Indigenous institutions and wildlife conservation: The case of the Oromo Gada System protecting Swayne's hartebeest in Ethiopia

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Conflicts between people and protected areas (PAs) managers over land use create serious problems in Africa (Jacobs & Schloeder, 2001). Since its 1960s advent of wildlife PAs, the Ethiopian government has imposed exclusionary policies that marginalize local communities and deprive them of their historical natural resource use rights within PAs. Marginalization and loss of use rights have fostered negative attitudes within local communities towards PAs, placing communities at odds with wildlife conservation. The consequences have been severe wildlife poaching and opportunistic destruction of wildlife habitats, particularly during periods of political unrest. For example, heavy wildlife poaching and destruction of natural resources occurred following the downfall of the socialist regime in 1991 and recently during the 2016 Oromo protests against the current government. Despite these persistent challenges, our experience shows that there is hope for protecting Ethiopia's remaining biodiversity. Here we argue that realizing this hope should begin with valuing the role of local communities and partnering with indigenous institutions in achieving shared conservation goals.

We use the "Oromo Gada System" in Ethiopia as it relates to the Senkelle Swayne's Hartebeest Sanctuary (SSHBS) (see Supplemental Material 1) as a case study to support the thesis that indigenous institutions can have vital relevance for enhancing effectiveness of wildlife conservation. The SSHBS (36 km²) is located on the west side of the Great Rift Valley (7°10'N; 38°20'E) and was established in 1976 to protect the Swayne's hartebeest (Alcelaphus buselaphus swaynei), an endangered antelope subspecies endemic to Ethiopia (Simon, 1972; Supporting Information 1 and Figure S1). The “Gada System” is an indigenous socio-political institution of the Oromo nation in Ethiopia. It was registered in 2016 on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2016; Supporting Information 2). We focus on describing (a) the causes and consequences of conflicts in the sanctuary since 1990s, and (b) outcomes of the actions taken by the “Gada System” leaders. Our aim is to inform conservation practitioners, planners, and policy-makers to consider the contribution of such local institutions in enhancing effectiveness of PAs management.

Historically, the Senkelle plain had been used as a livestock pasture land by local communities. However, these communities were not consulted during establishment of the SSHBS, resulting in recurrent conflicts over grazing between the community and SSHBS managers (Nishizaki, 2004). Following the downfall of the socialist regime in May 1991, as was the case of most PAs of Ethiopia, SSHBS was severely affected due to mass poaching of hartebeests and destruction of residence and office buildings and facilities by local communities. As a result, the hartebeest population dramatically declined from 3,000 to 200 individuals from 1990 to 1993 (Nishizaki, 2004).

On June 5, 1993, four Ethiopian conservationists, including the last author (R.A.), met the then Abba Gada (Gada leader), and informed him of the situation and the need to conserve the hartebeest. This team asked the Abba Gada to safeguard the animals. Accordingly, the Abba Gada ordered the community to attend a public meeting, which was held on June 15, 1993. The meeting attracted over 10,000 people.
during which the Abba Gada declared three Gada laws (Seera Gadaa) (as translated from the local language, Afaan Oromo [see Supporting Information 3 and Figure S2]):

“… From now onwards, let it be known to you all that: (i) Killing ‘Qorkee’ [local name for hartebeest] is prohibited; (ii) Hartebeests are now adopted to (legally become part/member of) the ‘Hambentu’ clan [the largest Arsi Oromo clan in the area], based on the law of ‘Moggaasaa’ (Supporting Information S2). Thus, ‘Hambentu’ clan members will be responsible to protect the animals as much as they do to any person of their member; (iii) I declare that killing of one Hartebeest shall be considered as killing of one person among “Hambentu” clan. If someone is found guilty of killing a Hartebeest, he shall be charged with and punished according to human life indemnity law (‘Seera Gumaa’) of our Gada System…” [For detail on the different levels of punishment, see Supporting Information 4.]

To the best of our knowledge, legitimate adoption of the hartebeests to the “Hambentu” clan, where the life of an individual animal is treated equal to human’s life is globally the first indigenous conservation action of its kind.

Soon after the first date of the Gada law declaration, hartebeest killing was stopped. In addition, 50 houses that had been built within the sanctuary were demolished. Because the owners of these houses had land and house outside the PA, they were not compensated. These declared Gada laws have remained intact for the subsequent 26 years, except for two incidences: an unintentional hartebeest killing (by a bullet fired to allegedly targeted hyena) in December 2015; and associated with political unrest, an attempt to destroy SSHBSs buildings in 2016 during Oromo protest against the government. Nonetheless, these conflicts were resolved according to the Gada laws, and the processes involved during the resolutions represent additional evidence for the potential long-term functionality of the laws (Figures S3 and S4). Additional laws were also declared by later Gada leaders, including prohibition of building houses, cultivation and tree cutting inside the SSHBS (see Supplemental Material S4). The net result has been that the Swayne’s hartebeest population has increased, reaching ~800 individuals at present (Senkelle Swayne’s Hartebeest Sanctuary, 2018).

The authority of traditional leaders is not necessarily a panacea for conservation. Nevertheless, excluding indigenous people from natural resource management decisions frequently leads to failure. Incorporating indigenous institutions in conservation policies, planning, and practices can help successfully achieve shared conservation goals. The experience reported herein demonstrates the potential contribution of traditional institutions to wildlife conservation. This may be especially true when the community leaders are elected democratically based on their wisdom. This is the case of Abba Gadads, who retain much respect and authority within their communities. The participation of local communities and local leadership in conservation may be particularly important for countries that experience recurrent political instability. Indigenous institutions like the Gada System may fill political power vacuums when government laws fail and maintain conservation achievements when federal governance falters.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS
A.A. and R.A. conceived writing of the manuscript; R.A. compiled data/information; A.A. wrote the first draft of the manuscript; R.A. and G.M. revised it critically for important intellectual content; G.M. drafted Supplemental Information; A.A. and R.A. revised critically the Supplemental Information. All authors contributed to revision and preparation of the final version and have given final approval of the version to be published.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
All necessary data/information used in the paper are uploaded to be published as Supplemental Information with the online version of the manuscript. Further data/information are available upon request to the authors.

ETHICS STATEMENT
We confirm that verbal permission to take and publish has been received from people shown in photographs.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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