SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trees symbolism, conservation and threat in Guji Oromo, Southern Ethiopia

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Abstract: This article aims at investigating origin of tree symbolism and the cultural events embedded within this symbolism among the Guji Oromo. The study has opted qualitative approach, descriptive research design, and method of data production like interview, focus group discussion and transect walk. The finding shows that culture of tree symbolism in the area has been originated and developed from the long existing notion that trees are perceived as sacred gift of God to Earth and humankind. Particularly, some of native trees such as Cordia Africana, Euclea divinorum and Maesa lanceolata are symbolically connected to a variety of indigenous practices and events like ritual of avoiding inauspicious omen, ritual of idiomatism, homicide case resolution, and mythical power expression. This allegorical link between indigenous practices and native trees has made the strong affinity between local practices and native trees in the manner that underpins conservation of native trees in spite of some anthropogenic menaces. Generally, culture of tree symbolism is indispensable to understand a long century’s environmentally friendly life of the people and to conserve native trees. Thus, this culture of tree symbolism has to be preserved by all concerned stakeholders to sustain environmentally benign practices among the people.

Subjects: Anthropology - Soc Sci; Sociology & Social Policy; Classical Studies; Cultural Studies

Keywords: Trees symbolism; conservation; threat; Guji Oromo; Southern Ethiopia

1. Introduction

Trees have long played central role in socio-cultural life of people throughout the world symbolizing range of cultural practices. Evidently, people make use of trees symbolically to materialize the abstract concept of human life which embedded in cultural settings (Janes & Cloke, 2002). Particularly, the

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This research investigates the origin of tree symbolism and cultural events associated with this symbolism in Guji Oromo, southern Ethiopia. The research is significant in that it contributes to attempts of understanding origin of tree symbolism from local people experiential knowledge point and the inextricable link between native trees and various indigenous practices that indirectly contributes for conservation of the trees. Therefore, the findings of the study might be of interests to academics, preservationists of natural features, policymakers and local communities in general whose indigenous practices are interconnected with physical environment.
symbolic values of indigenous trees are more significant to understand the link between trees and indigenous practices among different people. There is an occasion whereby indigenous trees metaphorically demonstrate communal identity, history, and belonging of people (Pauline von, 2016).

Furthermore, trees have been vital and integral part of human social life and the allegoric indicators of diverse belief systems, myths, local narratives, commemorations and other cultural phenomena in different cultural contexts across the globe (Castro, 2003; Christensen, 2015; Chuvyuru, 2004; Pauline von, 2016). As argued by Kolb and Murakami (1994), some indigenous trees are more known for their symbolic properties and possess a variety of constituent ritual uses. For instance, 

**Mugumo (Ficus thonningii)**

This tree in Gikuyu of Kenya is symbolically described as a boundary marker, worship center, circumcision site and icon of people identity (Karangj, 2008). All these foregoing discussions present that different indigenous trees have the diverse symbolic implications and attachments of cultural values. However, it is in fact that symbolic attachments and intrinsic mythical values attached to indigenous trees are considerably varied across the globe due to cultural variations. Therefore, further scholars’ attention is needed to systematically explore and properly document culture of tree symbolism within its own context and framework.

Among the Guji of southern Ethiopia, indigenous trees have deep ingrained cultural importance and implications ever since the ancient time. Studying the indigenous forest utilization and management strategies vis-à-vis subsistence economy in Guji Zone, Nagesa (2011) concluded that indigenous trees deliver cultural as well as economic functions to Guji Oromo. Highlighting the cultural dimensions of local trees, Desalegn (2013) underlined that Guji people have indigenous mechanisms of conserving forests and trees for different socio-cultural functions. As further discussed by Gemeda (2019) and Nagesa (2011) different rituals, libations and supplications are performed under different indigenous trees in Guji Oromo. However, even though cultural dimensions of indigenous trees have been addressed, the Guji Oromo culture of tree symbolism was not empirically investigated and documented. Specially, tree symbolism in Guji Gadaa system, the role of tree symbolism in conservation of indigenous trees and the emerging threats on tree symbolism were not duly inquired. Therefore, this article investigates the origin and practices of tree symbolism, the conservational value it offers to sustainability of indigenous trees, and current threats facing in Guji people.

2. Methods

2.1. Description of the study area

This study was conducted in two districts of Guji Zone, Adoolaa Reeddee and Waadaraa in southern Oromiya National Regional State, Ethiopia. The Guji people reside in southern part of the region particularly in West Guji, Guji and Borana Zomes. The people have also been residing outside of the Zones, in and around western parts of Bale Zone and Wondo district of West Arsi Zone in Oromia regional state as well as in South Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region around Dilla, Gamo Gofa, Wondo Genet and around lake Hawassa (Jemjem & Dhadacha, 2011). They speak Afaan Oromoo (Oromo language), one of the most widely spoken languages in Ethiopia.

Guji Zone particularly Girja district is mythically thought as the land of origin for the people, though there are still contesed views on narrative of Guji myth of origin. Situating in southern areas of the region, Guji Zone is one of twenty-one Zones in the Region. The Zone is characterized by three ecological classifications as Baddaa (high altitude), Badda-daree (middle altitude) and Gammoojii (semiariad land) (Debsu, 2009). The districts of the study share mainly high and middle altitudes. The zone in general, is highly endowed with invaluable minerals such as gold emerald, silver and tantalum and others. Concerning the forest resources, needless to mention all but dense and eye-catching natural forests like Anoogaa, Ulaan’uluoo, Sarbaayye, in Waodara district and Saakarroo forest in Adoolaa Reeddee district are evident. The following map shows Guji Zone in general and study districts in particular Figure 1.
Gadaa system- an ancient civilization and philosophy of Oromo people has been functioning in Guji Oromo so far. The system is an indigenous institution of Oromo ordering the people around politics, economy, culture, natural environment and religion (Asmaram, 1973; Jeylan, 2006). Besides Gadaa system is described as indigenous complex system of ranking, authority, and decision-making consisting of a successive generational structure that rotates every eight years among five culturally configured “parties” locally termed as Baalli Shanan (Hinnant, 1990; Jemjem & Dhadacha, 2011). The five parties in Gadaa system are known in different nomenclatures across the Oromiya region. In Guji, they are known as Halchisa, Roobalee, Harmuufa, Muudana and Dhalana. The term of office for one Gadaa party is eight years period. However, the remaining parties tolerantly wait for the cyclical rotation of their tenure by performing the precluding rituals and passing through mandatory anticipatory socialization processes in the system.

In Guji Gadaa system, there are fourteen age grades ranging from birth to agedness through which everybody passes. These stages of age grades are: Dabbalee (1-8 years), Qarree Duraa or Gaammee Didiqoo (9-16), Qarree Duubaa (17-24), Kuusaa (25-28), Rooba (29-36) Doorii (37-40), Gadaa (40-48) Baatuu (49-56), Yuubaa (57-64) Yuuba Guddaa (65-72) Jaarsa Guururuu (73-80) Jaarsa Quulluu (81-88) Jaarsa Raqaya (89-96) and Ginya (97-death) (Jemjem & Dhadacha, 2011). Except the Kuusaa and Doorii generational grades (luba) that take four years period to join the next generational rank, all the rest Gadaa generational grades take eight years period to complete the staying time in a particular age grade, and then promote to the next stage. In fact, the hierarchical developments in Guji Gadaa systems usually depend, not on the age grades, but on luba grades-which is all about the successive generational grade. The development from one age grade to another is usually accompanied by various rites of passages. The active party assuming power of leadership in Gadaa system is responsible to oversee all affairs among the people including politics, socio-cultural, economic, religious and ecological concerns. Unlike the modern states political power transition, Gadaa power transition is peacefully carried out without any symptom of disputes, disturbances, which are common in pre and post elections in many states. As a result, Gadaa system is indigenous democratic institution of Guji in particular and Oromo at large.
Based on genealogical grouping, Guji people are categorized into three phratries namely Uraaga, Maatti and Hoookku. This classification diachronically traces back to Guji’s myth of origin in Girja land. Gujo, an ancestor of Guji had four sons and one daughter whose name are Uraaga, Maatti, Hoookku (Tuloo) and Adaadaa respectively. The names of three phratries have been derived from the names of three sons. Currently, all phratries have independent Abbaa Gadaa (Gada leader) who administers overall affairs of the system but Gadaa leader of Uraaga phratry is thought to be the premier of all Guji Gadaa leaders because of Uraago myth of primogeniture.

2.2. Methodological approach
This study has employed non-probability sampling, particularly purposive one in selection of the informants. This form of sampling was opted to access the knowledgeable elders, Gadaa leaders and their councilors who are believed to be rich in knowledge of Gadaa system and its links with natural features. Among thirty-two elderly informants, seven of them are elder women. The elderly informants were purposively selected to share their experiential knowledge about tree symbolism. Field guiders facilitated the informants contact and access at different occasions, places and times.

The study has employed qualitative approach, descriptive research design and data production techniques like interviews (in-depth interview and key informants interview) and focus group discussions and transect walking. In-depth interviews were conducted to get full understanding on culture of tree symbolism in the community. In addition, four key informants who are believed to be knowledgeable elders in Gadaa system were frequently interviewed. Data were collected from community elders, Gadaa leaders and Yuubaas (senior elders in Gadaa system). Focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted with seven community elders and Gadaa leaders. Transect walk was carried out with key informants to identify symbolically important trees and the associated traditions. Additionally, to substantiate the empirical data, secondary data were obtained from written documents. As soon as data collection was started, the sorting and grouping of the ideas under the similar themes was simultaneously undertaken. Finally, data were thematically presented and qualitatively described.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Conception of trees in Guji
Questioning a conception of tree symbolism among a particular community might seem ludicrousness, though it is an experiential reality embedded in cultural settings and subjected to academic inquiry. Based on an experiential knowledge and old-aged as well as diversified notions of culture-nature affinity handed down from generation to generation, trees have been symbolizing diverse cultural practices in different localities. For instance, in some contexts, they metaphorically represent loss, death, decay and rebirth (Tidball, 2014), kinship continuity and reproduction (Castro, 2003) and unity, strength, greenness, resistance and long life (Nagesa, 2011) among different people. These symbolic expressions originated from the diversified notions of different people about their local trees.

However, culture of tree symbolism among the Guji people seems quite different in its conception and cosmological backgrounds embodying experientially multiple realities and experiences. According to Gujj, standalone trees and dense forests in general are believed to be the most sacred gifts of God to the earth and human kind. They are perceived as a robe of the earth and sacrosanct endowment of human kind, which have to be properly managed and conserved for multiple socio-cultural functions they potentially provide to current as well as coming generations. In the Guji, God (Waqqo) is perceived as father and the earth is thought as mother of all creatures. It is extrapolated that the trees are natural vesture that God has sprouted on the land to cover the nudity of the earth. In the community, land without trees and forest is seen as a naked person presenting him/herself in the public street, which is shocking to see in culture of the study people. Thus, this cosmological view laid the strong ground for materialization of culture of tree symbolism and sacredness of standalone trees and sense forest in the manner that underpins the conservation efforts of indigenous trees.
Among Guji, trees and forests are whilst thought as belonged to God, humankind and wild animals. This thinking formed the “imaginary consortium” of natural features, cultural elements and supernatural being in cosmology and conception of trees in Guji Oromo. As a result, human kind should not hold sole dominion over these natural resources. This perspective underpins environmentally benign way of life that has been embedded in Gadaa system since the time immemorial.

Unlike a utilitarian view that emphasizes on the immediate advantages would be gained from trees in terms of monetary values or other services, the notion states inextricable links among natural features, cultural elements and supernatural views have been coincided with Guji culture of trees symbolism. Because, trees are whilst natural features, culturally defined natural elements, and supernaturally dedicated elements to transcendental power. But utilitarianists always recognize the inevitable influence of humans on the trees (Kolb et al., 1994), which in fact undeniable, but their intention is largely restricted to the private industrial trees targeting on the benefits obtain from production of the woods (Boyer, 2015; Kolb et al., 1994; Vitz, 2016). In addition, they see that the trees are storehouses of raw materials to be converted into goods for mere human use (Wilkinson, 2013) than serving as natural vesture of the earth as stated in Guji belief system. These evidences apparently indicate that utilitarianist define and recognize the trees in terms of their production benefits to human societies, overlooking the cultural functions they provide in different cultural settings. Therefore, in Guji cosmology the trees are perceived as the sacred gift of God covering the earth surfaces from bareness and afford the multiple socio-cultural functions to human kinds while utilitarianist focus only on immediate benefits acquire from wood production. In general, culture of tree symbolism in Guji Oromo stems from the synergy among local trees, cultural definition of trees, and endeavors of dedicating trees to the particular ritualistic events as will be discussed hereunder.

3.2. Trees in Jaarrao Utaaluu ceremony
Some native trees are widely utilized to convey a symbolic message in Guji Gadaa system. Particularly, they play a vital role in Jaarrao Utaaluu ritualistic event commonly known in Guji Gadaa system. Jaarrao Utaaluu is explicitly in fact a process of identifying and enlisting overall weaknesses performed by Gadaa ruling party during their last consecutive four years, a time half period of Gadaa power term of office. The aim of this event is to positively shape the leadership defects of the ruling party, and correct any deviated experiences and behaviors from the normal standard. This event is jointly marked by active Gadaa party who has been assuming power for half term of office, and who had assuming power of leadership before the tenure of currently active ruling party. Obviously, the term of office for each Gadaa party is eight years. The line of power transferring in Guji Gadaa system successively goes from one party to another in every eight years period. For instance, following the irreversible line the tenure period goes from Muudana to Halchiisa, Dhallana, Harmuufa and Roobalee, and then it again goes back to Muudanaa and repeats the same line.

In Guji Gadaa institution, the parties are classified into two as opponent and supporter camps. In the system, each party has its own two permanent supporters (Qadadduu) and two opponents (Wolaan naa) within five parties actually not in the basis of enmity and amity but based on traditionally patterned check and balance process in Gadaa leadership. This aims at sticking to identify and correct the flaws of ruling party to sustain the originality of indigenous practices under the globally formidable socio-cultural changes. For instance, the opponents of Muudanaa party are Halchiisa and Roobalee, because in cyclical rotation of power handing over, Roobalee precedes Muudanaa, and Halchiisa comes after Muudana. Similarly, the rest two parties are supporters of Muudana party in the system. Therefore, Jaarrao utaaluu in case of Muudana party is performed with Roobale, the preceding party in cycle of power handing over. On the ceremony, the members of opponents organize all the weaknesses observed in leadership of ruling party within half of the term of office and aggressively tell them how far they have been failed to give flawless and timely leadership in terms of keeping and transforming overall social, cultural, political, spiritual and environmental issues. The ruling party could be blamed during
the events if something was wrongly performed and omens of ruling party tenure deviated from the socially recognized standard.

At the eve of the ceremony, Gadaa ruling party goes to nearby field and stay the whole night in the patchy forest under sycamore sacred tree, getting ready for the next morning arrival of opponent group. Before the arrival of opponent group at the early morning, Abbaa Gadaa and Gadaa councilors of ruling party who stayed whole the nightlong in the forest, collect some species of trees such as *Rhicioissustridentata* from the adjacent forest, and coil them up at their heads. Upon their arrival, the first thing to be done by opponent group is pointing a newly prepared thick stick prepared from *Cordia Africana* and/or *Ehretia cymosa var cymosa* at each member of ruling party and reciting their leadership defects by going in front of them. Then the opponents slowly go behind ruling party by positively replying to their words of criticism. For instance, the opponents talk to ruling party saying “your reign is reign of bad omen, instability, deviation from the norms, full of mess, disarray and so on”. In that time, Abbaa Gadaa and Gadaa councilors reply to the opponent group saying, “unlike your presumptions, our reign is reign of peace, abundance, stability, prosperity, fertility and good omens”. Nevertheless, even though it may appear as if there might be a dispute between the parties, there would never be a dispute and any symptom that could lead to the conflict.

The tree creepers, coiled up on the heads of Abbaa Gadaa and Gadaa councilors during Jaarraa Utaaluwin is usually extracted from Dikicha tendril (*Rhicioissustridentata*), whereas the stick handled by opponents group, is prepared from Woddeessa (*Cordia Africana*) and Uraaga (*Ehretia cymosa var cymosa*) trees. Because, these trees have been dedicated to Gadaa rituals and known as the most ordained species for such events. According to Guji belief systems, making use of Dikicha tendril for Jaarraa utaaluu event usually symbolizes prosperity, bright hope, strength and endurance of ruling party. It also indicates culture of tolerance between the opponent and supporter parties. Hence, Abbaa Gadaa and his councilors encircle the creeper around their heads to signify these symbolic implications and cultural attachments. The stick handled by opponent group symbolizes the wigging system embedded in the authority of Abbaa Gadaa and Gadaa councilors’ that aims at identifying and correcting all the deviations of activity and behavior from the standard. In addition, coiling up the creepers on the heads of active party members demonstrates their willingness to admit the criticism as well as admonition from the opponent group on one hand, and their readiness to correct all the identified weaknesses within the rest four years tenure period on the other. This process gives a good opportunity to active Gadaa leaders to improve their flaws in leadership and sustain overall indigenous traditions of Gadaa governance on a right track Figure 2.

### 3.3. Tree creepers and Hulluuqqaa ritual

Culture of avoiding inauspicious omen is a deep-rooted cosmos in Guji belief system. Particularly *hulluuqqaa*- a tradition of passing beneath the creepers tied above head at two trees stand right
and left sides of the road is common practice of averting inauspicious omen. The uncertainty of the future life and anxiety about existential questions obviously overwhelm humankind to develop a certain belief system and pursue religious principles. Based on these internal existential questions, external environmental pressures and human-environmental relation, Guji people have developed the diverse culturally adaptive and coping mechanisms in their environments. The tied creeper over the head for avoidance of inauspicious omen is an ancient tradition in Guji, whereby the people declare their averting from the potential fear and danger. According to Guji elder informants, a person who passes through tied creeper usually perceives as if he/she safely escapes from the possible threat like illness, accident, risks, famine, and drought and property damage. This ritual can be performed at family and individual levels, though the procedure of conducting it is quite similar. As noted by the informants, everyone who interested in the ritual at community level, usually collects some of small branches of native trees as well as grasses and rotate them around one's head saying “the evil omen and bad harbinger bird, fail to spot at me any time” that locally translated as “kaayoo hantuul faroo hantuul na hanaqadhu”. After this aphorism, the performers throw away the small branches and grasses already rotated around one's head on the tied creepers overhead. Then the practitioners perceive as if they absolutely escape from all potential threats.

The people believe that a creeper tied over the head at two trees of parallel side beside a road has not only physical dimension but it has the spiritual and symbolic meanings and implications. Locally it is believed that a creeper extracted for this purpose is possessed in mystical power of the divine that would save the people from the potential threats. In addition, as community belief system indicates, the power of divine would blockade every inauspicious omen from the individuals and their livestock whenever they pass beneath the creeper by praying God to escape them from the potential danger. Thus, hulluuqqaa is just coterminal with going through the framed route in order to escape from the prospective threats in Guji Oromo tradition. Based on the local availability and cultural attachment of the creepers, the Guji people make use of the diverse species of creepers in different settings. However, in study area, Adoola Reedde and Waadara districts, Guji Zone, the creepers such as Hoophii (Landolphia buchananii Stapf) and Xixixiaa (Cassipourea malosana Alston) are commonly used to make a site of averting inauspicious omen. In the study area, well-known hulluuqqaa site is found in Waadara district Bullailaa Qorcaq peasant association and the area is known as Gaalee Hidhaanaa. Particularly this area is sometimes known as point of departure between semiarid and highland, which is locally stated as ‘daangaa gammojji fi ambaa”. In general, passing beneath these creepers is metaphorically believed as passing through all the potentials threats, war, drought and famine without being harmed as Guji cosmology.

3.4. Trees and mystical power
All trees are important but some trees are special in Guji Oromo Gadaa system. The diverse cultural values of trees are attached to many local stories, belief systems, myths, narratives and expressions. In the system, some native trees like Odoo (sycamore), Woddeessa (Cordia Africana), Uraaga (Ehretia cymosa var cymosa), Mi’eessa (Euclea divinorum) and Abbayyii (Maesa lanceolata) are known as Haaganna trees (the trees ordained by mystical power) and set aside for rituals and events in Gadaa system.

Particularly, the cultural values of sycamore tree permeate in the culture of Oromo people and symbolically represent their identity. Sycamore tree is presumed as a hall of Oromo Gadaa institution under which different socio-cultural affairs are performed. It is a sacred site, where Gadaa assembles come together and formulate customary laws, and announce oral declaration. It is a tree dedicated to God and Gadaa system, being a center for socio-cultural, political and religious affairs (Hinew, 2012). The tree is associated with Oromo Gadaa system because of different myths, stories and belief system. For instance, its ever-greenness, long and deep roots, white sap (milk-like liquid) and huge shadowing shelter symbolically imply the prosperities, fertilities, abundances, peacefulness and development in Oromo belief system. Above all, Ooda tree manifests and represents Oromo identity since various cultural elements in Oromo Gadaa system
are inextricably connected to it. As a result, currently Odaa tree is revealed on Oromiya National Regional State flag and other Oromo political parties’ flags as an icon of Oromo identity (Oromummaa) expression. In Guji Oromo context, Odaa tree is a center of rituals, events and cultural festivals. This culturally institutionalized attachment of Odaa tree to Oromo culture apparently indicates the affinity of natural features with Oromo culture in general and Guji in particular. Based on the multiple functions it offers, Sycamore tree is considered as an ordained tree in Guji Oromo.

Another ordained tree with mystical power and dedicated to supernatural power is Woddessa (Cordia Africana). This tree is mythically respected due to a belief system that considers it as a resting venue of God. In Gadaa system rite of passage from Raaba to Doorii age grade, cutting a branch of Cordia Africana is a prerequisite event always marked as a symbol of rank promotion. On the other hand, Uraagaa is a sacred tree, which is usually used in practices of Guji Gadaa system. For instance, Nagesa (2011) noted that Uraagaa phratry undertakes traditional prayers under this tree. As further stated by this author, this tree symbolizes strength and power of overcoming different challenging situations. Furthermore, Uraagaa tree is known as ordained tree by mystical power of God, and set aside as a revered tree. Abbayii is another tree that is believed to be ordained and imperative in various rituals of Gadaa system. In most cases, it is taken as the women’s tree under which women perform various rituals. These ordained trees are allegorically connected to various belief systems in the people. Generally, Haaganaa trees are the trees set aside for special rituals of Gadaa system and considered as the most significant trees in the community. These all are the most sacred trees in Gadaa system of Guji Oromo.

3.5. Tree and marriage ceremony
There is a symbolic alliance between a local tree called Mi’essa and marriage ceremony in Guji. This tree has been known for its cultural value and symbolic insinuations. A branch of this tree commonly cut down and made in front of groom’s door on the marriage ceremony to symbolize love, fertility, peacefulness, long enduring and coexistence between newly married spouses in the community. From its very nature, a word Mi’essa indicates something that has a value of sweetening other things. As a result, before wedding day a branch of this tree is searched from the nearby locality and brought home by family of the groom in order to stand it in the left and right sides of the door. The tree is usually stood at the door of the groom family and not at brides’ family house, because marriage is concluded at groom’s family residence. By doing so, the family of the groom celebrate and publicize the marriage of their son. In general, Mi’essa tree is symbolically taken as a tree that sweetens the life of newly married spouses in Guji Oromo.

3.6. Tree and idiomism
Even though some of the trees are symbolically associated with love, peace, fertility, abundance, reproduction and new hope in Guji culture, there is another tree linked with ritual of idiomism. This tree is called Dhamee. Dhamee is a local tree that has no value of sacredness but set aside only for ritual of idiomism whereby a curse is called upon some individuals or group as means punishing wrong doers. This means a curse invoking ritual is undertaken beneath this tree since it is known as the tree of idiomism. As a result, Guji people do not make use of this tree for any private purpose while it is thought as the tree of idiomism and craziness that could cause an evil omen when someone utilizes it for construction or fire wood purposes. As stated by the informants, whenever a given group declares war on Guji, when thieves frequently steal the properties and escape from ready handed caught, when someone does something bad and hides him/herself from the community, Guji community elder summon the assembly and call upon curse on those persons by seating under Dhamee- a tree of idiomism. Literally, a term Dhamee indicates the state of dullness, weakness, craziness, idiomism and demented in one’s life experience. However, the state of dullness has nothing to do with physical aspects of the tree. Therefore, this tree is symbolically used to call upon a curse on the enemies and evil doers among the community to make them the demented, crazy and idiot individuals or group. It is believed that one who makes use of Dhamee for private purpose would be demented and idiot. Hence, this tree is symbolically labeled
as a tree of idolatry, which serves only for the cursing ritual in Guji Oromo. Even though this belief system underpins conservation of Dhamee tree in the study area, following the expansion of imported religions and weakening of indigenous belief system, there have been degradation of indigenous trees in general and Dhamee in particular.

3.7. Tree and truth
There is allegoric connection between a tree named Dhugoo and a truth (Dhugaa) in Guji Gadaa system. Dhugoo is a sacred tree, under which Abbaa Gadaa and Gadaa councilors perform the slaughtering rituals. Particularly Dhugoo tree found at Dooyaa maintain nearby Adoolaa Woyyuu town, in Guji Zone is well known for its ritualistic functions among Uragga, Maattii and Hookku phratries of Guji Oromo. For instance, in their ritualistic prayer Abbaa Gadaa and Gadaa councilors usually call the name of the tree in their usual prayer reciting as, “God of Dhugoo Dooyaa, listen to our supplication”. They express the omnipotent power of God acknowledging as he is a creator of this sacred tree. This indicates, the tree is culturally indispensable physical element that has been linked with some symbolic expressions. However, the symbolic value of Dhugoo tree goes far beyond its ritualistic and mystical values. During, Gadaa power transition, Gadaa councilors collect small branches of Dhugoo tree and make them toothbrushes before orally declaring the indigenous laws and customs at Me’e Bokko sacred landscape. It is traditionally obligatory practice to brush one’s teeth by a brush extracted from Dhugoo small branches on the occasion, which is believed as a tree of truth, because the local people symbolically associated Dhugoo (a tree) and Dhugaa (truth). While brushing their teeth by small branches of the tree, the practitioner elders utter “ Waaga dhugoo Dooyaa, dhugaa nu dubbisa”, which means oh, God who sprouted Dhugoo tree, please help us to speak the truth. Thus, Dhugoo tree is symbolically associated with truth (dhugaa) in Guji Gadaa system.

3.8. Tree and homicide case resolution
There is a native tree usually known as “a blood tree”, which has been mainly used for ritual of resolving conflicts related with homicide cases. A tree of blood has special cultural values in conflict management and peace building endeavors in Guji people. In the people belief system, homicide is extremely condemned and coterminous with the act of despoiling oneself and siblings by curse of being murdered by someone else. This means, if someone kills a person, someone else inevitably kills him/her. Thus, this belief system shapes the people attitudes so that they refrain themselves from engagement in homicide cases. Nevertheless, in case whenever someone unintentionally kills someone else, there are cultural procedures in which murder case would be settled by support of the community elders. Since killing someone is strictly forbidden and condemned in Gadaa system, there was no culture of planned murder in the Guji Oromo.

Even it has been taken as the most evil deed among the people. Nevertheless, whenever murder case happens in the conflict, local community elders and Gadaa leaders immediately handle it and proceed to the negotiation step. A person who committed homicide during the conflict would immediately run away and admit his/her guiltiness to the local elders. The local elders strive to stabilize the situation and strongly advise the family of the murdered person not to think about the vengeance, rather patiently adhering to advices of Gadaa leaders and community elders. While doing so the elders hide a murderer at somewhere else not known for the time being, particularly until the last date of reconciliation. In the course of time, the elders go to the homestead of the murdered person relatives and cordially proceed the negotiate procedures. In this time, they repeatedly inform family of the deceased person how the murder case was happened and how thinking for revenge could bring the repetition of the homicide as per the local belief system. After making series discussions with the murdered person relatives to calm down a case, Gadaa leaders and community elders, organize Gondooro ceremony to perform reconciliation between the relatives of deceased person and murderer families. Gondooro is an indigenous conflict resolution mechanism in Guji, which mainly settles the homicide cases since the time immemorial. Gumi (2016, p. 72) stated that “Gondooro has significant role in conflict resolution, justice administration and peace building from psychosocial perspectives” in Guji people.
There is an indigenous tree known as *Muka Dhiigaa* (a blood tree), which has been used in *Gondooro* ceremony while settling the murder case in Guji. The elderly informants stated that “muka dhiigaa ittiin harka micciirratan” which means a blood tree is used for the reconciliation ritual of homicide case. Once *Gondooro* is conducted and a blood tree is ritually used, there would never be the enmity and sentiment of vengeance between relatives’ murderer and families of the murdered person. A blood tree is sacred tree, which is hardly utilized for any other purpose except for the ritual of reconciliation of murder case. Even the cattle herders never use it as birch to guide their cattle in the field. Therefore, a blood tree is a symbol of reconciliation and settling homicide case to the extent of recovering peace and harmony between relatives’ of murderer and families’ of murdered person in Guji culture.

### 3.9. Conservational and tree symbolism

Conservation of indigenous standalone trees and huge forests are not new practice in Guji community, since it has been long embedded in Gadaa system for centuries, and enforced by customary laws and local belief systems. The conservation of trees in general is developed from the notion that trees are perceived as sacred gift of God to cover nudity of the land, and to facilitate human wellbeing. Thus, in Guji belief system the degradation and loss of forests and trees by the intentional action of people would inevitably bring wrath of God that could punish humankind by bringing the drought, disease, war, mess and instability, because once natural balance is disturbed by humans it is thought that humans life balance in turn would be disturbed. Therefore, this belief system contributes towards conservation of symbolically significant trees in particular and other native trees at large.

In course of time, this belief system has been nurtured and capitalized in the form of customary laws in Gadaa system of Guji Oromo. Customary law that enforces conservation of trees is a common tradition whereby trees have been preserved for centuries. It is usually formulated, amended and proclaimed by senior elders (particularly known as *Yuubaa*) in Gadaa system every eight years at *Me’e Bokkoo* sacred landscape to sustain the biodiversity resources in general, forests and trees in particular. This is mainly carried out to support the efforts of conserving trees and forest resources, since trees are physical features whilst culturally meaningful elements in the community. Particularly, some indigenous trees are special and thus separately treated as sacred, because of mythical, ceremonial and rituals associated with them (Desalegn, 2013; Gemeda, 2019; Nagesa, 2011). The informants confirmed that in spite of formidable changes and declining of indigenous values, the customary law, myths, rituals and symbolic values connected to native trees have been contributed for preservation of symbolically valued trees. Generally, culture of tree symbolism whereby some native trees are perceived as culturally significant features underpins conservational efforts.

### 3.10. Emerging threats

However, now days there are no pristine nature. The pressures threatening natural environment on one way or another are either natural or anthropogenic menaces. The forests and trees have been highly destructed due ubiquitous anthropogenic interventions. This causes biodiversity degradation across the world. Similarly, the experience of the study area shows that even though the indigenous trees are symbolically imperative among the society, they have been facing massive degradation than before, since there have been the speedy expansion of farmland, villagization, infrastructural projects, and degradation of wood for timber, charcoal business and firewood consumption. Particularly, the emerging massive plantation of exotic species like *eculpetus* tree, and land encroachment associated with some farmland, have been underlined as major anthropogenic threats to the indigenous trees and their symbolic values. Besides, the emerging “charcoal culture”, in the society, which means the declining of the former negative attitudes towards the charcoal production to the extent of labeling it as a bad business activity on one hand, and the blossoming of new thinking as charcoal production is vital supplementary source of income, have been taken place.
The charcoal business is everywhere alongside the asphalt road of the districts. Evidently, I personally observed the sacks of charcoal collected alongside the road for selling purpose. Everybody buys and takes it by one's vehicle from the road. Fortunately, I took an opportunity to interview two charcoal sellers to know what type of local trees they had burnt and how far they were beneficiary from the charcoal market. Incredibly, they shared me information with the smiled face that they had been generating good income from charcoal business that would have not been obtained from the cereal crops harvested in a season. Thus, they stated that this condition attracts them to be full time sellers of the charcoal unlike the past when it was seen as a supplementary source of income. Of course, among the indigenous trees they used for charcoal business, two of them were symbolically significant. This refers to the gradual degradation of the symbolically important trees in the study area.

Infrastructural projects and villagization were also the threats of indigenous trees as discussed by the informants. There were recently implemented projects like rural road access and Electric Power Line supply that passes through the study districts. The informants noted that the trees, patchy as well as dense forests on the route of the projects were massively degraded. Particularly the innumerable indigenous trees culturally set aside had been destroyed. On the other hand, the emerging voluntary villagization alongside the asphalt road and some gravel roads construction is another threat discussed by the informants, because the more people reside densely in a village form the more they exploit a given resource in a particular environment, that is true for degradation of symbolically significant trees. Another threat expounded by the local people was high demand for timber businesses. Timber business is evidently common in the two districts; as a result, there were woodwork centers in the districts town. Generally, the informants underline that the expansion of farmland, villagization, infrastructural projects, and rising demand of wood for timber, charcoal business and firewood have been the anthropogenic threats affected the symbolically valued indigenous trees in the study area.

4. Discussion
The foregoing findings describe that culture of tree symbolism embodies the diverse social and cultural issues such as Jaarra utaaluu ceremony, avoidance of inauspicious omen, marriage, ritual of idiotism, mystical power expression that have been allegorically interconnected with native trees. This culture of tree symbolism implies that a range of cultural practices have been attached to various native trees differently. This attachment implies strong bond of culture-nature affinity in the people. Of course, the comparative studies witnessed that tree symbolism primarily stems from links between culture and indigenous trees (Castro, 2003; Pauline von, 2016; Ţenche-Constantinescu et al., 2015), though symbolic meaning and contexts are varied across the cultures. With this regard, the finding of this study corroborates what Cloke and Pawson (2008, p. 107) noted as “trees make active contributions to the relational agency of place-related nature—culture assemblages”. It helps to remark that in most cases the link between culture and local trees is framed in, and sustained through culture of tree symbolism. Usually, symbolism is social construct. As apparently illustrated by James (2010) symbolism is not an inherent quality of any object or sign, but rather a product of interpretation and consensus. Tree symbolism is also a product of local people’s interpretation and consensus on connection between native trees and local traditions. Specifically, in the study community the indigenous practices such as Jaarraa Utaaluu event, ritual of avoiding inauspicious omen, marriage day event, idiotism, and mystical power and truth expressions are connected to native trees through symbolic interpretation and consensus. The arrays of literatures confirm that symbolic interpretation varies across culture and through the time. Evidently, trees represent loss and rebirth (Tidball, 2014), kinship and marriage image (Castro, 2003), power life and fertility(Karangi, 2008) and fatherhood and motherhood (McGillivray, 2011). These evidences clearly show that the interpretation of link between native trees and local traditions in framework of tree symbolism is embedded in culture of different communities yet in diverse approaches.
In spite of varied culture of tree symbolism across the communities, symbolically significant native trees serve as junction points between trees and local traditions. Thus, native trees symbolically connected to local traditions through culture of tree symbolism serve also as a “ junction spot” between indigenous practices and trees, where culture-nature affinity is manifested. This culture-nature affinity cements and links native trees and indigenous practice in the manner that underpins conservation efforts of the trees, because local belief system, myths and customary laws strictly prohibit felling of symbolically valued trees. For instance, in the study community the trees dedicated to mystical power (muka haaganaa) are highly protected by myths, belief systems and customary law of Gadaa system.

In general, culture of tree symbolism in Guji Oromo is emanated from a notion that trees are perceived as sacred gift of God to humans and land. The perspective deems trees as gifts of God is not basically unique to Guji Oromo, though the way that trees are perceived as gift of divine differ from culture to culture. For instance, trees are taken as precious gift of God to people in Pakistan (Sheikh, 1993), whereas Miombo native fruit tree in southern Africa is perceived as gift of God for utilization of its fruit. Taking Pakistan case, Sheik illustrated that trees are gift of God, since they are useful resources for human consumption. He further noted that trees in Pakistan contribute towards improvement of the environment (see Sheikh, 1993). In case of southern Africa, the unit of study was one tree named Miombo that is perceived as gift of God because it bears edible fruits for smallholder farmers. It shows the tree is sacred because of its fruit edibility and being utilized as source of food among smallholder farmers of the area. Nevertheless, in Guji case, trees in general are perceived as sacred gift of God to humankind for careful utilization and preservation for coming generation. Guji community believes that God does not allow people to subdue and exploit the trees for food or business purposes; rather he allows and orders utilization of trees within only stewardship framework excluding utilitarianists approach of immediate benefit. Though trees are sacred gift of God, there are some special trees dedicated to some events, rituals, ceremonies and celebrations in Guji Oromo (Gemedu, 2019). Thus, this notion is springboard for origination and development of culture of tree symbolism in Guji people. With this regard, Guji notion of tree symbolism shares biocentric thought by large degree giving more attention and care to tree conservation, whilst rejecting anthropocentric thought, which advocates human as superior to nature. Thus, Guji perspective of tree symbolism is a “synergetic approach” that perceives trees as belong to God and humankind. Hence, it is believed that people are expected to conserve and carefully utilize the trees. This significantly helps conservation efforts of the trees. Generally, tree symbolism in Guji Oromo bridges local traditions with native trees in the manner that underpins conservation of the trees.

5. Conclusion
The findings of this study indicate that culture of tree symbolism is commonly originated from the long-existing notion that trees are thought as sacred gift of God to earth and humankind. Particularly they have been perceived as sacred vestures that cover a nudity of the earth. According to this conception, the trees are sprouted and grown up by omnipotent power of God to be vesture of land, and they are vital resources given to humankind not for overexploiting and subduing, but for proper utilization and conservation as well. This view informs us that in the community, trees are natural resources belonged to God and people at the same time. Therefore, this notion is the origin and prototype for the culture of tree symbolism in Guji Oromo.

The study shows that culture of tree symbolism is not only about symbolic association between native trees and local traditions, but also about inextricable connection between the two. Thus, culture of tree symbolism is a connecting bridge between the community indigenous practices and native trees in very inextricable manner. As it has been shown in the findings that culture of tree symbolism in the community embodies the diverse social and cultural practices such as Jaarraa Utaaluu in Gadaa system, ritual of avoiding inauspicious omen, marriage ceremony, idiomism, mystical power manifestations, truth and homicide-related conflict resolution symbols that have been symbolically interconnected with native trees. Thus, it can be extrapolated that tree
symbolism is integral part of Guji social life, since culture of the people and native trees are interconnected through practices of tree symbolism.

The finding apparently shows that tree symbolism is a circuit connecting indigenous practices with native trees in various ways. This means, even though trees are elements of natural features, Guji people take them as part of their cultural expression by ordaining and setting aside for symbolically essential events, ceremonies, rites and rituals. The importance of native trees in performing rite of passage, avoidance of inauspicious omen, marriage and conflict resolution reveal the symbolic association of native trees with local cultural practices. This symbolic link between indigenous practices and native trees has made the strong affinity between local practices and native trees in the manner that underpins conservation of native trees in spite of some anthropogenic menaces. Generally, culture of tree symbolism is indispensable to understand a long century’s environmentally friendly life of Guji community and to conserve native trees. Thus, this culture of tree symbolism has to be preserved by all concerned stakeholders to sustain environmentally benign life among the people.

Acknowledgements
First, I would like thank my God for his mercy! Next, I would like to thank Mr Bokko Gurra and Tsega Endasha from Bule Hora University who contributed their invaluable comments to enrich this article. I would like to extend my wholehearted appreciation to my wife and all my friends and colleagues who encouraged me to produce this article.

Funding
The author received no direct funding for this research.

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Competing interests
The author declares no competing interests.

Citation information
Cite this article as: Trees symbolism, conservation and threat in Guji Oromo, Southern Ethiopia. Gemeda Odo Roba,Cogent Social Sciences (2021), 7: 1880681.

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