Contesting views on coronavirus pandemic: causations and indigenous preventions in Guji Society, Southern Ethiopia

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Abstract: This article investigates the contesting views on the causes and prevention of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) in Guji society. The study opted for a qualitative approach, descriptive research design, and data collection methods such as interviews (both in-depth and key informant interviews), focus group discussions, and observation. The findings show that local views take violations of social standards, the myth of the plague pit, and the omen of the ruling Gadaa party (Luba) as the main causes that contradict medical science’s etiological notions. Similarly, with their complete focus on rituals, the prevention mechanisms widely used in society compete with the medical science prevention system. Despite the fact that local perspectives on medical etiology are contested, Gadaa leaders and community elders have collaborated with local health professionals and stakeholders in a public awareness program to enhance the medically supported prevention system for better life. As a result, even though local community views disagree with medical etiological notions, the collaboration of Gadaa leaders and community elders with healthcare professionals in preventing and controlling the virus is an exemplary mutual approach that should be strengthened in the future to maintain people’s better lives.

Subjects: Anthropology - Soc Sci; Sociology of Culture; Sociology of Knowledge

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article investigates the diverging views on causations and preventions of coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) in the Guji society, southern Ethiopia. Guji society is a branch of Oromo nation, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. The research is significant in that it contributes to understanding of the multiple realities and views on causations and preventions of the pandemic comparing how it has been viewed in the local community context and medical science knowledge domain. In fact, the findings indicate that local community views on the nature and prevention of the pandemic disagree with medical science understandings and etiology of the virus prevalence. Therefore, the findings of the study might be of interests to academics, health experts, policymakers and local communities in general to fight against the pandemic through the integrated approach, narrowing the gaps and capitalizing on existing opportunities.
Keywords: Coronavirus; Causations; Indigenous Mechanisms; Guji Oromo; Southern Ethiopia

1. Introduction

Pandemic diseases are the most psychologically terrifying and biologically fatal incidents that could harm human health acutely. They have the characteristic of intermittently and suddenly erupting at different times and places throughout the world. The Corona virus is a type of pandemic disease that has been swiftly thinning out across all countries, threatening all nations across the world. The threat, stems from the tendency for recombination and high mutation rates that may allow the virus to adapt to new hosts and ecological niches (Woo et al., 2006), zoonotic nature (Dominguez et al., 2007; Drexler et al., 2014) and rapid transmission propensity from person to person through droplets.

As illustrated by scholars, there have been diverse types of coronaviruses based on their hosts and family categorizations (Hermans et al., 2017). Likewise, diverse types of coronaviruses have been identified in various vespertilionid bats inhabiting Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America (Falcón et al., 2011; Ithe et al., 2013). These viruses could severely infect a variety of animals, including poultry, livestock, and humans, causing respiratory, enteric, and hepatic diseases (Saif, 2004; Tang et al., 2006; Weiss and Navas-Martin, 2005; Woo et al., 2006). Birds are the main reservoirs of viruses (Dominguez et al., 2007; Li et al., 2004). However, in its evolutionary history, human coronavirus is believed to have been derived from bovine coronavirus (Vijgen et al., 2005). Nevertheless, before its recent outbreak as COVID-19 in Wuhan, China in December 2019, the coronavirus had infected over 2000 people with a reported death rate of 36% in 2012 (Miguel et al., 2017) and 701 people, of whom 35% died in 2014 (Yang et al., 2014).

Presently, the novel coronavirus, whose outbreak is associated with a seafood market in Wuhan city (Holshue et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020), is a deadly infectious disease speedily spreading across various nations. In China, where COVID-19 is likely to have started, the outbreak has infected and killed a considerable number of people. Consequently, it is evident that the virus has perturbed people unprecedentedly, in spite of attempts made to control it by producing vaccines and promoting scientifically verified prevention mechanisms. Many African countries, including Ethiopia, have been exposed to the infections and deaths of this pandemic.

As soon as the virus was confirmed in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia on 13 March 2020, the community elders and Gadaa leaders among the Guji society performed preventive rituals to control its thinning out. The preventive rituals were performed by community elders who have been actively participating in the Gadaa institution. Of course, the Gadaa institution is an indigenous institution that consists of political, social, economic, environmental, and religious aspects of Oromo in general and Guji society in particular (Asmaram, 1973; Jemjem & Dhodocha, 2011). This indigenous institution is usually presided over and led by Abbaa Gadaa (Gadaa leader) and Gadaa councilors (i.e. the members of the local elders who keenly participate and devotedly take part in the Gadaa system). The detailed information about Gadaa institution/system is explained under the study area description, the next section of this part.

There have been attempts to prevent and control the virus by various stakeholders, i.e. governments, non-governments, institutions, medical experts, researchers, and scientists, through enhancing preventive systems and vaccination. Even though attempts have been made by governmental and non-governmental organizations, medical experts, researchers, and other stakeholders, little scholastic attention is given to questioning views on the causation and prevention of coronavirus in local contexts. Similarly, in Guji society, the etiological notion of coronavirus and its comparison with medical etiological views are not empirically investigated and duly analyzed. As a result, this article interrogates local views on the causation and prevention of coronavirus, as
well as the contest and compatibility of local etiological views and medical etiology on the virus’s occurrence among Guji society in the Guji Zone and West Guji Zone, Southern Ethiopia.

2. Methodological approach

2.1. Study area

This study was conducted among the Guji people who live in the Guji Zone and the West Guji Zone in the Oromia National Regional State, Southern Ethiopia. It was carried out in three West Guji Zone districts, namely Bulee Hora, Dudda Daawwaa, and Malka Sooddaa, as well as three Guji Zone districts, namely Adoola Reedddee, Annaa Sorraa, and Wadarraa. The Guji society is thought to be a phratry of the Oromo nation, who speaks the Oromo language, one of Ethiopia’s most widely spoken languages. The society has been traditionally ruled by the Gadaa system- an indigenous institution that was inscribed as an intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO in 2016. This indigenous institution orders and regulates social, political, economic, environmental, and religious aspects of society since time immemorial (Asmarom, 1973; Hinnant, 1977; Jemjem & Dhadacha, 2011; Tadesse, 2014). It is relatively intact and viable in the Guji society (Gemeda, 2021), where this study was conducted.

The Gadaa system has survived and thrived in Guji society for centuries, despite the presence of myriad and powerful external influences as a result of global socio-cultural changes. In the system, there have been five culturally configured parties branded as Baalii Shanan or Lubaa that each assume power of Gadaa leadership and administer the community for eight years. These Lubaa/Gadaa parties are Halchisa, Roobleee, Harmuufaa, Dhallana and Muudana. The term of office for one Gadaa party is eight years, and then the next Luba will take power by replacing the preceding party. Similarly, the rotation of handing over power continues sequentially among the five parties of the Gadaa system peacefully. Once a Gadaa power of leadership is assumed and exercised by a given Lubaa for eight years and then transferred to the next party, the cycle takes 40 (forty) years to get back to the first party. Because, five Lubaa irreversibly handover Gadaa power in a rotation of eight years, which means a cycle of assuming power goes from one to another in sequential order. Power transfer from one party to another is peacefully executed and accompanied by various rituals and ceremonial events.

Based on the mythically narrated genealogical category, Guji society is classified into three phratries: Uraaga, Maatti, and Hookkuu. This classification has no geographical basis, but it diachronically traces back to the Guji myth of origin in Girja land. According to the narratives of the elders, the ancestor of Guji society, who was named Gujo, had three sons and one daughter, whose names were Uraago, Maatto, Hooke, (Tulloo) and Adaadaa, respectively. The Guji phratry classification, later on, eventually developed into Uraaga, Maattii, and Hookku as derivations of the names of the three Gujo sons enumerated above. The settlement of Guji people is not limited to the West Guji and Guji Zones, but extends to the western parts of Bale Zone and Wondo district of West Arsi Zone in Oromia regional state as well as in the South Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region around Dilla, Gamo Gofa, Wondo Genet, and around Lake Hawassa (Jemjem & Dhadacha, 2011). In addition, the Guji society is gifted with indigenous knowledge of medicine and medication systems, indigenous knowledge of forest and/or tree conservation, and indigenous knowledge of conflict resolution, among others.

2.2. Sampling and methods of data production

This study used non-probability sampling, specifically purposive sampling, to access the knowledgeable elders of society, Gadaa leaders and their councilors, who are believed to be rich in knowledge of the Gadaa system and narratives of illness and curing systems. Among the thirty-five total elderly informants interviewed, nine of them were women. The elderly informants were selected and interviewed based on their experiential knowledge of disease causation and its prevention systems. In the fieldwork, the informants’ contact was facilitated through field guiders at different occasions, places, and times.
The study opted for a qualitative approach, a descriptive research design, and data production techniques like, interviews (in-depth interviews and key informant interviews), focus group discussions, and observation. In-depth interviews were conducted to get a full understanding of the local views on the causes and prevention of COVID-19. In addition, three key informants were frequently interviewed. Data was collected from community elders, Gadaa leaders, and Yuubaas (senior elders in the Gadaa system). Focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted with seven community elders and Gadaa leaders. During data collection, the researcher properly and cautiously took into account social distancing, wearing facemasks and using hand sanitizer all through fieldwork. Additionally, secondary data was obtained from published or unpublished documents to substantiate the empirical data. As soon as data collection was started, the sorting and grouping of ideas under similar themes was conducted simultaneously. Finally, the data was thematically presented and qualitatively described.

3. Result and discussion

3.1. Coronavirus causation and prevention

The outlook regarding disease causation has increasingly changed over time with advancements in medical science knowledge and technologies. As a result, there have been diverse views depicting disease causation and prevention since the “one size fits all” approach could not work in all contexts. The diversity of disease causation views inherently emanated from ever evolving and developing medical science knowledge and the social construction of multiple causations of diseases. It is evident that disease causations and preventions vary even within the medical science domain, as well as among unlettered people who have no medical laboratories or medical research centers but are rich in indigenous knowledge that has been tested and proven over a century of trial and error. The goal of this study is thus to investigate how coronavirus causations and preventions are viewed in the community, and the contestability and compatibility of local views with medical science etiological views, with a particular emphasis on epidemiological and germ theory perspectives. Epidemiological perspective is preferred to this comparison because it is relatively recent and multicausal in medical science etiology; whereas germ theory is a monocausal model of disease causation that argues microorganisms, particularly germs, are the only causes of a disease (Carter, 1977). As a multicausal model, epidemiological conception states that a triad of agent, host, and environment causes the occurrence of a disease (Dangi and George, 2020; Zhai et al., 2020). Thus, epistemologists strongly argue that only pathogens are not causative agents of a disease, but humans as hosts and various environmental conditions contribute to the incidence of a disease (Dangi and George, 2020). As a result, the concept of coronavirus causation in Guji society is analyzed through these multicausal and monocausal approaches of medical science to explore the contestability and compatibility between local etiological views and medical theoretical frameworks.

3.2. Coronavirus causation in guji society

Though a question about how and/or why a disease occurs in a particular host might be common among an educated group of medical experts and unlettered individuals, the answers to the questions would not be similar, because there are diverse views that illustrate how and why diseases occur in different hosts and contexts. In the study area, the views on coronavirus causation focus on three main perspectives: violations of social standards, the myth of the plague pit, and the omen of the ruling party as causes of the pandemic.

3.2.1. Violation of social standards

Violation of social standards refers to deviation of individuals' or groups' behavior and actions from customary norms, values, belief systems, myths, and practices already ingrained in the culture of a particular society (Bierbrauer, 1992). This form of violation is extrapolated as the cause of all diseases and undesirable incidents in Guji society. The etiological notion in society upholds that the major cause of the occurrence of coronavirus is the violation of norms, belief systems, values, truth, and justice. Because, any incident that happens in one's life in Guji society is interpreted as
per the established experiential knowledge related to “dos” and “don’ts”. According to the experiential knowledge regulating “dos and don’ts” in society, there is a firm relationship between human beings and God, in which virtuous behaviors, actions, and God’s will are highly sought by individuals, and conformity to these behaviors is thought as a source of blessings, wellbeing, prosperity, stability, and healthy life. In society, the will of God refers to caring for others, respecting humanity irrespective of any background, adhering to justice, respecting the truth, and abhorring all thoughts, behaviors, and actions likely to harm humankind or other natural features in one way or another. On the contrary, there is a belief system that takes violation of God’s will and deviation from socially approved values, norms, and belief systems lead people to unwanted and troublesome incidents, health problems, and instability. This thought has shaped the ways people think about disease causation in Guji society.

Thus, according to this view, the prevalence of corruption, homicide, partiality, abusing and twisting decisions, defaming people, lack of respect for elders, parents, Abbaa Gadaa, and degradation of values, encroachment of sacred landscapes, and escalation of ethnic as well as individual hatred have resulted in the outbreak of the coronavirus as retribution of God. As to this thought, the coronavirus is a result of people’s wickedness and disobedience to social norms, belief systems, and the will of God. This perspective takes the conviction that without the prevalence of violating social standards, the coronavirus pandemic would not have spread to the land. Primarily, this thought coincides with a punitive theory of disease causation that usually takes retribution from God as the cause of disease outbreaks elsewhere. Punitive theory argues that disease has been thought to be caused as a punishment for any bad deed done, as an outcome of the outrage of God (Dharmashree et al., 2020), which is similar to the etiological notion in Guji society. Comparatively, the etiological views in society are incredibly different from the epidemiological notion that takes the triad of agent, host, and environment as a cause of the pandemic, and the germ theory that takes disease as only caused by microorganisms’ effects on hosts. This is one of the views of local people on coronavirus causation in the study area.

3.2.2. Omen of gadaa ruling party
This viewpoint primarily blames an omen of the Gadaa ruling party for the occurrence of the coronavirus in Guji society. The Gadaa parties, culturally organized to govern society in a rotational mode of power handing over, are ascribed to a particular omen that would happen following the tenure of each party. This means, all five Gadaa parties mentioned earlier have their own distinctive and expectable omens throughout their respective tenures and periods as ruling parties. There is a yearlong belief that the omens of each Gadaa party change from one party to another in predetermination modality. Because of the association between the incidents and omens of the Gadaa party, incidents such as war, drought, pandemics, and accidents are usually predetermined to happen during the tenure of some Gadaa parties. In this perspective, if something undesirable or bad happens in society, the first question to be asked is whether a similar incident has happened or not, and whether it is due to the expected omen of the ruling Gadaa party or not. Because, there are tenures that are always characterized by and ascribed to disease, war, drought, and accidents, according to the belief system permeating the Gadaa system.

Among the Gadaa parties, Muudana’s tenure is believed to be characterized by war and drought, Halchisa by peace, abundance, and fertility, Dhallana’s by sufficient rain, abundance, and war victimization, Harmuufaa by drought, and Rooble’s by a full of diseases (Jemjem & Dhadacha, 2011). However, the elderly informants further noted that the tenure of Harmuufaa party that is currently in power (particularly in 2021, when this paper was being written), is characterized by diseases and social instability. This means that whenever the Harmuufaa party comes to power, local and national social instabilities and outbreaks of diseases will be common incidents. Therefore, based on this belief system, the outbreak of the pandemic is thought to be an omen of a pandemic in the tenure of the Harmuufaa Gadaa party. According to this outlook, whenever the Harmuufa Gadaa party assumes power of leadership, the associated incidents will inevitably happen. Consequently, if something miserable like a war, pandemic, or drought happens in society,
it is always acknowledged as the incident is inevitable in the tenure of the Gadaa party’ which is locally stated as, “Kaayo Gadaa tanoati”. In general, in addition to the violation of social standards, the omen of the ruling Gadaa party (Harmuufaa) is extrapolated as responsible for the occurrence of the virus pandemic in the local etiological view. In general, this perspective has inclined toward a disease causation outlook, attributing the occurrence of the pandemic to the omen of the Gadaa party, which contradicts germ theory and epidemiological notions of medical science.

3.2.3. The plague pit myth
The myth has a significant position in Guji society’s life by signifying different phenomena, incidents, and practices, including the causation of illness and disease. Mythically, the outbreak of coronavirus is highly associated with the myth of the plague pit. What is a plague pit and where is it found? There is a small hole known as a plague pit that is located in the northeastern area of Guji Zone around the Gannaale river watercourse. This site is locally named “Balee Wanyaaata Billaa,” which is translated as “a ravine of Wanyata Billaa.” In the local view of disease causation, the plague pit is thought to be the center that receives any pandemic disease from every corner of the world where it is likely to have an outburst, and it facilitates its prevalence across the spaces. Because, according to the belief system, the plague pit has the ability to absorb any pandemic disease that occurs elsewhere and disperse it throughout the space without any limitation. This perspective upholds that the plague pit is like a disease authorization and dispensary site, since it is taken as a disease hotspot in society. Evidently, even though the novel coronavirus is likely to have started in China, its occurrence in Guji society is allied with the myth of the plague pit. This thinking suggests that unless it could be averted by ritual performance, the plague pit would take the coronavirus to its center and disperse it throughout the areas.

Thus, to prevent the pandemic, the Gadaa leaders of the Guji society have conducted a ritual of blocking the plague pit by putting a blockade on it as a symbol of averting and warding off it. Immediately after a coronavirus case was confirmed in Ethiopia, the elders sent senior members from the clans of each phratry to the area of the plague pit so that they could perform a ritual of putting a blockade on the pit. Upon their arrival at the place, the delegates checked the readiness of a bull to be slaughtered and a blockade object (Cufanoa) that is made from tiny plants and tendrils to block the pit. Indeed, Cufano is a blockade object locally used to close thresholds of houses and calves’ huts (Qoqqoba) in rural areas of the Guji society.

After making sure the barricade and bulls are ready, they start to present supplication to God, which is the beginning stage of the ritual. It is usually performed by delegates who move the scepter sticks back and forth over the bull’s back, prior to slaughtering. During this supplication, the practitioners and devotees approach God through prayer, believing that God would block any inauspicious omen, and fulfill all their desires. After supplication and moving the sticks over the bull’s back, the slaughtering of the bull is carried out by the elders, for two basic reasons. First, they want to take out the ruminant, which is important to the ritual because the ritual is not complete without it. Second, they do it to see whether there is inauspicious omen that may insinuate the virus propensity in a bad or promising manner. After the slaughtering, the ruminant is taken out for the next ritualistic prognostication stage. Then the barricade, which is already made for the ritual, is laid down on top of the pit to deny access to it since it is too small to easily cover. Later, the ruminant is dampened on the barricade to coat small holes in it as a symbol of blockading and preventing the pandemic outbreak.

In so doing, after staying seven days in the area, the delegates of Gadaa leaders make fire by rubbing dry wood together to form a flaming fire. After the fire flames, the attendants of the ritual extinguish it by dispersing the glowing woods with the edge of their spear or scepter stick, and immediately run away from the area and back to their home. Generally, the delegates of Gadaa leaders have conducted this ritual at the plague pit to prevent a coronavirus outbreak and lessen people’s apprehension about what would result from it. Because, there is a prevailing belief system
that states, unless a coronavirus is received by the plague pit, and authorized to harm people, it cannot kill even a mosquito. In general, this is how community elders and Gadaa leaders among Guji society are analogically explaining the occurrence and potential effects of the coronavirus pandemic in southern Ethiopia.

3.3. Indigenous prevention system
There have been indigenous mechanisms widely used to prevent and control diseases in Guji society since time immemorial. These mechanisms are different from the prevention methods broadly used in medical science, and focus on ritual performances. Based on empirical data obtained from the field, the following rituals and events are illustrated as indigenous mechanisms for preventing the coronavirus in Guji society.

3.3.1. Slaughtering ritual and pandemic coronavirus
There are multiple and multipurpose slaughtering rituals that commonly performed in Guji cultural practices (Hinnant, ; Jemjem & Dhadacha, 2011). However, the slaughtering ritual conducted to avert pandemic diseases, war, and disasters is to some extent distinctive in its nature, focusing on symbolic connotations. For instance, the slaughtering ritual conducted to prevent the spread of the coronavirus is highly connected to not only the domestic animals to be slaughtered, but their colors too. The color of the animal to be slaughtered significantly matters in this ritual due to the symbolic association between the animal to be slaughtered and the incident for which the slaughtering is conducted. After, coronavirus case was confirmed in Ethiopia, Gadaa leaders slaughtered the bulls with culturally determined colors that have intrinsically meaningful symbolic insinuation with regard to the avoidance of the pandemic. Gadaa leaders of the society mostly slaughter bulls with grey-black and grey-red colors (Bulee Daalachaafi Bulee dimaaq) while averting bad incidents and avoiding their omens. In the people’s belief system, slaughtering the bulls with these colors is significantly important in the attempts made to mitigate apprehension imposed by the incidents beyond playing the prevention role.

3.3.2. Slaughtering of grey-black bull
In most cases, the grey-black bull is slaughtered for the purpose of repentance, which people undertake to approach God and cleanse themselves from stern wickedness and trespasses. It is believed that this ritual would rinse out long existing iniquity (cubbuu cubuxxe) and prevent potential threats like pandemic diseases. Taking the outrage of God as the cause of the coronavirus, the Gadaa councilors performed this ritual to get repentance from God. Before slaughtering, the Gadaa leaders pray to God by smearing butter on the bull’s back and moving the scepter stick back and forth between its head and tail, reciting as follows:

This evil and infectious disease, any evil that would come from east, west, north, south, and any massive death, and bitter sorrowfulness, fail to spot at Guji. Then, every morning is peaceful, every year is peaceful, young people are peaceful, aged people are peaceful. Oh, this bull, get safe for who is going to slaughter you, and let your suet insinuate to us what is going to happen. Oh, God, give us your peace for our people and livestock.

The suet indicated here has a special value in society’s tradition. According to the narratives of the Guji elders, God had given three holy books to the world’s people so that they would properly manage and guide their everyday lives according to the principles of the books. These books were the Holy Bible, Holy Quran, and Holy Scripture of Guji society. As stated by informants, once upon a time, a cow ate the holy scripture of Guji, among three books. The people who had been there during the event were very perplexed and remained empty handed. The book that had already been eaten by the cow was immediately masticated and changed into omasum (Faltoo)—a ruminant part of the digestive system. Then local people discussed the event and reached a consensus to slaughter the cow and take out the book. After the slaughtering, however, they did not find it in the cow’s ruminant, but instead they took out suet, which is white like their book. Immediately, after they found the suet, the ancestors of the time received instruction from God to
read the suet with divine knowledge as a prophesying and guiding tool. Since then, the knowledge of reading and understanding suet as a metaphorically guiding holy book has been handed down from generation to generation in the Guji society. That is why the elders in their prayer said, “Let your suet insinuate to us what would happen”.

After this supplication, Abbaa Gadaa, or senior member of the phratry’s Gadaa councilor, ordered people to slaughter the bull. However, it should be Abbaa Gadaa or a senior Gadaa councilor who is supposed to cut the throat of the bull while the rest of the elders observe how the bleeding flows after the cut. If the flow of blood is very low and speedily absorbed by the soil, then the omen is believed to be bad and the elders must again slaughter another bull to supplicate God to prevent the pandemic, because, it is taken as if people are under threat of death resulting from the pandemic. However, if the flow of blood is swift and stays on the ground for some minutes, it is perceived that the pandemic would be eliminated soon, and could not harm the people, because, it is perceived that no death would result from the pandemic. Then, all the attendants pryingly look at how the bull would die after a throat cut to see whether it dies without thrashing about or not. If the bull immediately dies, the omen is said to be very bad, so other bulls would be looked for and slaughtered to dispose of the bad omen. However, if a bull thrashes about and endures for some minutes before dying, the omen is perceived as good. As already stated, it is a young bull known as Hanqataa, which is usually slaughtered for hanqisaa, a ritual of avoidance, to avert the pandemic.

On the other hand, a ritual of slaughtering black bulls was carried out among the Hookkuu phratry for the same ritual. This form of slaughtering black bulls to avoid evil omens of the pandemic is known as gondooruu (avoiding inauspicious omens and threats). This ritual refers to and represents the tradition of casting out bad omens and potential pandemics from the locality. In Guji society, if someone says “gondooroo “when hearing or seeing something, it is similar to a word of power typically used in mainstream religions that is uttered as “in the name of Jesus Christ ” among Christians and “Bismillahirrahmanirrahim “which is taken from Arabic and means' in the name of God, the merciful and compassionate among Moslems. Thus, by repeating the word “gondooroo” as a word usually used to cast out any inauspicious omen at ritual time, Maattii and Hookkuu phratries have slaughtered young black bulls, believing that what casts a black shadow on the people in the form of the COVID-19 would be quashed soon after the ritual. The elderly informants noted that the coronavirus would never kill even a mosquito in Guji land after this ritual, because there is no threatening omen that forewarns the potential harm.

Based on the experiential skills of the elders who look into the suet, one slaughtering could lead to other rituals of disposing of inauspicious omens based on the existing premonitory conditions. As already discussed, suet is critically read by elderly experts to obtain premonition regarding what will happen in the future. Gadaa councilors read suet and used it for prognostication about future incidences that happen to people and livestock. Sometimes, suet insinuates the performance of further rituals, such as the slaughtering of a bull, or the performance of the horooroo afataa ritual. Hororo afataa is an Oromo language term that literally indicates the practice of putting down sticks on the ground to pray to God for peace, prosperity, fertility, and reproduction. On the other hand, there are occasions when communal slaughtering rituals are conducted by specific sub-clans within society for the sake of a belief system that connects ritual and clan. For instance, in Hookkuu phratry, the Baallaa sub-clan is traditionally given a mandate to slaughter bulls just to avert inauspicious omens and threats in Hookkuu phratry when something undesirable happens. While conducting this ritual, the sub-clan commands, “dhukkuba kana baala badi’ which means, “let this disease be eliminated.” In general, the slaughtering rituals have been customarily performed to prevent the spread of the coronavirus and lessen the apprehension yielded by it in Guji society.

3.3.3. Slaughtering grey-red bull
A grey-red bull is slaughtered to avoid a potential threat associated with a pandemic that is not yet fully visible, but its premonitions are evident through harbinger birds, idiomatic plays, and
games of children. When this kind of premonition happens, Gadaa leaders slaughter grey-red bulls to dispose the potential threats in society. Specifically, this form of slaughtering was conducted in some districts of Guji Zone and West Guji Zone. The informants noted that there were some COVID-19 cases confirmed in two zones’ districts without signifying acute health complications, though some hospital sources report a few individuals who have died of it. Thus, the Gadaa leaders of the society have slaughtered the grey-red bull to stop the spread of the virus and lessen social trauma that may result from it. Specifically, the Uraaga phratry performed this ritual in the Bulee Horaa district, Hookkkuu in the Adoolaa Reeddee district, and Maattii in the Annaa Sorraa district. Therefore, a grey-red bull is slaughtered to avoid a potential pandemic in general and the coronavirus in particular.

3.3.4. Ritual of preventing inauspicious Omen

Another preventive ritual conducted in Guji society is the ritual of averting inauspicious omens that is classified into two: the hulluqqaa ritual and the bita gatiisa ritual. Hulluqqaa is an Oromo language term that refers to passing through the framed route for some cultural purpose. Conceptually, it indicates a ritual of passing beneath creepers tied overhead on the trees that people go through to avert potential threats or plagues. The passage through the creepers, which are tied to two trees on the left and right sides of the road, symbolizes people breaking free from unfavorable omens or threats. Thus, the hulluqqaa ritual was conducted to avert the prevalence of the coronavirus in Guji society as a mechanism of preventing it. The passage through the creepers is performed by all attendants of the ritual and Gadaa leaders, accompanied by supplication to God as following:

‘Oh God, let every evil omen, disease, war, and drought that may come to harm us be quashed. Oh, God, keep us all safe from the ominous omens of the pandemic that may come to harm us.

The passage through creepers is traditionally coterminous with averting premonitions of misfortune and potential harm through symbolic break free and supplication to God. While passing through the creepers, the Gadaa leaders pray to God, strongly pleading with him to eliminate the potential plague and its associated potential risks. This ritual was thus conducted in three phratries of the Guji society to prevent the coronavirus pandemic in southern Ethiopia. In Uraaga phratry, it was carried out in Surjii around Dudda Daawwa district, in Bulee Loon Lokee and Hejeejee in the Bule Hora area, in Haroo kateelo in the Surroo area, and in Kilkilee mataa namaa around Malkaa Sooddoo district in West Guji Zone. In Maattii phratry, the ritual was conducted in the Annaa Sorraa area, whereas in Hoookkuu it was conducted at Xuxuaa in the Adoolaa Reedde district, in the Guji Zone.

Bita gatiisaa is another ritual performed to prevent inauspicious omens and miserable conditions in Guji society. Literally, it refers to throwing away something bad or dirty out of one’s home, but conceptually, it is a symbol of casting out bad portents from one’s homestead. It is a ritual of avoiding presentiment of misfortune and evil omens from one’s home and neighborhood. Even though this ritual is sometimes conducted at the family level, it is usually carried out publicly in a collective manner in the study area. Prior to this ritual, Gadaa leaders extract bitter gourds from calabash tendrils and fill them with water at the eve of the ritual. The next morning, before going out to the ritual, they collect all disposable dirties along with gourds gathered, and throw them away in the ravine as symbol of quashing possible pandemic. The tendrils usually used for this ritual include Xixxiixaa (Cassipourea malosana Alston), Hoophii (Landolphia buchananii Stapf) or Dikicha (Rhociissustridentata). Everyone who participates in this ritual is supposed to wake up early in the morning and collect things like gourds, pieces of leather bed sheet (Itilee) from its verge, charcoal, and cinder, to cast out all these in ravines as a symbol of avoiding inauspicious premonitions.

Married men and women independently conduct this ritual, but they do similar things. Before going out for ritual purposes, they run and rotate around their homes three times, loudly reciting: “golgola badi, hantuu barri fide badi, wabaasoo, waan barri fide baasoo, waan barrin fidde baasoo,
dhukkuba hamaa baasoo,”. That is translated as “all evil portents, dreadful and undesirable incidents that may happen to harm us, the pandemic disease, we command you to be eradicated or quashed forever.” After three rounds of running around their respective houses, reiterating this recitation, they go to the ritual site, continuing their loud recital until they join other groups who did something at their home, and go to perform a communal ritual. When they joined other groups and reached the site, they threw away all the bitter gourds, pieces of cattle skin, charcoal, and cinder they had already collected from their home into a deep ravine (Balee) and hurriedly ran away from it. After the men’s round is over, women in their turn perform this ritual by ululating all the way from their home to the ritual site instead of loud recitation as men do. Apart from the ululation all the way while marching to the ritual site, what makes the bita gatiisa ritual of women different from the bita gatiisa ritual of men is that women usually wear a Bonkoo (leather made from cattle hide and worn by women) in an unusual fashion. The women purposefully turn Bonko inside out during the ritual as a symbol of reversing the threat and invalidating the spread of the virus. Wearing of this kind is an uncommon tradition, which is hardly observed in the daily life of society, except during this ritual. It is usual to see statements like “Oh God, let you destroy an evil omen from us” in Guji prayer, which significantly indicates the long-standing belief system of averting evil omens. At the end of this ritual, all attendants, local elders, and Gadaa leaders from the neighboring villages take part in a feast that is known as Buna-nyoata (chewing coffee berry). This feast does not necessarily indicate a large meal preparation, but the tradition of chewing the fried coffee berry (without removing its husk) with butter and fresh milk that all attendants share together at the closure of the ritual as a symbol of peace, prosperity, and stability.

3.3.5. Ritual of blocking passage through
Cufanaa dhawuu is another ritual conducted when a serious premonitory condition is supposed to happen in Guji society. Literally, as stated, cufanaa dhawuu is making a barricade object from thin wood and tendrils to close the gates of huts or houses in society. As it is usually carried out during forewarning of appalling portents, cufanaa dhawuu, as a symbol of preventing the virus, is performed by Guji elders at different sites. Indeed, this ritual could be performed at the plague pit found in Wanyaata Biila, as already stated, but additionally, it could also be performed in some other places in society for similar purposes. As a result, it is deemed by the community that the ritual performed in a plague pit is not fully guaranteed to block the spread of the virus, and as a result, additional blockading rituals have to be performed in different areas of the community. In this case, community elders took Cufanaa to an inaccessible place out of the reach of local people and their livestock, and put it on a given foot passage, saying “this disease”, even though you have been spread in our country, we ward off your intrusion from our homestead and land, as we have symbolically closed this passage with this barricade. After performing it, the participants go back to their respective homes, continuing their supplication to God for his merciful recognition of this ritualistic entreaty and the blocking of the pandemic. The rituals conducted to prevent this pandemic are in one way or another associated with prayers to Waqqa/ God in the community.

3.4. Collaboration in the contests
Local people’s perspectives on the causes and prevention of coronavirus have clashed with medical science’s concepts of illness and disease causation, as well as prevention systems. However, there was observed “collaboration in contest” between Gadaa leaders and/or community elders, and local healthcare professionals who pursued diverging views on the nature of the virus, but collaborated on public awareness programs aimed at preventing the virus through social distancing and keeping hygiene. How do ideas of actors that contradict each other in practice support the position of one actor? Similarly, Abbaa Gadaa and Gadaa councilors of the Guji society participated in awareness creation programs in collaboration with local health professionals to educate people about the prevention of the virus, although their views on the virus diverge. Initially, they took this position willingly and flexibly to use and tolerate any means that could save people from the dreadful pandemic, taking awareness creation as one way of preventing it. They took the position that if it heals, let it be a kind of thought without abandoning their diverging views.
In fact, all Gadaa leaders are not well trained in modern education and medical fields of study to engage in community education programs, but they collaborate with health professionals since they think that it benefits people and saves their lives. This awareness creation was organized after all the traditional rituals of the Gadaa institution had been performed at different sites in Guji Zone and West Guji Zone. The awareness creation program was held in districts of two zones, particularly in Bule Hora, Dudda Daawwa, Adoolaa Reeddee, and Booree districts. This does not necessarily mean that the awareness creation is limited to these districts, but be it in a small group of elders or a collaborative team with local administrators, many events have been organized by Gadaa councilors on prevention of the pandemic. This apparently shows that the Gadaa system works in its own cultural context to prevent and control COVID-19 through ritualistic mechanisms, whilst promoting collaboration with the government and any other organizations to educate people about the piggybacks of the pandemic in all possible ways. Here, the social recognition, respect, and reputability of Gadaa leaders and their councilors in the community are believed to have contributed a lot to their effectiveness in convincing people to implement the preventive principles such as regular hand washing or using hand sanitizer, wearing a facemask, and social distancing. The engagement of Gadaa leaders in mainstream healthcare advocacy endeavors to prevent and control COVID-19 indicates that Gadaa institutions strive to solve social problems not only within their own framework, but also in collaboration with mainstream institutions, pursuing a synergetic approach.

3.5. Discussion
Whenever local views of disease causation and remedial measures to be taken are central to this discussion, looking into the context of the interconnection between culture, health, and illness is imperative. Of course, culture is seen as a blueprint for entire social living (Küpper et al., 2017), providing meanings and approaches to health, disease, and illness. As a result, there have been culturally constructed perspectives whereby health, illness, and diseases are understood and interpreted differently. However, the anthropologists who were interested in links among culture, health, and disease have already contributed to the theoretical and academic frameworks under which particular interactions and intersections of health, illness, disease, and culture are contextually studied and interpreted. This academic framework is an ethno-medical perspective that advocates systematic description, interpretation, and assessment of relationships among, health, illness, and diseases to understand the intersection of the concepts in a particular cultural context (Donald, 2017; Robert and Wenzel, 2005). Here I used ethno-medical perspective as a theoretical canopy to see how healthcare system, belief, and local conception work together to prevent pandemics on the one hand, and the contest and compatibility between local views on disease causation and epidemiological as well as germ theory from medical etiological notions on the other. Thus, the empirical data produced has been interpreted under the systematic description and interpretation framework of an ethno-medical perspective to explore the local perceptional narratives on the causes of the coronavirus and the indigenous ritualistic prevention mechanisms embedded in the Gadaa system and practiced by the society.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the causes of the virus are violations and degradation of faithfulness, impartiality, integrity, sympathy, fear of God, kindness, and good conscience, on one hand, and intensification of immorality, brutal crimes, and norm contravention in different contexts, unprecedentedly. It is argued by elderly informants that these violations have been pervasively evident across the world at large and in Guji society in particular. Specifically, it is extrapolated in society that illness is an outcome of the flaming wrath of God due to people’s wickedness and the prevalence of immoral as well as socially evil actions and behaviors like miscarriage of justice, disrespecting humanity, insulting, wrongly defaming, cheating, and other socially condemned behaviors. The immoralities and evil practices elucidated here indicate a violation of the truth, a twisting of judicial decisions, a massive violation of social standards, and heinous crimes that have been increasing at an unprecedented rate over time. These are believed to be the underlying causes of the coronavirus in particular, and social anxieties at large in the Guji belief system. On the other hand, in the
society's cosmology of health and illness, the cause of illness would be the emission of disease and illness causative agents from the plague pit, which is usually blockaded with barricades by Gadaa councilors after the case of outbreak is confirmed in Addis Ababa.

This indicates, the mythical etiological notion of disease causation in society contradicts the notion of western biomedicine, particularly the epidemiological and germ theory views, which primarily presume agents, hosts and the environment, and pathogens as the main causative agents of disease causation, respectively. However, Gadaa councilors went far beyond openly acknowledging medical science mechanisms to fight against the pandemic, and engaged in a campaign of public advocacy to awaken local people to implement principles for preventing the virus. Moreover, as stated in the findings, even though different rituals have been performed to prevent the pandemic, Abbaa Gadaa and Gadaa councilors supported healthcare professionals during the campaign to educate the community on how to prevent and control the pandemic by urging them to implement “dos and don’ts” scientifically supported to prevent the virus. This apparently indicates that the Gadaa institution from its very philosophy is not fixed, closed and self-centric system, but it is an open, flexible and culture relativist institution that usually adheres to its perspective whilst appreciating and supporting others’ perspectives that is thought to be beneficial to the human societies across spaces and through the time. This view shapes how Gadaa leaders and community elders think of prevention and controlling mechanisms of the virus in their own perspective emically and from the other perspectives, etically.

Etiologically, the causes of disease vary from culture to culture, since one size does not fit all. Thus, it is very important to shed light on debatable views between local notions of disease causation and other perspectives on its causation. The causes of disease among some communities are described as the wrath of God, ancestral spirits, and witchcraft attempts (Mshana et al., 2006). Here, the findings of this study share the same idea, stating illness as a result of the wrath of God, but the ancestral spirit and witchcraft are not deemed as causes of illness in the study area. On the other hand, western medicine, which has been described as biomedicine, assumes that diseases are the results of deviations in the normal functioning of biological (somatic) variables (Hewa, 2016). As further elaborated by the scholar, the germ theory of biomedicine postulates, every disease is caused by specific, identifiable agents such as bacteria or viruses. This view contradicts the mythical causation of disease and illness in Guji society. The contagion theory in sub-Saharan Africa identifies illness as resulting from taboo violation (Green, 1999), which is similar to views of the study area on the causation of illness and pandemic outbreaks. In particular, my findings show that in the Guji society’s health and illness cosmology, violations of social standards and environmental dangers (for instance, the emission of causative agents from plague pit) are considered causative agents of the pandemic. However, unlike environmental elements that Green stated as wind, air, and water, as causes of disease, a plague pit is a cause of disease.

However, Green stated that there are four basic etiological beliefs about illness and disease causation in Sub-Saharan Africa; these are naturalistic infections or germ theory, mystical contagion or pollution, environmental dangers, and taboo violations. Furthermore, disease causation in African indigenous belief systems includes attacks by bad spirits, ancestors angry with relatives in cases of mistreatment, witchcraft, people with evil powers, curse invocation, and disobeying taboos (Jaiswal, 2018). In general, comparative analysis indicates that even though, social norm and taboo violations permeate across cultures, causing illness in many parts of Sub-Saharan African countries, the causes of illness in general and COVID-19 in particular result from violations of social standards and behaviors (norms, truths, justice, impartiality, integrity, fear of God, and kindness) in Guji society.

In particular, the approaches used to prevent COVID-19 are different from culture to culture. For instance, the Chinese community used traditional medicines in the form of oral administration of preventive herbal formulae and indoor herbal medicine fumigation (H et al., 2020). However, the
mechanisms used to prevent the pandemic and lessen its uneasiness in Guji society are more inclined to rituals such as the slaughtering ritual, blockading ritual, the ritual of passing beneath tied creepers, and the ritual of casting out inauspicious omens. It tends to seem like an absurdity to some adherents of western perspectives, who may oddly question what rituals have to do with endeavors to prevent and control a coronavirus pandemic by underestimating the roles of indigenous institutions’ and peoples’ experiential knowledge as superstitious and vain. Nevertheless, the empirical reality goes far beyond this argument, demonstrating how the ritualistic prevention approach builds the psychosocial readiness of people for the prevention of pandemics. Additionally, an advocacy and public awareness program organized by local health professionals and stakeholders on the prevention and control of the virus, which was also supported by Gadaa councilors (highly respected community elders) has contributed a lot to combating the pandemic. Even though people’s perceptual narratives and the mainstream healthcare approach hold contrary etiological views, the collaborative approach applied and engaged by Gadaa custodians in advocacy and public awareness creation is an indispensable effort in combating the coronavirus pandemic.

3.6. Conclusion
A variety of issues were raised and discussed in the preceding discussions, including local perceptions of the causes of the virus and preventive ritualistic mechanisms used to control it in society. The findings and discussions indicate that unlike the etiological notion of medical science that has been tending toward germ theory and the epidemiological triad as causative agents of the pandemic, the etiological views in Guji society emphasize multicausal relationships related to violations of social standards, omens of Gadaa’s ruling party, and the myth of the plague pit. Specifically, the violations of social standards include infringements of norms, taboos, truths, and justices that invoke the retribution of God, disobedience to one’s parents, encroachment of sacred landscapes, the prevalence of atrocious crimes, and the colossal and ubiquitous degradation of morality. Hence, unlike the mainstream medical knowledge of disease causation, health and illness cosmology in the Guji society extrapolate that humans’ wickedness and violations are the causes of the coronavirus and most of the fatal diseases that have been challenging the world unprecedentedly.

This finding clearly demonstrates that culture, health, illness, and diseases are inextricably interconnected in the Guji cosmology of health and illness, because it is only within the cultural framework that health and illness are understood and interpreted. This cosmology of health and illness emanates from the Guji Gadaa institution, which comprehensively guides and orders people’s way of life. Based on this, it could be concluded that the Gadaa system of Guji society is not only an institution that orders people around social, political, cultural, and economic ways of life, but it also ritually guides community health affairs, serving as a customary health institution. The rituals embedded in Gadaa institution and conducted by Abbaa Gadaa and Gadaa councilors to avert the pandemic have the potential to influence people’s health and illness by helping them cope, giving them a positive state of mind about its prevention, and providing emotional and practical support. These are pieces of evidence for the vital role played by Gadaa institution in health affairs and their attempts to control ailments. Furthermore, the involvement of Gadaa leaders in advocacy and public awareness to support the implementation of mainstream preventive mechanisms such as facemasks, frequent hand washing, and maintaining social distance indicates that the Gadaa institution promotes a collaborative approach in which it functions within its own context and collaborates with other healthcare institutions to prevent a pandemic. The integrated approach taken by the Guji Gadaa institution to simultaneously apply indigenous preventive practices and advocate for the mainstream healthcare systems is an exemplary effort in preventing and controlling disease. Perceptual views on the causes of the virus and the ritualistic preventive mechanisms embedded in the Gadaa system and practiced by society did not disregard the scientific prevention mechanisms practiced by mainstream health institution. This indicates that the Gadaa system is not a closed system per se, which only works within its own framework to shape people’s views, but it is an open system that coincides with practices, and
experiences serving humanity in mainstream institutions. In general, systematically coordinating the efforts of Gadaa institutions with national and international healthcare institutions to prevent and control pandemic is an exemplary collaborative approach and experience that should not be dismissed as vain and inferior; rather, it should be built up as a means to minimize the associated risks. As a result, the future study and intervention endeavors are strongly recommended to further find the alternative ways on how to properly harness the diverging views of the actors to the common goal- that is a potent and integrated approach needed to prevent and control the coronavirus pandemic.

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Notes
1. Abbaa Gadaa is a highly respected person and a leader of the Gadaa system- an indigenous and comprehensive institution in society
2. Qaalluu is a highly respected person and spiritual leader in the culture of society

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