

Ritual Elderhood in the Age System of the Borana of Southern Ethiopia

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This study examines ritual elderhood in the age system of the Borana people, based on ethnographic fieldwork. Many ethnic groups in East Africa maintain age systems, and numerous previous ethnographic studies of such systems have described them as social organization. The Borana are Oromo-speaking people who live in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. They maintain the most complicated age system called *gadaa*.

The age system of the Borana is based upon eight grades, which are called respectively *dabballe*, *gamme*, *kuusa*, *raaba*, *doori*, *gadaa*, *yuuba*, and *gadaamojji*. When the members of the generation set reach these grades, they are called by the names of the grades. A generation-set used to take eighty eight (or ninety six since 1980) years to complete all the grades.

A new generation-set is formed every eight years. All men are to be recruited into the fifth generation-set after his father's generation-set and all siblings belong to the same generation-set. As the generation-set is never closed, it continues to recruit members. Consequently, the age gap amongst the members of the same generation-set inevitably expands over time.

Therefore, the *gadaa* system is not an administrative institution, but rather a ritual complex, which represents manhood and fertility of the Borana. Since councilors of the generation-set perform those rituals, all Borana males are not required to pass through all grades. However, every male has a ritual duty to perform the transition ceremony of the most senior *gadamojji* grade. In the age system, the old man who has completed the rite of passage of the *gadamojji* grade reaches *jaarsa* which meant an elder. This study explores the elderhood of the Borana by focusing on the ceremony of the *gadamojji* grade.