

THE ORIGINS OF THE BORANA GADA SYSTEM

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A Discussion of *Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of African Society*.

By ASMAROM LEGESSE. New York: Free Press, 1973

GADA, or generation-grading, systems are found only in a few Cushitic-speaking societies of Ethiopia. Unlike a true age-grading system a *gada* system is distinguished by the rule that all sons follow their fathers in the sequence of grades at a single fixed interval, irrespective of their actual age. In order to maintain the constancy of this interval, the length of time which a man spends in each grade is fixed at a specific number of years, as is the number of grades separating him from his father. It is evident, therefore, that in such systems the various grades will include at the more senior levels young boys and adolescents together with mature men, a confusion that will not arise in true age-grading systems.

These systems, moreover, have an innate tendency to progressive distortion by which either men are born too high up the system, and may be retired before they reach maturity (under-ageing), or are born too low down in the system, and never reach the senior grades at all (over-ageing). To prevent over-ageing it is necessary to restrict legitimate procreation to those men who have reached a sufficient level of seniority in the system: and to prevent under-ageing it is necessary that men should not go on begetting children after they have reached a specific grade. It may, however, be possible to dispense with the second rule, since the higher a man is born into the system, the sooner he may marry. Thus, other things being equal, under-ageing will be reduced by the capacity of men born into the higher grades to marry sooner than men born into lower grades, and if 'under-age' men take advantage of this, their sons will be born into the lower grades appropriate to their real age.

Generation-grading systems are therefore cumbersome and difficult to operate, requiring a sophisticated calendar and a number of irksome restraints of a sexual or marital nature, and are clearly less effective than true age-grading systems in stratifying society into such basic categories as boys, warriors, and elders. It is perhaps for this reason that they exist in very few societies—notably the various branches of the Galla, the Sidamo, the Darasa, and the Burji, Konso, and Gidole—although the generational principle is applied to age-sets in a less rigorous form by a few societies outside Ethiopia e.g. the Kikuyu, Karimojong, and Masai. The Ethiopian *gada* systems differ widely from one another both in their internal working, and in their relation to other social institutions, but in view of the close proximity of these societies to one another, and the basic homology of the systems, it is obvious that they have a common origin—just where need not concern us, at present.

The high degree of coordination required by *gada* systems and the fact that the Konso, for example, have indisputably modified their *gada* systems in the past shows that such systems have not just evolved without some clear purpose; their originators knew what they were about and in the case of the Konso were able to design systems that show no tendency either to over- or to under-ageing. Our problem therefore is to

discover what advantages such systems could have over the ordinary age-grading systems which clearly preceded them.

The interest of Legesse's book is that he proposes a solution to this problem for the *gada* system of the Borana Galla, and it is upon this aspect of his book that I intend concentrating here. A brief preliminary description of the Borana system will be necessary first, however.

The system is a cycle, or rather spiral, of ten grades each of eight years' duration, so arranged that boys in the first grade are the sons of men in the 6th grade; in the 2nd grade, of men in the 7th grade, and so on—the generations being divided by a five grade or forty year interval, all brothers being in the same grade. Not all grades are in fact of 8 years' duration: the 5th grade lasts 13 years, the 6th 8 years, and the 7th 3 years, while the 8th grade is of normal duration, but the basic symmetry of the system is preserved nonetheless. There is an eleventh grade, *gada moji*, whose members assume ritual responsibilities of purity and special sanctity, in many ways resembling that of the youngest boys in the first grade, who are the grandsons of *gada moji*. After *gada moji* men become *iarsa*, retired men.

The system applies to men only, and the basic categories through which they pass are those of sexless boys attached to their mothers; adolescent boys whose masculinity is socially acknowledged; young warriors; senior warriors; political and ritual leaders; semi-retired men with ritual authority; and finally men of special sanctity who live a life of ritual purity.

All the members of each grade belong to a named *gada* class, *luba*, in which they remain all their lives, and these classes retain their corporate identity even when they become *iarsa*.

Men are not allowed to marry before the 32nd year of the *cycle*, though they may have mistresses as soon as they are capable of attracting them, and may only beget sons in the 40th-year of the cycle, and daughters in the 48th year, but there is no upper limit on procreation.

It appears that at present men are being born on average about 5 grades too high in the cycle, and that the membership of the lowest grades has therefore been partially shifted to the upper grades. As a result, a series of true age-sets, *hariyya*, has been established to compensate for this. These sets have a span of 8 years, and the youngest set includes boys of about 12–19 years of age, but the age sets, like the *gada* classes, are only formally incorporated at the transition from the 3rd to the 4th grade. The age-sets are distinct from the *gada*-classes, since they include men from different *gada*-classes; the age-sets have the function of organising cattle raids and war-parties.

If, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the distortion of the age structure of the *gada*-classes or *luba* had resembled that of today, too many warriors would have been in those *luba* nominally above the warrior grades, and some other institutional means of recruitment and organisation for warfare would have been necessary, and the age-sets clearly provide this. Legesse argues (p. 138) that the presence of infants, young children, and adolescents in the warrior *luba* would have prevented them from carrying out their tasks, but this is fallacious—they could simply have left the toddlers at home. The real problem was the untimely promotion of too many warriors into the upper grades.

From this description of the *gada* system it will have become clear that each of the

5 *gada* classes or *luba* in the first half of the cycle has a fixed relationship with one of the 5 *luba* in the second half, and this relationship will also extend to the *luba* of the retired men. The Borana have a term, *gogessa*, patri-class, for men linked in this way, and since there are 5 *luba* in each half of the cycle, it follows that there must be 5 *gogessa*.

In one of the most interesting chapters of the book (VII), the author describes how a cycle of 7 names, the *maḳabasa* cycle, is superimposed on the *gogessa* cycle for the purpose of ordering Borana chronology, whereby the *maḳabasa* name returns to the same *gogessa* after seven generations, or 36 *gada* periods, and the Borana believe that events repeat themselves in an intelligible manner that reflects the *gogessa* or *maḳabasa* cycles:

Dacḳi is the mystical influence of history on the present course of events. It may be transmitted from genealogical ancestors to their descendants, or it may operate in accordance with the *maḳabasa* cycles. (Legesse: 194) . . .

The return of historical influence in accordance with the *maḳabasa* cycles is a source of great concern for the *gada* leaders. (Legesse: 195).

By the use of the *maḳabasa* and *gogessa* cycles the Borana have an historical map of their society reaching back to the mid-17th century. The *gada* system is also based on an accurate lunar calendar which is too complex to discuss here.

The groups of the *gada* system and the age-sets cut across the descent groups of moiety and clan, and Legesse has some most illuminating observations on what he calls the 'functional redundancy' or Borana institutions, especially the *gada* system in this respect:

The individual is free to take political action as a member of an age-set or a *gada* class or a moiety (clan). It is this phenomenon of cross-cutting categories that introduces considerable freedom to individual choice into an otherwise rigid pattern of social differentiation. (Legesse: 224).

It is particularly encouraging that another anthropologist should have proposed, quite independently, exactly the same explanation as the reviewer's own for the multiplicity of cross-cutting ties in Konso society:

It is a means of escaping from the tyranny of exclusive allegiance. Aid and assistance can be obtained from quite different sources, with the result that neither ward nor lineage can exercise the same control as it would be able to if it were the sole object of allegiance. (Hallpike 1972: 127).

But while one can accept that for a society like the Borana, which places high value on equality, individual freedom, and also on social order, the functional redundancy of institutions is a means of obtaining the maximum of choice within a society of ascribed statuses, it does not of itself explain the existence of the *gada* system, and we must now consider Legesse's specific explanations of this institution.

His first approach is an appeal to universal human needs (in some ways very similar to the theory of age-grading systems proposed by Eisenstadt (1954, 1956), who is not mentioned, however. These needs are the provision of a conceptual framework within which the individual can learn new social roles; the support of the community as he

enters a new phase of life; and the removal of excessive family influence during adolescence:

It is . . . in response to such universal human needs that Borana have institutionalized *the generational order* governing their central institution. (Legesse: 110. My emphasis).

But even if these were universal needs, they would be sufficiently satisfied by an age grading system, and would not require a *gada* system. He attempts to supplement these arguments by introducing another 'human universal'—the fear of incest; since power over the family herds lies with the father or eldest brother, and since cattle for bridewealth are essential for marriage, the despotic use of these resources creates friction between fathers and sons, and between brothers:

Just as the father is a potential threat to the maturation of the sons, so too are the sons a threat to the polygynous dominions of their father. The polygynous family contains wives of such disparate ages that the sons of the first wife are often the same age or older than their youngest co-mothers. The Borana male continues to marry younger and younger wives even after he has ceased to be a viable husband. Under these circumstances, keeping the generations straight and the incest rules in force becomes more difficult than it is in monogamous families. The danger of incestuous liaisons between the sons and the wives of the same man is therefore quite real. The universal human fear of incest becomes especially acute because it is reinforced by the inequities of Borana family structure. (Legesse: 111).

Since a man may not have sexual relations with the women of his father's or his son's *gada* class (women take their husband's *gada* class), Legesse concludes that 'the generational structure of the *gada* system is probably a response to these basic fears'.

The reader might suppose that polygynous families with wives of widely differing ages were a significant proportion of the total, but in fact this is not so. The census in Appendix 1 (an invaluable contribution to Ethiopian ethnography) shows that of 131 married women only 16 were co-wives, and 1 an established mistress, while there are no instances of a man with more than 2 wives. These figures make it obvious that the fear of incest is likely to trouble only a small minority of the Borana population, and to have had little significance in the evolution of the system.

These explanations for the existence of the *gada* system have little connection with the demographic arguments, which are as follows. Legesse suggests that for most of its history the *gada* system was a simple age-set system, and that in the 16th century, when the great northward expansion of the Galla was taking place, stimulated by a rapidly expanding population, the generational rules were introduced to limit the population:

The rules restricting the position of the generations, marriage, and childbearing were introduced some time during the 16th century to set limits on the rapid expansion of the population that occurred in that century. Once these rules were introduced, the *gada* system became an extremely unstable institution and began to undergo a process of structural transformation [under-ageing]. (Legesse: 154).

Legesse reaches these conclusions as the result of a computer simulation of the system, and the simulation further suggests that the system was introduced in 1623. Legesse concedes that this date is too recent, since the chronicler Bahrey, writing in the latter part of the 16th century describes the *gada* system as fully operational before then,

and Legesse suggests that this partial failure of the simulation may be attributable to the lack of the necessary ecological data incorporated into the model.

Let us first examine the possibility that the *gada* system was a simple age-grading system at some time in the 16th century. One of the deficiencies in Legesse's argument is that he fails to consider the *gada* systems in societies other than the Borana; in fact we must assume either that the Borana invented the basic principles of the system, which were then diffused, or that they borrowed them from some other society. Let us first assume that the Borana invented them.

I have shown (Hallpike 1972:192n) that the most recent form of one regional *gada* system among the Konso was adopted in 1604, replacing an earlier defective one; both the present and earlier systems differ considerably from that of the Borana, however, and according to Konso tradition their ancestors borrowed the original system from the Burji, not the Borana. The Konso have three different systems in different regions, and in these the equivalents of the Kallu (Borana moiety leaders) are responsible for the *gada* system and have no special relation with descent groups; there are no *gada* councils; the Konso systems have, or had, a principle of sibling-seniority grading apparently unknown to the Borana; there are no true age-sets; there are no *gada* classes; the oldest men remain in the top grade and do not pass beyond the system; the period of each grade is 18, 9, or 5 years; and the generational interval is 36, 27, or 30 years.

While one readily concedes that many of these differences could have been produced in the process of adapting the basic *gada* system to different societies, it still seems very unlikely that it would have been possible for the Borana to have invented the *gada* system even at the beginning of the 16th century, and for it then to have been transferred to the Burji, then to the Konso, and there operated in two successive forms, all in a period of less than 100 years, or less than four generations. Indeed, since it is improbable that such a system would be borrowed until it had become well-established in its parent society, this leaves very much less than 100 years for the differences already described to have evolved. But if the Borana invented the system earlier than this, in the 15th century, or before, the simulation, which gives an adoption date of 1623, ceases to be an even vaguely accurate model of the system's evolution.

But it is possible that the Borana borrowed the system from some other people, such as the Burji or the Konso; in this case Legesse can indeed argue that this could have occurred in the 16th century for the purpose of restricting their birth rate, but this line of argument leaves the *origin* of the system as obscure as ever.

Whether the Borana borrowed or invented the system, however, it is extremely unlikely that they adopted it as a means of restricting their population. The increase of the Borana population in the 16th and 17th centuries is central to Legesse's explanation of their expansion and conquests at this time (though for some reason he ignores the effects of Mohammed Grañ's devastation of the Ethiopian state in accounting for the Galla successes). He very reasonably claims that expansion and more intensive use of land are responses to population increase:

they adopted techniques of intensive cultivation in most of the newly occupied territories: *ensete* (false banana) gardening in the southwest and grain cultivation in the north and east. (Legesse: 155).

but suggests that the restrictions on procreation embodied in the *gada* system were a third response. Yet if the Borana dealt with over-population by territorial expansion and more intensive land use, it is difficult to see why they should also have needed to restrict their birth rate. To Legesse's amazement—and to mine—his computer simulation showed however that:

the population declines by about 40% during the first eighty years after the rules of the Gada system are imposed on the normal age-graded population. (Legesse: 155).

This decline continues for a total of 240 years after which the population stabilises. The simulation was repeated 13 times, with increasing birth rates, but even at the highest levels ever recorded in any society, the population decline was very substantial. Such a conclusion makes nonsense, however, of the admitted facts of Galla expansion during this period, and the simulation must therefore be fallacious. (I believe that a basic error in the simulation is the assumption that birth rates are independent of the father's age, but lack of space prevents me developing this argument here. It should be noted however that one of the disadvantages of computer simulations, as I discovered for myself in *The Konso*, is that they themselves become 'black boxes' whose processes are as obscure as the institutions they model). Not only is the conclusion of the simulation contrary to the facts, but there is no reason to suppose that, provided the food supply could have been expanded by migration and more intensive land use, there would have been any advantage in population control for a militarily aggressive pastoral people engaged in the largest expansion in their history.

The simulation is based on the assumption that the *gada* system has an inherent tendency to under-age, and that it could never have been in equilibrium. But since the Konso systems are in equilibrium it is conceivable that the Borana system is not intrinsically unstable either, and that its under-ageing is produced by some other factors peculiar to Borana society that were not always present. If this is so, there is no reason why the system might not have been invented by the Borana well before the 16th century, and only later become subject to distortion.

The most obvious means by which under-ageing can be produced is by women bearing children to men in the higher grades, and secondly, when men who have been born into high grades do not take advantage of the lower age of marriage automatically permitted them by the system. Why should a high proportion of women marry men in the higher grades? The Borana, like the Konso, think that warriors should not have children. As Legesse says,

the social system is so organised that the man must first demonstrate his capacity to wage war before he is allowed to become a father. Furthermore, it is obvious that if the warriors were to have many children their mobility would have been curtailed. This was probably the function of infanticide in past centuries when warfare was a dominant aspect of Borana life. (Legesse: 73-4).

While one must distinguish between marrying and begetting sons, it seems likely that the exigencies of warfare would have made marriage itself more difficult for warriors in their twenties. This being so, it is likely that in the 16th and 17th centuries, during an epoch of large scale warfare, many more women than normal would have been available as wives for older men, and as mistresses for the warriors, and this would

have produced a higher than average number of sons to men in the higher grades, and given thereby a significant distortion to the system.

The other factor possibly responsible for under-ageing, and whose presence would aggravate the consequences of the first factor, is the propensity of men to marry later than they are entitled to; this could be induced by the absence of cattle for bridewealth, since the herds are under the control of fathers and eldest brothers who, we are told (Legesse: 111) frequently deprive their sons or younger brothers of cattle for marriage. This would retard the age of marriage of younger sons—that class of men which is already inherently born higher up the system—and thus continue to distort the system even in the absence of warfare.

Since Legesse has failed in all respects to explain the origin of the Borana *gada* system we must ask again why such a difficult alternative to the true age-grading system should have been adopted by a number of societies, notably the Borana and Konso.

Both societies are organised on the basis of patrilineality, and the inheritance of property and ritual status in particular is determined by generational status, or 'genealogical level', as Needham (1966) more precisely expresses it. Both societies are also distinguished by a fundamental concern with classification and order, and, for these societies,

There is a strong belief in the association of social order, peace and harmony with that general well-being of men which derives from the physical world—health, fertility, rain, and success in war and hunting. (Hallpike 1972: 220).

Now, age-grading systems by making age rather than genealogical level the basis of social status, are in conflict with the organisation of the descent groups and the whole basis of the inheritance of property and ritual status. Men who are on a lower genealogical level than others can, in such a system, have superior status to those of a higher genealogical level. Moreover, as the population increases the number of such 'ambiguous' men will also increase, and it is therefore possible that the Borana, Konso, and others, eventually considered that the only way of removing this anomaly was to make the age-grading system conform to what they believed was the more important principle of genealogical level.

Societies with age-grading systems for whom genealogical level is a less important source of status may not object to men being in a higher age-grade than their genealogical 'superiors'. Among the Nuer, for example, 'a man may be to another a classificatory paternal uncle or grandfather genealogically, but if he is of the same generation [age group] he is his "brother" and would so address him and be addressed by him.' (Evans-Pritchard 1951: 175).

Generation-grading systems of course produce notable anomalies of their own, since young boys may be in the same grades as old men, but at least in this case they are of the same genealogical level. Granted that it is impossible, given the nature of human demography, fully to reconcile age and genealogical level, it seems that a few societies prefer to impose a single classificatory principle upon descent groups and upon age groups. (The explanation of the origin of generation-grading systems which I am advancing here is, of course, a modification of that originally proposed in *The Konso of Ethiopia*, and even now I do not regard it as conclusive; it may no longer be possible to reconstruct the origin of these systems).

At the conclusion of what is a review article, some general criticisms of the book would be appropriate. The methodological contributions are the least valuable, although this reviewer agrees with many of Legesse's individual contentions. His aim is to show how the perspectives of Lévi-Straussian structuralism, American 'behavioural studies', and British 'case analysis' are all necessary but individually inadequate for understanding society. These are the 'Three Approaches' of the subtitle, and they are a distortion of their supposed originals. In particular, Legesse thinks that his description of the groups, categories, and rules of the *gada* system is a 'structural' model in the manner of Lévi-Strauss, whereas it is simply a conventional description of social organisation that might be found in the ethnography of any of the 'Three Approaches'.

It is regrettable that this ostentatious discussion of methodology (62 pages, together with another 57 pages of the theoretical analysis) has drastically reduced the book's ethnographic content and value. The multiplicity of Legesse's ambitions has produced a confusing account of the *gada* system which is rendered more opaque by the sparse yet disorderly description of the society, ecology, beliefs and values upon which the system rests.

But despite my belief that his explanations of the origins of the system are entirely wrong, he has written a very lively and interesting book, and one can only hope that in due course he will give us the fuller account of Borana society which they deserve.

NOTE

¹ I am grateful to Dr Martin Brett for some valuable criticisms of an earlier draft of this review.

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Résumé

LES ORIGINES DU SYSTÈME GADA DES BORANAS

LES *Gada*, ou systèmes de hiérarchisation par descendance se distinguent des véritables systèmes de hiérarchisation selon l'âge par la règle qui veut que le rang d'un homme soit déterminé non pas par son âge mais uniquement par le rang de son père. De tels systèmes sont plus difficiles à mettre en œuvre que les systèmes de hiérarchisation selon l'âge puisque des enfants peuvent naître avec un rang élevé ou inversement être nés si bas dans le système qu'ils n'atteignent jamais les rangs supérieurs. Pour quelles raisons des systèmes aussi incommodes ont-ils été adoptés? En se basant sur une représentation par ordinateur du système Borana, Legesse soutient que celui-ci fut introduit au 16^{ème} siècle pour permettre de contrôler la

démographie et que la promotion excessive des jeunes hommes à des rangs supérieurs représente un aspect intégral de cette opération : cette théorie présente les défauts suivants :

1. Elle ne tient pas compte de l'évolution des systèmes de hiérarchisation par descendance dans d'autres régions de l'Éthiopie, en particulier parmi les Konsos ; le système Konso était fortement développé à la fin du 16^{ème} siècle : ainsi, s'il fut emprunté aux Boranas par rapport au système desquels il présente de grandes différences, les Boranas ont donc dû inventer le leur bien avant le 16^{ème} siècle.

2. Mais une date placée au 15^{ème} siècle ou antérieurement s'écarte à tel point de celle que suggère la représentation par ordinateur que les conclusions qu'on peut en tirer perdent tout leur sens. Toutefois, si les Boranas n'ont pas inventé ce système, les origines de celui-ci demeurent aussi obscures qu'auparavant.

3. Quelle qu'en soit l'origine, il est clair que les Boranas n'utilisaient pas ce système pour limiter leur démographie parce que a) la population augmenta au cours du 16^{ème} et du 17^{ème} siècle, b) les Gallas acquirent de nouvelles terres pour y installer les habitants représentant cette augmentation de population et c) cette augmentation de la population aurait représenté un avantage militaire.

4. La déformation que l'on trouve dans le système Borana et selon laquelle de jeunes hommes ont été promus d'une manière excessive à des rangs supérieurs est sans doute le résultat de a) la diminution des possibilités de mariage pour les fils cadets dépourvus de capital matrimonial, b) le peu d'occasions qu'avaient les guerriers de se marier à une époque de guerre permanente.