

## Pastoralist Forum Ethiopia

### UNDERSTANDING *Buusaa-gonofa'*: social safety net of the Borana community

By Honey Hassen, Pastoralist Forum Ethiopia (PFE)

The intention of this article is to promote the role of traditional institutions in sustaining the scarce resource use and preserving the very environment in which they live. Pastoralist rules for resource use, display a combination of collective and individual features appropriate to their livelihood. The Borana practice is therefore taken to share the pastoralists' experience in retaining their social security, ability to share natural resources fairly, maintaining a peaceful society, and prevent environmental damage by regulating fair access to them.

The Borana pastoralists, living in more demanding environment with climate ranging from semi-arid to arid, exclusively depend on their livestock for subsistence, which they love and reserve. For pastoralists, pastoral system is more than mode of production, and it is imperative to be recognized as a valid and important livelihood and existence. It is the highly imaginative and original system of intricate modes of social organization and patterns of culture. As one can judge seeing how traditional institutions are organized in pastoralism, where there exist a huge variety of social and cultural creativity. As direct dependent on a sparse natural resource base, pastoralists are obliged to be efficient managers of it, and theirs is one of the very few surviving civilizations that can claim to have lived in harmony with nature.

The term *Buusaa-gonofaa* is constructed from two Afaan-Oromo words '*Buusaa*' and '*gonofaa*', mostly used by Borana Oromo. The term *Buusaa* is to mean contribution. *Gonofaa* in the language indicates ways of help (mainly giving cattle); putting together; and also mean covering a (milk) container with skin – in order that its capacity strengthened. The Borana pastoralists developed social security system where wealth, land, water and pasture are all communal and shared fairly among the tribe using a unique system of indigenous management, known as the **Gada**<sup>1</sup> system. In Borana oromo, *Buusaa-gonofaa* is a social security system mostly among clan members. It is a traditional institution built for helping people in need and serves to enhance survival, maintain solidarity and redistribution of wealth. It is a coping strategy developed by the society to ensure survival despite losses that could be caused by the vagaries of nature - drought, animal disease, or human epidemic. The mechanism is designed in the *Gada* system. The *Buusaa-gonofaa* is performed through a process that involves different units – clans, sub-clans, family groups and households with virtual autonomy to manage their own affairs, as a segmented character of the pastoralists' social organization.

*Buusaa-gonofaa* has different forms that work like social welfare with all Borana people in the same clan (*Gosaa* or *Miiloo*) expected to help each other in times of hardship. It is mostly done through provision of animals, while sharing of other resources; gift giving and herding partnerships are some of the reciprocal rights and obligations in the society. The social safety nets works for sharing of grazing-land, watering of animals, use of milking cows, and other mechanisms of reciprocal provisions. Moreover, the practice of giving animals from a large herd to those who have less makes economic as well as social implication. In addition to fulfilling the social responsibility of replenishing their member in times of adversity, it is a means of accumulating 'social-capital' and anticipating reciprocity.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Gada* is an integral part of the Borana that governs all parts of their life, acting as political, religious, judicial, economic and social institution. The *Gada* system is a structure of generational classes that succeed each other every eight years in assuming political, legislative and ritual responsibilities, and it is believed to be one of the most democratic systems in Africa.

In the Borana tradition, people who have lost their assets (livestock) due to drought, disease or tribal conflict must be restocked, and are described as *qollee*. Petitions for help are presented during *kora-gosaa* -the clan meetings conducted with presence of the clan leader *jaallaba*. During the meeting, losses due to drought are very accepted as wholly legitimate. For such requests the clan must respond with some help for *qollees*, where each of the several losers receive five to ten cows with wealthy clan members giving at least one cow. However, for a person who losses animals due to carelessness in handling or inappropriate sales the appeal may imply partial negligence. Those people are portrayed *nyaattuu* (cattle eaters), do commonly lose their identity and move to towns or become servants of well to do.

Livestock losers (*qollees*), to natural hazards can request their close relatives. If the requested person refuses to provide what is demanded, the person in need reports to one of his *Miiloo/Balbalaa* - the sub-clan member. Members of his *Miiloo* will then take their responsibility after analysing the causes and convinced on the importance of supporting, by asking the repudiated person for second time, before reporting the petition to the clan members. The *Miiloo* can't decide about *Buusaa-gonofaa* themselves but they inform the issue to the clan leader *jaallaba*. It is after receiving this information that the clan members call for meeting - *Kora-Buusaa*, where the clan members discuss about it and assign wealthier member of the clan to assist, if the previously person again refuse. If he accepted to support, he will be punished with more cattle than first requested. Though it happens rarely, if he persist in refusing the issue is presented to the ultimate body of appeal - **Gumii-Gaayoo**<sup>2</sup> Assembly, where social problems are investigated with the help of traditional judges and elders.

In case the request is from a female, every member of Borana community must support, as a custom, while rejecting her request is seen a crime. Widowed women in need commonly go to their brothers to ask for help; otherwise it is men's responsibility. In Borana society, house head women have the right to inform their neighbour whenever they are in hardship, which can help if capable to do or else inform responsible sub-clan members otherwise.

The other form of *Buusaa-gonofaa* is **Dabaree** or **Hameessaa** (indicating communal use of milk), is organized for supporting use of milk cows. Any pastoralist who has no milking cows for the time being has the right to use from neighbours - relatives or any other body - having enough cows to milk. This doesn't need a clan meeting (*kora-gosaa*) to decide, but regularly performed as a social responsibility. It is again common in the society to share food with neighbours, why not during relief food distribution, those who received do not feed only their family members without confirming whether their neighbours have food or not. Since, nothing is targeted only for private use in pastoral community of Borana.

The type of support is organized among different clans for use of **water points**, known as **tulaa**. The water points are managed by a clan that assigns one man, *abba-herregaa* to manage its communal usage through their own bylaws. Anyone demanding water from a well that doesn't belong to their tribe must appeal to its owners, who will decide based on the water availability. The owner clans do allow the share, considering the communal resource use and foreseeing reciprocity. If water is low, the clan owners will order the person to move on, but only after his animals have drunk and grazed enough for that day as both land and water are seen as a common resource. The other social security structure of Borana pastoralists that maintains solidarity is known as **gumaata**, is performed through contribution of resources from parts of the

---

<sup>2</sup> Gumii-Gaayoo is a huge, open Assembly of the Borana pastoralists gathered at Gaayoo (Dirree District of Borana zone) that takes place every eight years, where rules and regulations dictating the way a Borana should live are renewed and adapted at each meeting.

society. This is organized based on the information received from someone celebrating traditional festival and weddings, and involves contribution within the society without calling for formal clan meetings. The gifts given include livestock, money, butter, milk, yoghurt and any other required inputs for the ceremony. Thus, it is important to strengthen and support *Buusaa-gonofaa*.