tree species for the grave except *hambabeessa* (*Albizia gummifera*). This indicates how customary institutions of the local people shape their behavior towards effective utilization of forest resource and thereby conserve the forest.

On the other hand, "permanent" Oromo residents in the study area do not extract timber from the forest. This is possible because they give priority to the other non- economic values of forest than of economic values. The other reason is they might not be aware of timber production. One of my informant reported that 'timber' production is a recent phenomena to their locality after some individuals came from other places, especially the Northerners and the *Shewas*. The other important culture of Gera people that contributed to forest conservation is that they never chop down trees for charcoal burning. As it is well known, charcoal is the basic domestic fuel for the people of Ethiopia. However, charcoal burning practice was minimal in the study area.

Gera people, however, use either self fallen trees or dead woods as firewood for the purpose of domestic fuel. They also occasionally collect dead woods and sell them in the nearby town, *Chira*, as fuel wood although this happens seldom. This selective approach to the collection of fuel wood in the area also contributed positively to the conservation of forest. As women primarily engage in the practice of fuel wood gathering, they are well aware of not to cut down live trees for the purpose of fuel wood. Moreover, the practice of cutting trees for house construction and some other household furniture remain the duties of males. However, they were wise enough to choose among trees species appropriate for house construction. Some tree species were never cut down for the purpose of construction or households furniture as they have other more important functions in that specific area.

This cautious utilization and conservation of forest resources has been historically and culturally rooted in the traditional institutions developed over generations by the local people. The intimacy of human beings and natural resources is not new for African people in general and Oromo people in particular. Oromo views toward natural environment have been considered valuable. Their valuable local knowledge of resources like forest for sustainable development and

management seems an exemplary to others. For its soundness, the relative high forest area existing in Oromiya constituting 63% (WBIPP 2004) of the total forest area in the country, which made first out of total regional states, seems evidence. Currently, the remnants of forests in the country are found in areas where customary institutions and knowledge are relatively in practice although 'modern' economic oriented systems have been weakening those traditional natural resources management institutions.

Despite such constraints, local people have developed the tradition of natural resource management systems because they have close interaction with forest for a long period of time. Gera people too have traditional leadership setups such as *Abbaa Lagaas* that are responsible for regulating natural resources and other socio-economic concerns. Violations of the regulations of forest conservation existed for generation results in different social sanctions. Since such social sanctions alienate the violator from any social organization, local people obey the traditional systems of resource utilization.

On top of this, in traditional systems of natural resource conservation, local government authorities have been using the traditional leader's social capital for execution of state programs and policies. For instance, in my research site, *Ganji-Caallaa Gandaa* administration, there are three *abbaa Lagas* each at their respective three zones: *Caallaa*, *Guree Ganjii* and *Warwarii*. Each *abba Lagas* at their respective zone has dual purposes. First they represent traditional leadership system of the local people. Second, they have manipulative functions for the execution of state programs and policies. The government authorities at local level do this for they know the acceptability of this traditional leadership among the local communities.

Although cooperating with local government authorities on the conservation of natural resources (forest) seems encouraging, the strength and power of customary leadership is being eroded. The social sanction enforced by traditional institution, *Abbaa Lagaas*, on an individual who do not comply with it can be reversed by government authorities, but the reverse is impossible. So, this kind of power imbalance finally, with no doubt, leads to the collapse of traditional system, and replace totally by state institutions.

To sum up, the vitality of customary institutions in natural resource management (forest) was apparent as it is indicated in this paper. Local people were well aware about importance of forest resources that have cultural, material and spiritual significance for them. Today, it seems clear that the relative abundant forest area in the country is found in areas where remnants of traditional institutions have still existed although they have been under the threats of "modern" intervention. Ninety five percent of high forest areas are found in Oromiya, South Nations Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia and Gambela regional states (WBISPP 2004) where cultural institutions are still relatively strong compared to other parts of the country. These regions have well developed traditional systems of natural resource management as the people of these regions have close interaction with their natural resources.

In the study area, traditional social obligations were more respected by the people than the institutions created and enforced by the government. But, modern protectionists in forest conservation poorly understand the valuable knowledge of local people about forest management. However, customary resource management systems often developed over time through a process of cultural learning and adaptation seems successful in generating appropriate local institutions for sustainable forest management.

## 4. Conclusion

This study explicitly indicated that the role of local perception of forest resources values and its management contributed positively to the conservation of Gera forest. The local people in the study area were well aware of the fact that forest was the integral part of their life. Besides, indigenous institutions and cultural understandings of the forest land tenure system were still feasible in playing vital role in forest conservation.

The study also portrayed the significance of access right to resources and ownership right to forest management and its conservation. Although natural resources like forests belong to state by government proclamation, the local people perceived Gera forest as their own common property. They perceived as their own property because the forest had never been completely detached from their hand, and above all they had the strong belief that the forest had been founded by their ancestors.

The recent participatory management of Gera forest priority area project considered the cultural institutions of local people on forest management, and the local people themselves were happy with it. However, the more recent problem has emerged when forest resources were given to State Enterprise. In this case, local people were very skeptical about the access, use and property right they had been enjoying. Furthermore, expanding investment activities in the forest had negatively affected the forest resources and the poor forest users.

Therefore, this study strongly stressed the importance of considering local knowledge, customary institutions, and subsistence mechanisms of local people in sustainable development of forest management.

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