



Blessing the Route, Striving for Peace and Success

Borana-Arbore Ritual Gift Exchange

Dejene Gemechu Chala

Abstract. – This article draws attention to the Borana-Arbore ritual gift exchange in southern Ethiopia. The two groups share common resources and have institutionalized links between their ritual leaders. Ritual leaders exchange both tangible and intangible gifts, which serve as base for their political alliances and social integrations. Furthermore, the blessing of the Arbore ritual leader is believed to have a positive impact on human and animal fertility, peace, prosperity, and victory. As a result, the Borana pilgrims often visit the premise of the Arbore ritual leader. [*Ethiopia, Arbore, Borana, gift exchange, qalluu, kawot, butumee*]

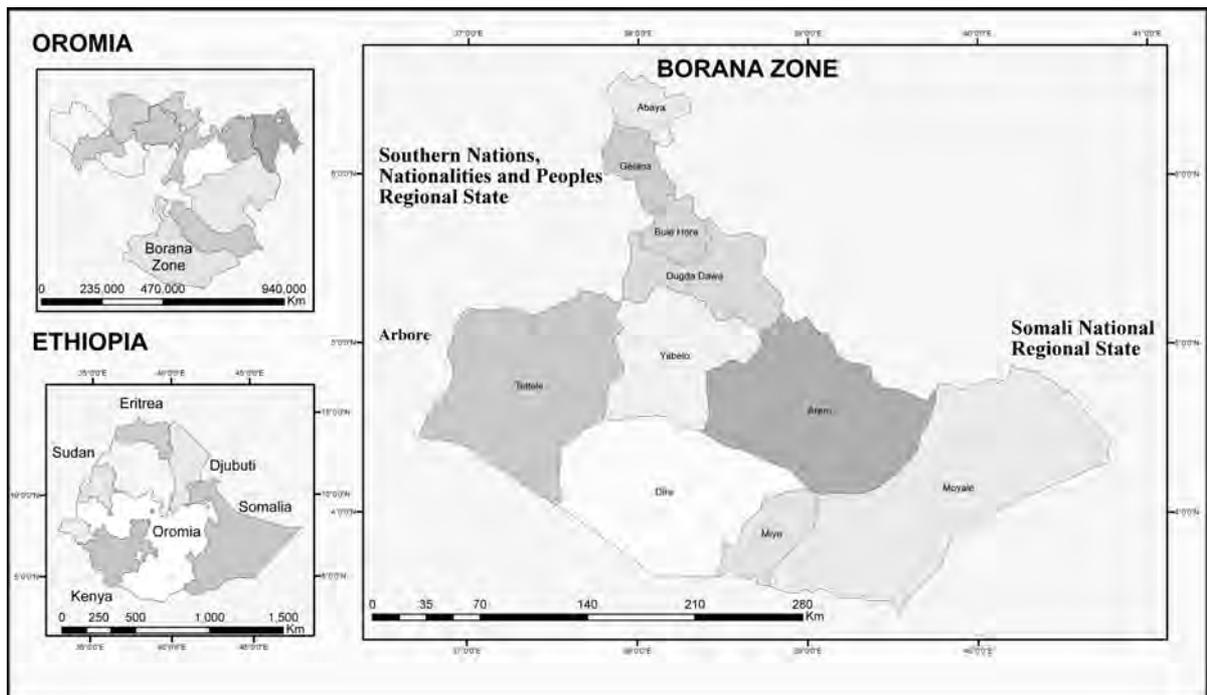
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Introduction

The Borana Oromo have different forms of ritual gift exchanges as a way of forging social bonds and integration with their neighbors. This has been the practice in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. Ritual gift exchanges between the Borana Oromo and the Arbore in southern Ethiopia are at the focus of this article.

Ethnographic evidence shows that ritual gift exchange is inherent to all human societies across cultures (Camerer 1988; Joy 2001). It has a positive social process, serving various political, religious, legal, economic, aesthetic, and psychological purposes (Boas 1895; Mauss 1950 [1925]). Gift is instrumental in maintaining social relationships and expressing feelings (Sherry 1983: 157). The Kula ring among the Trobriand Islanders is one of the typical examples, which Malinowski (1922: 83) presented as a complex institution that served the purpose of linking the various groups of islanders to form an organic whole. Olexová (2007: 4–21) also showed how ritual gift exchanges served practical purposes in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, as described in the medieval heroic epic “Beowulf.”

In this tradition, the practice of gift giving had different dimensions. It aimed at establishing long-lasting friendships between a lord and his attendants, and the nobles of the same level. Here, gifts were often connected with the society, mainly as a means of strengthening the relationships within a community. The understanding of this universal human practice, however, requires close observations of the cultural contexts in which it happens and the values it represents. The interpretation of gift-giving behavior is possible through a synthesis between the norm of reciprocity, rules, and the strategy of exchange within certain cultural environments. Within this framework, a comprehensive interpretation of ritual gift exchanges between the Borana and the Arbore also calls for a close examination of cultural contexts in which they have been practiced. For this



Map 1: Borana and Arbore in their national and regional settings (source: Oromia Economic and Planning Bureau, adopted by GIS expert).

purpose, the article presents an overview of the Borana and the Arbore and their ritual gift exchanges in cultural and economic contexts and attempts to elucidate the role of ritual gift exchanges in regional political integrations.

Data for the article was generated from the field between March 2007 and October 2010. During this time, I conducted three-round fieldworks among the Borana Oromo for his PhD dissertation. Key informant interview, focus group discussions, and personal observations were used to collect the data from the Borana side. However, in summer 2007 I made a short visit to the Arbore. Furthermore, a huge pastoralist gathering was organized by NGOs in January 2009 in Borana land. Different pastoral groups from Ethiopia and Kenya, including the Arbore delegate, took part in the gathering. On this occasion, I got the chance to observe the blessings of the Arbore ritual leader. Some data was also secured through interviews. Yet, due to language barrier and a busy schedule of this meeting, it was not as successful as it was intended. As result, the data for this article mainly was drawn from the neighboring Borana pastoralists who have close links with the Arbore. The data was supported by the work of other scholars also writing on the Arbore and the Arbore-Borana relations.

1 The Borana: An Overview

The Borana are predominantly pastoralists who inhabit southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. At the beginning of the 20th century, the territory of the Borana was divided by the colonial rulers between the Ethiopian Empire and the former British East Africa, current Kenya (Adugna 2009: 19). In the Oromo myths of origin, the Borana are the senior division, considered as *angafa* Oromo (first-born of the Oromo nation). Further, in different parts of Oromia¹, the most ritually senior clans are often called Borana (Legesse 1973: 10; Helland 2000: 22). The Christian monk Bahrey, one of the early writers on the Oromo, divided the Oromo into two major divisions: Borana and Barentu (1993: 44). Borana and Barentu refer to the western and eastern divisions of the Oromo, respectively. In this article, the term Borana refers to the pastoral community that resides in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. The Borana occupy a vast territory and share fluctuating ethnic and resource borders with different Oromo and non-Oromo groups. They share boundaries with Somali clans to the east and southeast, Arsi Oromo to the northeast, Guji Oromo to the north, Rendille and Samburu to the south in Kenya (Oba 1996: 117) and

¹ This is one of the nine ethnically based regional states of Ethiopia.

with the Arbore and the Hamar in the west, and the Konso in the northwest. They share common territories with the Guji, Konso, Burji, and Gabra in southern Ethiopia.

2 Basic Political and Religious Institutions of the Borana

The Borana Oromo are often considered as custodians of Oromo culture. *Gadaa* and *qaalluu* institutions are among the major Oromo institutions still actively working among the Borana. The *gadaa* system is a generation-set organization which guides every aspect of the life of the Oromo. It has elective leaders for an eight-years term in office. The system divides all male members of the Oromo into five classes called *gogeessaa*. Each *gogeessaa* controls political and ritual power for only one single term of office, which means eight years in rotation. The same *gogeessaa* but successive generations serves in the office for eight years every forty years. The system has been working at least for the last five centuries of recorded history (Legesse 1973; 2006: 30). Oral history indicates that the Borana restructured their *gadaa* under the leadership of Gadayoo Galgaloo in the mid-fifteenth century. Since then they have been practicing the system uninterrupted and the current *gadaa* leader is the seventieth. Accordingly, each *gogeessaa* ruled for fourteen terms of office through its fourteen successive generations.

The *qaalluu* institution is an indigenous religious institution of the Oromo. The leader of the institution is also called *qaalluu*. The traditional Oromo religion is a belief in one creator, called Waaqa, who is a supreme being, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. He is believed to be the equivalent to God in English. The *qaalluu* is believed to be a mediator between Waaqa from above and the human from Earth. Currently the Borana have two major *qaalluu*, drawn from two of their major clans: Karrayyuu and Odituu. The *qaalluu* and *gadaa* institutions often serve as an institutional channel through which the Borana establish alliances with their neighboring groups.

Until the last quarter of the 19th century, when Menelik II established the modern Ethiopian empire and incorporated the Borana into the empire by a war of aggression and the establishment of British colonial rule in Kenya, the Borana were able to maintain their military supremacy over their neighbors in the region (Schlee 1989: 37; 2009: 203; Bassi 1997: 30). Their two basic institutions have played a central role in their military, economic, social, and political supremacy. In this regard, Schlee

(1989: 37 f.) has shown how the Borana successfully established a form of loose federation called “Worra Liban” Alliance. The Worra Liban Alliance included groups like the Gabra, Sakuye, Ajuran, Wardha, and Garre who lived with the Borana. These groups were loosely allied and internally peaceful. The *gadaa* system played an important role in building their military capacity over the area in the precolonial period. Consequently, the various potential victims used the political strategy of submitting to the Borana supremacy “and putting themselves under the umbrella of the *pax borana*” (Schlee 1989: 38). Apart from their military superiority, the recognition of the ritual power of the Borana *qaalluu* was at the center of this alliance (Schlee 1989: 37). Political alliances and social integrations among these groups were marked through certain ritual gift exchanges, which played a central role in the ritual activities of each of them.

Cultural integration and ritual gifts and exchanges among the Borana and their neighbors served as a means through which groups formed the political integration at a wider regional level (Schlee 1989: 37–41). Through gift exchanges they define and redefine relations with some of their neighboring groups. For instance, the Somali group of Eji provides the Borana with the banner called *baqala-faajjii*² (see Fig. 1).

In a similar context, the Borana and the Gabra³ have ritual gift exchanges on a regular time interval and ritual pilgrimages, which are mainly performed either by the *gadaa* or by the *qaalluu* from both sides, representing their respective groups. The Gabra Malbe of Kenya often are called Dibbee Shanan, meaning the “five drums,” which refers to the five phratries: Algana, Gaar, Galbo, Odola, and Shaarbana. Each phratry has its own separate politico-religious assembly, which has sacred objects like the drum (*dibbee*), ivory horn (*magalata*), and fire sticks (*uchuma*). The oral history indicates that some of these phratries originally received the ritual drum and ivory horn from the Borana ritual leaders, the *qaalluu*, and the fire sticks from another group called Waata⁴ (Kassam 2006: 177).

The Gabra Miigo (Gabra in Ethiopia) *gadaa* leader (usually called *dhabela*) receives a *ruufa* (turban) from the Karrayyuu clan of the Borana in return for

2 Schlee and Shongolo (1995: 15); Schlee (1989: 140); Gemechu (2012: 55).

3 The Gabra are Oromo-speaking camel pastoralists who reside in southern Ethiopia with the Borana and in northern Kenya. They have a generation-set organization whose leaders are called *dhabela*.

4 Waata were hunter-gatherers and despised group, sharing territories with the Borana.



Fig. 1: Red and white colored *gadaa* banner (*baqqala-faajjii*) are hung on the head of a ritual bull on the occasion of the *gadaa* ritual called *buttee*. The bull is also known as *buttee* bull. The Borana receive the banner from the Somali group Eji as a gift (source: author's fieldwork, July 2007, Areero).

a camel bull. They have also a ritual drum which is beaten on ceremonial occasions. The Gabra receive a bull from the Metta, a subclan of the Borana, to have a covering leather of the ritual drum. The Borana provide the bull for slaughter, as they believe that the performance of Gabra *gadaa* is so vital for peace and prosperity. It is believed that the Gabra's ritual activities have the power to change the situation in favor of wellbeing, good conditions (*finna*), health, and fertility of the land.

The Gabra Malbe of Kenya make periodic pilgrimage to the Borana *qaalluu* to perform *muuda* (anointment) ceremonies. They provide the *qaalluu* with gifts of livestock as sign of honor and respect (Kassam 2006: 178; Schlee 2008). This was not a unilateral tax, but a ritual gift given in return for the *qaalluu*'s blessing (Schlee 1989: 37; Bassi 1997: 29). The blessing of the *qaalluu* is highly valued and believed to make a difference. For the Borana the *qaalluu* institution is a divine institution and a *qaalluu* has divine personality. They say "*qaalluun Waaqa nama, namaa Waaqa*," meaning "for human being a *qaalluu* is 'God' and for 'God' he is a human being." The blessing of the *qaalluu* is equated with the blessing from the above. In addition to the verbal blessing the *qaalluu* provides incense as a material symbol of blessing. Not all the Gabra from Kenya make pilgrimages to the Borana *qaalluu*; only the Algana and Gaar phratries visit the Karrayu and Oditu *qaalluu*, respectively, once every eight years for the *muuda* (anointment)⁵ ceremony.

5 According to my Borana informants, this kind of pilgrimage is not unique to the Gabra. Other Oromo and non-Oro-

The other way round, the Gabra Gaar is a provider of incense for the Borana *raaba* and *gadamojjii* (the fifth and eleventh *gadaa* grades, respectively; Gemechu 2012: 59). The incense from the Gabra Gaar is known as *qumbi gabra gaar*. In return for the blessing and incense the Borana give *baddo* (cotton cloth) and *darara* (tobacco).

Similarly, there are important relationships between the Borana and the Konso at an institutional level through ritual gift exchanges between the ritual leaders. The Borana *qaalluu* council visits the Konso ritual leaders once every eight years. They receive *burana* (beads) from the Konso *kala* (ritual leader) in return for salt. The Borana *qaalluu* does not visit the Konso *kala* in person, but is represented by their councilors. The delegates present gifts and collect the beads back for the *qaalluu* and themselves. These beads are esteemed/valued to indicate the ritual status of their bearer. This is one of the few instances in which the Borana *qaalluu* pays a visit to receive ritual materials from other ritual leaders. In most of the cases the Borana *qaalluu* receives gifts in return for blessing.

Furthermore, the Borana *gadaa* leaders visit the Konso land on two occasions within the eight years of *gadaa* time. One of these occasions relevant to this particular issue is the *gurgur naqaa* ritual which is translated as "flood of trade" (Leus and Salvadori 2006: 290). It is performed by the outgoing *gadaa*

mo groups made similar pilgrimages to the Borana *qaalluu*. In the past, the Oromo made their pilgrimages to the famous *abba muuda* in Borana land from all over the Oromo areas (see Hassen 1990).



Fig. 2: *Kallacha* is a phallic *gadaa* symbol, usually worn on the forehead by the Borana male and *gadaa* leaders when performing certain rituals (source: author's fieldwork, October 10, 2010).

leaders. On this occasion the Borana *gadaa* and Konso ritual leaders physically meet each other. The Borana *gadaa* leaders go to the Konso land with livestock and salt as gift for the Konso represented by their ritual leaders. The *gadaa* leaders provide oxen, castrated sheep, and goats, and salt of about thirty laden. On this occasion, in return, the Konso ritual leaders provide the Borana *gadaa* leaders with important cultural materials like *kallacha* (see Fig. 2), *baddoo* (white cotton cloth used as blanket), *burana* (beads), sorghum, coffee, and tobacco.

These cultural materials are accorded a special status compared to those bought on the market in a normal transaction. For instance, the Konso make *kallacha* for sale on the market and any ordinary Borana pastoralist who is eligible to wear it easily can access it. However, the one for the leader of *gadaa* has to be a gift from the Konso ritual leader. This *kallacha* is called *kallacha korma*, which literally means “bull *kallacha*” and connotatively implies an “active *kallacha*” with superior status. It is worn by the prime *gadaa* leader. In this regard, the more important is not the material itself but the meaning and value attached to it and the communication between the Konso and the *Borana* via their ritual or/and political leaders by means of ritual gift exchanges. Through the gift they retain the link between the two groups. Even though gift-giving practices are done at an individual level between the ritual leaders, it has the capacity of maintaining established amicable relationships between the two groups, and it must be seen in terms of cultural contexts. The Konso are known as providers of *kallacha* and deserve a special place in the *gadaa* system. The Borana associate the *kallacha* with all Konso and not with a ritual leader of leaders. Meanwhile, the Konso who received an ox from the Borana *gadaa* leader slaughter the ox and invite Konso men and women to eat. Further, the skin of the ox is distributed among the attendants in the form of a skin bracelet called *medhicha* (for its physical appearance see Fig. 3).

Such webs of political, cultural, economic, and psychological ties are often updated through ritual gift exchanges. As forms of this common social phenomenon the Borana have similar cultural ties and

Fig. 3: The photo shows *medhicha* worn by the Borana *qaalluu* of the Karrayuu clan and his councilor on their wrist on the occasion of a *gadaa* general assembly. They wore a strip of skin taken from a slaughtered animal, either for daily consumption or a special ritual act. *Medhicha* is worn to indicate the participation in the ceremony or feast when the animal is sacrificed. It also indicates that the blessing pertinent to the sacrificial extends to the bearer of the bracelet. Furthermore, it is used to indicate honor of the guest for whom certain animal is slaughtered (source: author's fieldwork, August 2012).



ritual gift exchanges with the Arbore (Gebre 1997; Wolde Gossa 2000, 2002). To understand these cultural ties one needs to know who the Arbore are and what some of their basic cultural institutions are.

3 The Arbore and Their Social Institutions: An Overview

In the present Ethiopian administrative structure, the Arbore inhabit the southeastern part of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR; one of the nine ethnically based regional states of Ethiopia). The Arbore are also called Hor (Pankhurst 2006: 249; Wolde Gossa 2000: 119, 2002: 37). Their territory extends along the desert plain from the Tsemako country in the north to the Kenyan frontier in the south and from the foothill of the Hamar in the west to the foothill of the Borana land in the east, including the surface of the dry Lake Stefanie (Wolde Gossa 2002: 37). The Arbore are a small group and according to the 2007 Ethiopian population and housing census (CSA 2007: 65) they count about 6.840. They speak a common language, which is categorized as belonging to the Omo-Tana cluster of the Lowland East Cushitic languages. They are multilingual; they speak Oromo and Hamar in addition to their own language. Their livelihood is based on both crop production and animal husbandry. Animal husbandry is significantly important not only for subsistence but also central to their rituals and values. They also practice flood retreat cultivation. Sorghum and maize are the main crops produced by using the Waito and Segan Rivers for irrigation (Gebre 1997: 144; Wolde Gossa 2002: 37).

Like most East African communities, the Arbore have an age-grade system which has an important impact on political, social, judicial, and economic life of the people. The Arbore have a ritual leader called *qawot*, who usually is a male. They live in four main villages. Each village has its own ritual leader (Wolde Gossa 2002: 37). The *qawot*⁶ is equivalent to the Borana *qaalluu*. It is believed that the *qawot* has the power of blessing pasture, water, cattle, and humans. They are known for their rain-making abilities and for enabling friendly neighbors to defeat their enemies. The *qawot* has also cursing powers (Wolde Gossa 2002: 43). In general, the *qawot* is believed to have the power of channeling between God and man (Gebre 1997: 147; Wolde Gossa 2002: 43). Wolde Gossa (2002: 37) stated that ordinary Arbore pass the cattle gates of the *qa-*

wot with gifts of animals, honey, tobacco, coffee, herbs, etc. to obtain blessings that enable them to have children, wealth, and good health. Besides the *qawot* there are political functionaries who play an important role in the life of the Arbore. Leaders of the age-set in power, called *jaldhaba*, are responsible for the administration of pasture land, while those named *mura* are responsible for the administration of farm land and the cultivation of sorghum. They also work to ensure the maintenance of order. The *qawot* claims to have influence over the natural and social order of the territory of the Arbore and beyond (Wolde Gossa 2000: 120).

The Borana consider the Arbore as their kin and kith. Borana's oral tradition indicates that the Arbore once were Borana. They say, "*Arborri borana arboreen borana*," meaning "the central *gadaa* council of the Borana, called *ya'a arbora* belongs to the Borana and the people of Arbore are Borana." In their oral tradition the Borana state "*ona godannaan bulte Arboreen dir itti dhaabde*," which means "Arbore permanently settled where they passed the night during seasonal migration." According to this version, the Arbore were detached from the Borana caused by migration. The origin of one of the Arbore ritual leaders is also traced back to the *qaalluu* of the Karrayu clan of the Borana (Gebre 1997: 146; Schlee 1989: 201).

Similarly, oral traditions traced the origin of the Arbore back to different groups spread over the area, especially to the Borana and the Gabra (Gebre 1997: 146). This has been further substantiated by Schlee (1989: 201) who stated that one of the versions concerning the source of the drum of the Boruga lineage of the Algana phratry of the Gabra was the Arbore *qawot*. This version depicts the interrelations between Borana, Arbore, and Gabra. Gebre (1993: 23) clearly stated that the Arbore are an aggregate of some of the communities that live in the region and that their origin can be traced back to the Borana, Gabra, Dassenetch, Hamar, Karrayu clan of the Oromo in Shoa, and others living around Lake Rudolf. In addition, Schlee (1989) mentioned that the historical relationship between the Arbore and the Borana can be traced back to the time characterized by an absence of any well defined boundaries between the Oromo-speaking ancestors of the Borana and the western Omo-Tana-speaking ancestors of the Arbore.

4 Borana and Arbore Relationships

The relationship between Borana and Arbore is a collaborative one and one characterized by the spirit

⁶ The Borana call the Arbore "*qawot a qaalluu*."

of brotherhood (Gebre 1997: 146). They share resources on both sides of the Segan River based on ecological and seasonal variations of resources. During the rainy season large areas of the Arbore lowland is covered by water and consequently they drive their cattle to Borana highland. Similarly, during the dry season the Borana cross Segan River and graze their cattle in the Arbore territory. Local trade and individual bond-friendships also contribute to the positive relationship and the spirit of brotherhood between the two groups. Until recently, and as the Borana were predominantly pastoralists and accessed grain through local trade, the main sources for that were the Arbore and the Konso in the west. Reciprocally, the Borana provide *sodda*, *magaadoo*, *dilloo* (salt for human and animals) to the Arbore. Furthermore, the cultural relations between the Borana and the Arbore are significantly revealed in the close relationships between the ritual leaders of the two groups. Particularly, their relationships are institutionalized around the office of Arbore *qawot* and Borana *qaalluu*. The Arbore *qawot* and the Borana *qaalluu* exchange certain ritual gifts (see also Gebre 1997: 146f.). The Borana fully believe that the Arbore *qawot* has numinous power; he is a *garoo* or *eebbiftu* (someone in charge of blessing) whose words communicate Waaqa to make a difference.

The succession ceremony of the Arbore *qawot* is supposed to be attended by the representatives of the Karrayu *qaalluu* of the Borana. The *qaalluu* is not visiting the Arbore *qawot* in person, rather he is represented by one of his councilors. The Borana *qaalluu* provides the newly initiated *qawot* with ritual gifts, like *ruufa* (turban), incense, and a bull for slaughtering. Similarly, the Karrayu *qaalluu* of the Borana, who also provides ritual gifts receives a ritual ax called *dhakaraa Arbore* (Arbore's ax) from the Arbore *qawot* once in his lifetime. Once he secured the ax, it serves a lifelong purpose. On the death of a *qaalluu*, his successor needs a new ax right from the time of the succession.

Literatures indicate that apart from alliance formation ritual gifts may be guided by religious or moral necessities. In all cases, ritual gift exchanges involve at least three obligations: to give, to receive, and to repay. Obligation to receive is equally important, because refusing gifts is a sign of an unfriendly or hostile act. In this regard, gifts draw boundaries between friends and foes, between those who are eligible to receive and those who are not. In addition, reciprocity is also equally important to sustain the exchange partnership through time. Yet, reciprocity regularly reverses the giver-recipient roles while it is not necessarily symmetrical in terms of material

values of the gifts.⁷ The ethnographic evidence on Borana-Arbore relations reveals that the Arbore *qawot* gives an ax and incense in exchange for a bull, a turban, and incense from the Borana *qaalluu*. In this sense, the reciprocity is neither symmetrical nor the giver takes into consideration the recipient to present a desired gift as suggested in research on the perfect gifts (Mayet and Pine 2010: 3).

The reciprocity between the Arbore *qawot* and the Borana *qaalluu*, however, has double meanings. First, it serves as means of maintaining the relations of cooperation between the two groups for the leaders to perform proxy ritual gift exchanges. It is part of the regional politics of alliance formation or the establishing of diplomatic relations in which the political systems and the religious institutions of the various ethnic groups have been interacting. The ritual gift exchanges performed between the two ritual leaders substitute ritual gift exchanges between all the Borana and Arbore, with the power of connecting the two. According to Mauss (1924; as cited in Sherry 1983: 158), even though gifts are done by individuals they have the power to be evaluated as an ideal contract and vehicle of alliance formation among groups within a certain cultural framework.

Schlee (1998: 139f.) discussed that the Borana, who were the dominant force in northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia, established certain links with their neighbors. Borana are ritually dependent on others, as others are dependent on them. Thus, the ritual gift exchanges and relations between the Borana and the Arbore have been parts of these institutional designs, which have made the groups in the region dependent on each other. According to Sherry (1983: 158), support for this assertion also comes from the work of van Baal (1975) who showed that gift can be interpreted as an invitation to partnership, and as a confirmation of the giver's friendly participation in the taker's hardships and joys. The giving of gift can be used to shape and reflect social integration.

Moreover, it has been a way of extending the blessing of the *qawot* to the Borana territories through their ritual leader, the *qaalluu*. The ax given to the *qaalluu* symbolizes the ax given to all Borana people, and the same ax is believed to have mystical power to give prosperity and fertility in the territories under the constituency of the receiving *qaalluu*. The Borana *qaalluu* also gets incense from the Arbore *qawot*. This ritual practice shows that incense is a gift for both of them, the receiver and the giver. The Borana *qaalluu*, who is liable in giving

7 Camerer (1988); Joy (2001); Belk (1979); Wolfenbarger (1990).

incense to the *qawot* and other people around, like the Gabra Gaar mentioned above, is also liable to receive the same item from the Arbore *qawot*. The issue is not about superiority and/or inferiority of the position of these ritual leaders, rather it shows how they mutually complement each other to attain their numinous power to its full capacity within and beyond their constituencies. The two groups developed a system in which the powers of the ritual leaders supplement each other.

In this regard, Wolfenbarger (1990; as cited in Mayet and Pine 2010: 3) argued that a gift is a symbolic affirmation of the relationships between the giver and the receiver and their social, political, and economic statuses. According to this writer, symbols in the gift exchange contain an array of significant meanings and expressive values. Expressive value, according to Sherry (1983: 159), enables a gift giver to communicate part of his individuality to the receiver. It entails a depth of relationship that the giver has for the receiver, which is difficult to measure, as it is personal and subjective.

Pertinent to this the Arbore *qawot* and the Borana *qaalluu* communicate to each other their numinous powers through the ritual gifts they exchange. Those objects of ritual gifts are accorded with special spiritual power to convey the message of the giver to the receiver. In this regard, Mauss (1924) stated that to offer something is to offer a part of oneself. Gifts allow a conveyance through symbols without the use of language in which the giver communicates his inner feeling. This point clearly indicates the difference between commodities and gifts. According to Bell (1991: 156), primarily, gifts “involve some element of interpersonal dependence”, that is, “the giver of a gift remains an element of the good or service and does not alienate himself from it.” The giver communicates his identity and retains his link with the receiver through the gift, whereas in the case of a commodity, exchange is simply between objects without any residual social relations between the parties to the exchange.

Apart from their institutional linkage and according to Wolde Gossa (2000: 120), the influence of the Arbore *qawot* goes beyond the territory of the Arbore and the allegiances to them come from the neighboring groups, including Borana individual pastoralists. Such relations, as Wolde Gossa (2002: 43) stated, favored both the Arbore and their neighbors. It resulted in intermarriage, sharing of pasture, water, and other resources, built mutual trusts across the boundary, enabled free movements of people, animals, goods, and knowledge, and the formation of bond friendships. Wolde Gossa (2000: 120) portrayed that Arbore *qawot* commanded, and still

command, respect for enhancing human, animal, and crop fertility and for facilitating relations between groups by keeping the main trade routes open and safe for users. The *qawot* are liable in blessing and praying to keep the routes open and safe. The traditional route to the Arbore *qawot* is termed as *gor* in Arbore (Wolde Gossa 2002: 43; 2000: 131). The *gor* is the symbolic representation of peaceful and formal relationships among the neighboring groups and the Arbore. Wolde Gossa stated that there are many prescribed and blessed routes used by the neighboring groups to visit the *qawot*. The blessing is believed to make possible not only social harmony and peace, but also to maintain natural order intact, like the rain to rain, the grass to grow, women to give birth, and cattle to multiply. As a result, the neighboring groups are loyal to the Arbore *qawot* and seek their blessing. Those who seek to visit their dwellings only have to travel on the blessed and prescribed routes. Detouring from the blessed routes is an indicator of a non-peaceful journey to the land of the Arbore. This helps the Arbore to identify pilgrims from potential enemies.

Pilgrims often offer gifts in return for prayer and blessing of the *qawot*. They also enter *qawot*'s cattle gates to acknowledge their allegiance to express their attitude for wishes fulfilled through his mediumship (Wolde Gossa 2002: 43). Thus, in line with this view, the *qawot* primarily build a bridge between the supreme divinity and man. They also transcend ethnic boundaries in the sense that people from the neighboring groups are loyal to the Arbore *qawot*, as they seek their blessing for fertility, prosperity, and peace. They establish friendship relations with the Arbore per se through their *qawot*.

At other times, the neighboring people invite the Arbore *qawot* to their own territories in order to benefit from the power of blessing and cursing (Wolde Gossa 2002: 43). According to my Borana informants, in former times, the Arbore *qawot* used to visit Borana territory, especially on market days, and the Borana pastoralists provided him with little gifts like *daraaraa* (tobacco) and coffee in return for his blessing. The *qawot* deserved great respect and hospitality among the Borana. In spite of the assumed proxy ritual gift exchanges between the Borana *qaalluu* and Arbore *qawot*, every Borana pastoralist still seeks to get Arbore's ax and his blessing in person. The Borana provide material gifts for the intangible return: a blessing and a blessing conferred on an ax. As Sherry (1983: 159f.) showed, the issue is not what is given but the act of giving takes precedence over the gift itself. Gifts are more important for their symbolic values compared

to their material values. Mayet and Pine (2010: 2) indicated that there are four key elements in gift exchanges. These include “the giver, the receiver, the occasion, and the gift” itself. A particular gift exchange needs to be seen from the point of view of the interactions of all these four elements, rather than its mere material values. Gifts are of different types: tangible or intangible, objects, services, and experiences. Any resource can be transformed into a gift through the channel of social relationships in a specific giving context.

In Arbore-Borana relationships neither an ax nor incense is a special item by itself, but it is when given and received by ritual leaders for ritual purposes. For the Borana an ax from the Arbore *qawot* is believed to be the source of prosperity, multiplication of cattle, health, and success in all aspects. The Borana often refer to someone affluent as the owner of an Arbore ax. Referring to someone affluent and successful, they often ask: “*Namni kun agaraa Arboree qabaa?*,” meaning “Does he/she have Arbore’s ax?” The Borana value cattle; a large number of cattle is a symbol of success in economic terms. Apart from this, they see other types of success, like victory in war and fertility in bearing children, maintaining good health and the likes as bound up with having Arbore’s blessing. In addition, those who have sticks of the Arbore are said to be winners in war.

In response to this, Borana individuals or organized delegates often make pilgrimages to the *qawot*. The pilgrims perform a highly ritualized way of giving and receiving gifts. They take a female lamb, ox, *baddoo* (cotton blanket), *ruufa* (turban), coffee, tobacco, and *dilloo* (bar of salt) as gift for the *qawot*. On the way to the *qawot* ritual site, the sheep pulls a rope fasten on its leg starting from the vicinity of the pilgrims to the dwelling of the *qawot*. The pilgrims are supposed to use one of the traditional and blessed routes. On their arrival, the pilgrims enter the ritual gate (called *galma*) of the *qawot*, stand in front of the *qawot*, and ask for his blessing by saying: “*Qaalluu eebbisi! marra eebbisi, madda eebbisi, nagaa eebbisi, dhal eebbisi, dhalch eebbisi, karaa eebbisi, eel eebbisi, dheed eebbisi, nam eebbisi, sa’a eebbisi*” (“*Qaalluu* would you bless, would you bless pasture, peace, safe delivery, fertility, road, wells, grazing, animals and humans, etc?”). They repeat the same questions many times, because the *qawot* normally does not respond before the cattle has returned home in the evening. The *qawot* responds only after he has heard his sheep bleat on the way home. The Borana believe that the sheep is a symbol of peace and that its blood has the potential to cleanse impurity and enables the com-

munication between man and Waaqa. They call it *gaaro*, which means something with spiritual or numinous power, something that deserves special respect, like the *qawot* and the *qaalluu*. Borana oral tradition indicates that the Karrayyuu *qaalluu* of the Borana was originally found with sheep. As *qaalluu* is *gaaro*, so is a sheep. This is extended to the Arbore *qawot* and his sheep.

The bleating of the sheep has two symbolic meanings: primarily it is the symbol of peace. Peace in the area between the neighbors, peace on that particular day; the herders and the herds are all safe, peace of the Waaqa who offers rainfall and grass so that the sheep feed on pastures throughout the day and come back bleating. Usually, it is when they are satisfied that cows, sheep, and goats bleat for their calves or lambs and bulls bellow. This signals the presence of pasture and water. Lactating livestock rush home to meet their calves or lambs when they are well fed, and not otherwise. Since sheep is *gaaro* from among other livestock for the Borana the bleating of the sheep symbolizes calmness and kindness, peace and abundance. Secondly, it signals fertility for the bleating is most likely in search of its lambs.

In the meantime, the *qawot* who has the power to pray to Waaqa for peace, fertility, and life in general and who is in charge of feeding and protecting his poor adherents through these practices of special communication with the Waaqa starts uttering words of prayer and blessing for the fertility, prosperity, and peace of the land. As soon as he had heard the bleating of the sheep, he started blessing. “*Maddi nagaya, karraan nagaya, bisaan nagaya, dhalti nagaya, dhalchi nagaya, dirreen nagaya, Boran muummeen nagaya, eel nagaya, harti nagaya, tikeen nagaa, tiki nagaa.*”^[8] These words mean: “May pasture be peace, routes to the Arbore be peace, water be peace, may it be good fertility for the women, crop, and land, may Borana be peace, may water wells, rivers, and springs be peace, may herds and herders be peace.” He also curses all the evils. Throughout their stay at his village the blessing continues in different ways. The pilgrims are fed, a sheep is slaughtered by the hosting *qawot*, honey is served, and sorghum is boiled. And each time the *qawot* blesses the meal and the pilgrims. For instance, the boiled sorghum is served after blessing the pilgrims saying that “you multiply like these sorghum grains!” And honey is served following the blessing “let Waaqa make us sweet to

8 In this text a Borana local dialect is used, which is a bit different from the standard Oromo, e.g., *agaraa* instead of *dha-karaa*, *tikee* instead of *tiksee*, *bisaan* instead of *bishaan*.

one another like this honey.” Each step and practice has its own meaning, as, e.g., the sorghum is a symbol of wealth, many people, and many cattle; honey signifies love and cooperation among the groups of pilgrims and the hosting Arbore.

One very colorful and symbolic ritual is the blessing of the road. As stated above, a rope is tied to the leg of a sheep and pulled throughout their journey to the dwelling of the *qawot*. At the end of the day, the same rope is tied to the leg of one of the attendants of the pilgrims and pulled back on the way home. The pilgrims never pass a night in any one’s home, never use any other means of transportation but walk on foot, follow the well-known road to and from the *qawot* seat. The *qawot* points to the rope pulled on the way to his place and back and blesses the whole road and cures diseases, war, theft, all over the territories through which the rope is pulled back and forth. The Borana visitors return home not only with blessing and prayer but also with an *agaraa* (*dhakaraa*) *Arboree* (ax from Arbore) for individual use. They use the ax to cut *butumee*, a wood used for the gate of the cattle’s corral called *moonaa*. The corral is a circular enclosure built of thorn branches. It has two gates in opposite directions. The first gate is called *balbala elemaa* (milking gate) and faces the house of the owner of the corral. It is used to get into the enclosure to milk and is closed by thorn branches called *cufanaa*. The second gate through which the cattle is released for grazing is called *karra loonii* (Leus and Salvadori 2006: 464). This gate is closed by *butumee*. Leus and Salvadori (2006: 95) describe *butumee* as a main branch which serves as a closing for the kraal gateway (*karra loonii*; see Fig. 4). Other

smaller branches called *qoraan karra* are piled on *butumee* to close the enclosure. When opening the enclosure in the morning, the smaller branches are pulled inside to one corner, whereas the *butumee* is pulled outwards, at some distance from the kraal gate. During the evening it is pulled back in. *Butumee* has symbolic meanings related to cattle economy. Pulling the *butumee* outward is the wish that a corral should be wider than it is. Any Borana person wishes the gateway of his/her corral to be pushed outward, which would happen as result of an increase in livestock.

In the absence of any cattle in the kraal, the *butumee* is not pulled back inwards. Instead, it is left abandoned and the Borana often express it as “*ya butumee ala na kayani*,” meaning “I lost all my cattle and my *butumee* remained outside of the gateway, there is no reason to pull it back in” (see Leus and Salvadori 2006: 94 f.). Thus, *butumee* is what it is in the presence of cattle in the enclosure. Leus and Salvadori further state that the *butumee* and the kraal gateway are ritually important. The Borana who want to enter the kraal for ritual purposes usually line up behind the *butumee*, which marks the area of the enclosure. One instance of this is that a fiancé, when he arranges marriage with his fiancée, has to visit her parents with certain culturally prescribed gifts. Usually he spends the night with his in-laws. However, regardless of the time of his arrival, he never enters the house before the cattle of the family has returned home. He is supposed to stay behind the *butumee* of his fiancée’s family and to enter the kraal following the livestock through the kraal gateway. Similarly, a bride is not allowed to enter the house of her in-laws before the return-



Fig. 4: *Butumee* (source: author’s fieldwork, August 2012, Gumi Gayoo).

ing of the cattle to the kraal, regardless of the time of her arrival. She has to stay behind the *butumee*. There she is ritually served a brimful cup of milk. Finally, she gets into the kraal together with the cattle of the family.

The Borana prefer to have the *butumee* which is cut by an ax from Arbore. When someone secures an ax from Arbore he builds a large corral, big enough for a larger number of livestock than the family's actual one, wishing that the cattle will multiply and saturate it as a result of the blessing and prayer communicated to the ax. The *qawot* is not the maker of the ax physically, but spiritually. The power of the ax emerges not where it comes from, but from the blessing communicated to it. The Borana buy ordinary axes from the land of the Arbore, but the same ax is endowed with mystical power through the blessing of the *qawot*. In this regard, early writers such as Csikszentmihalyi and Rothenberg-Halton (1981; as cited in Sherry 1983: 158) contended that an individual invests psychic energy in an object, thereby the object is charged with the energy of that agent. Objects communicate the being of the donor, who is ready to transfer a portion of that being to the receiver.

Despite the close relationships between the Borana and the Arbore the two groups have also experienced relations of war in different times. The wavering relationships between them have direct relations with the antagonism between the Borana and the Hamar and the friendly relationships between the Hamar and the Arbore. The account presented by Gebre (1997: 148) shows that the history of the conflict between the Borana and the Arbore can be traced back to about 200 years, caused by the conflictual relationships between the Borana and the Hamar. It is told that a surplus of food attracted both the Borana and the Hamar to join the Arbore. The Borana used this opportunity to kill many Hamar, which finally led to the conflict between the Borana and the Arbore in which the latter avenged the death of the Hamar.

Borana oral traditions do not confirm any large-scale fighting between the two in the pre-1991 period. Subsequent to the downfall of the *derg* and the coming to power of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in May 1991 and the power vacuum in the area, the conflict between the Borana and the Arbore escalated and reached its highest peak. The ever-exacerbated conflict between the two groups caused the loss of many lives. The war started on June 18, 1992 (Gebre 1997: 149). The Borana invaded most of the Arbore territory, however, they not only lost the war, but also a huge number of lives compared to the Ar-

bore who fought a war of defense.⁹ Writers have not agreed upon the number of Borana victims. Yet there was consensus that the number of Borana victims by far exceeded that of the Arbore victims. This was confirmed by the Borana account too.

It is not the intention of this article to discuss the war between Borana and Arbore. However, it is worth mentioning that according to Borana interpretation, the consequence of the war is rooted in / can be explained by the power of the *qawot*. The Borana attributed their defeat in the war and their fallen to the sacredness of the Arbore, rather than to any war strategies or differences in armament. Both groups employed light weapons, mainly Kalashnikov automatic rifles.

According to the Borana, the Arbore *qawot* is a person endowed with numinous power and any war against his people was unjust war. Any traveler to the land of the Arbore has to use the blessed and only the blessed route. They travel with the purpose to receive blessing from the *qawot* and to confess allegiance to him. The Borana attributed the loss of many lives to the spiritual punishment inflicted upon them for fighting the *qawot* who is the source of peace, fertility, prosperity, and life. The Borana have experiences of such a heavy loss of human life on several occasions, as, e.g., during the Italian invasion of the 1930s or the Ethio-Somali War of 1977/78 (also known as the Ogaden War). During these wars, many of the Borana have lost their lives and a large number of their cattle. Yet, it had nothing to do with spiritual involvement and punishment. It was the result of balance of power in its material and technical terms. But during the 1992 Borana-Arbore War, the Borana had both the numerical and the material superiority. Yet, the Arbore, according to the Borana, were supported by Waaqa. In other words, the imbalance of the outcome of the 1992 war between the two groups was due to the violation of the inviolable power of the Arbore *qawot*. Traditionally, the Borana were expected to pass through the Arbore land by taking the traditional route, and only in peace and proving their allegiances to the ritually superior *qawot*. Yet, they invaded the *qawot* and his people for which they paid a heavy price.

5 Conclusion

This case study shows that every group which seems militarily and economically powerful and ritually superior is still dependent on its neighbors in

⁹ Pankhurst (2006: 249); Gebre (1997: 149); Wolde Gossa (2002: 57).

one or another respect. The Arbore *qawot*, who are known to be ritually powerful and to have the power of influencing neighboring groups beyond their territory, still need certain gifts from Borana *qaalluu*. Similarly, the Borana *qaalluu*, who are known for providing incense and blessings to different Borana and non-Borana groups and individuals, receive gifts (including incense itself) from the Arbore *qawot*. None of them is neither absolutely self-sufficient nor absolutely dependent. The relations of cooperation between the two groups at the level of their institutions basically emerged from the recognition of these realities.

The practice of keeping the prescribed route open and safe by the *qawot* also serves common purposes. Primarily, it enables safe movements across the border to sale and/or buy market items within normal transactions. Furthermore, when the Arbore *qawot* blesses to sustain pasture, water, and peace in the region, it is to the advantage of all. In the meantime, the abundance of pastoral resources, on the other side, reduces the pressure on the groups' pastoral resources. Thus, the relations are part of the adaptation to the environmental and pastoral life of the region. Further, the relationship between the Borana and the Arbore is not unique; it is part of the political alliance and social integration of the region in which groups are ritually, politically, and economically dependent on each other.

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