
Conceptualizing Modern Urban Governance in the Everyday Language of an African Society¹

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Ethiopia is one of the fast-urbanizing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. As an inescapable phenomenon, urbanization has become a topic of people's everyday discussion particularly in areas such as the suburbs of Addis Ababa where urban expansion is appearing with a multiple of effects. People evaluate, analyse, judge, and/or try to estimate the future outcomes of urban expansion into their residential area which was primarily rural. In their everyday communication, they try to conceptualize the legitimacy and proper functioning of the contemporary urban governance systems. In connection with this, the main purpose of this paper is to explore how a particular common expression, *fafee*, in Afan Oromo (Oromo language) in Ethiopia is used by a community to frame the injustice and inequalities due to urban expansion in a newly established urban centre near Addis Ababa. Primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews and unstructured discussions, and secondary data from the municipality. The findings show that the concept of *fafee* is used to explain the pervasiveness of grievances that individuals, groups, or the community at large express due to institutional or individual actors' incompetence to provide the required services. The article argues that if a system together with the actors who operate it is inept, there will be incongruity between expectations and performances of the institutions in the modern urban governance system, which later ends up in distrust and conflict.

Keywords: Ethiopia, *Fafee*, institution, Laga Xafo-Laga Dadhi, Oromo, urban.

Introduction

Today in Africa, we can easily observe that modern governments and their machineries are not rendering the expected services to their societies, which resulted in different forms of conflicts and instabilities. These conflicts can be between the states and societies or between political factions. The consequences are internal displacement, inadequate services, migration, corruption, lack of justice, and pandemonium which are manifestations of lack of democratic institutions and accountable governance systems. Several reasons can be cited for all these deficits. One is the unwillingness of the African governments to give the recognition it deserves for the indigenous principles of African moral values. Even where some attention was given to indigenous value systems, they are not used in the way they can contribute to the efficacy of modern governance systems. Another major reason is the incompatibility between the traditional values and the modern laws, believed to have been copied from the West,² governing the socio-economic and political life of Africans; most of all, the dwindling morality that was once the guiding principle. To strengthen this position, Okpalike (2015: 2) says 'Gone are the days when morality and discipline used to be virtues'. Francis Nyamnjoh argues the 'pursuit of personal success and even self-aggrandizement' challenge African value systems such as Ubuntuism (2019). The diminishing of the moral values in the modern governance systems has become part of the everyday communication of the communities grappling with the complexity

¹ The final version of this article has benefited from the feedback and comments by the Editorial Board of *Urbanities* and the comments and criticism given by the anonymous reviewers.

² Most African countries did not have a constitutional history before colonialism. As a result, African constitutions were heavily influenced by the former colonizers in the 1960s, the US or the Soviet Union during the Cold War and, more recently, by the requirements of the international (donor) community. <https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/webdossiers/african-constitutions>

of the challenges that they face due to urban expansion in the suburbs of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, today.

The main purpose of this article is to explore how a single negatively charged concept, *fafee*,³ is used by the Oromo community of the study area to enforce positive consequences in the society's daily practices, and how this concept is used to explain the deficit of modern urban governance system in a particular urban centre, Laga Xafo-Laga Dadhi town, in Oromia. The main source of data is an ethnographic fieldwork conducted in this town between 2011 and 2012. The complexity of the situation in the locality calls for the use of such an approach to explicate the different perceptions and competing interpretations of the realities because 'ethnographic research is an "art of the possible", and in cities, there are many possibilities [...] the application of ethnographic methodology leads to a great variety of approaches and to new paradigmatic challenges' (Pardo et al. 2020: 1). Clifford Geertz's (1973) innovative idea of 'Thick description' also works in urban ethnography because it helps to generate several forms of knowledge out of the many possibilities (Krase 2018). Of course, the above authors acknowledge the contribution of scholars from different academic disciplines such as social anthropology, sociology, history, and urban planning for the 'methodological and theoretical development' for the 'contribution that ethnography offers for a better grasp of our rapidly changing and increasingly complex cities' (Pardo et al. 2020:3).

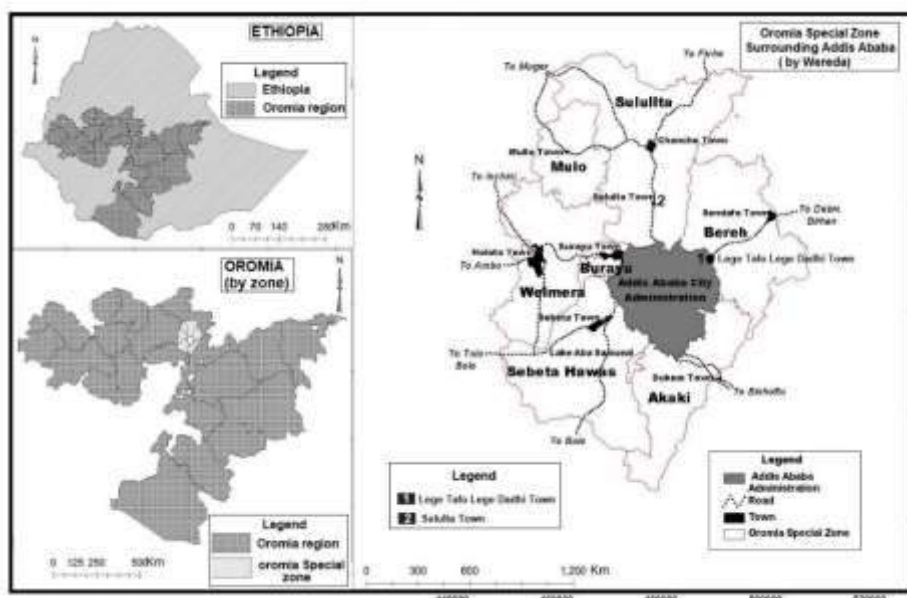
The paper first reviews how the underpinning principles of some selected African indigenous values have served humanity, and then elaborates the context in which the concept *fafee* is used to examine the incompetence of urban governance system, as perceived by the farming community which is recently included in the newly established Laga Xafo-Laga Dadhi town, located about 20 km in the eastern border of Addis Ababa. The development of Laga Xafo-Laga Dadhi, and other towns which were made to have their own municipal administrations after 2005 around Addis Ababa, has historical, empirical and political foundations.

Historically, before the establishment of Addis Ababa (AA) in 1886, the present location of the city was predominantly occupied by the Tulama Oromo which is one of the five 'clans' of the Oromo, the largest ethno-national group in Ethiopia (Haile 2009). Tulama Oromo in the area were predominantly farmers who used the land for crop production and animal grazing. However, due to the establishment of AA and the expansion of its frontiers over time, the farmers have continued to lose their land due to the influx of migrants from other areas of the country to tap the opportunities of urban way of life. Since then, these farmers who have been pushed away from what is now the centre of the city have protested against the exclusive nature of the urban policies and urban development programs. Whenever regimes change in Ethiopia since the creation of the modern Ethiopian state by Menelik II, they come up with their own land and urban development policies which have never made justice to the Tulama Oromo farmers in and around Addis Ababa although they claim they owned the land until the advent of the city in 1886.

³ The word *Fafee* is derived from *fafa*. It means to become deformed, maimed or physically handicapped. Figuratively, it means 'useless or good-for-nothing' (Gamta 1989: 204).

Empirically, the city has fast expanded after the coming into power of the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)⁴ in 1991 with its 'free-market' economic policy where the value of urban land has appreciated. Since the creation of the modern Ethiopian state with the Abyssinian expansion to today's southern half of the country (Baxter 1978), land has been a centre of struggle. The struggle was between the Abyssinian landlords and their local agents and the dispossessed people until 1974 (Markakis and Ayele 1986) and between the state and the people during the Military Dergue regime (1974-1991), which nationalized rural and urban lands. The EPRDF that came to power in 1991 declared that exclusive ownership of land is vested in the State and the Peoples of Ethiopia (Art. 40: 3) leaving only usufruct rights for citizens. Today, land ownership has been a centre of two opposing views under the EPRDF — whether, on the one hand, the country should privatize land or, on the other hand, keep it as it is under state ownership because the present Prosperity Party (PP)-led government retained state ownership of land.

In practice, the 'federal government assumes the power to formulate the broader land policy' (USAID 2004: x), while the regional states have their own respective rural land laws. The Oromia Regional State, where this study area is located, has enacted different rural land policies (see Proc. No 56/2002, 70/2003, 103/2005, 137/2007). Yet urban land administration is governed by federal laws such as Proc. 89/1993, 445/2005, 721/2011, and 1161/2019 which facilitate urban land lease holding system. The implementation of these laws, however, has resulted in challenges such as displacement, lack of transparency in the land transfer, unfair and unjust compensation payment, and lack of rehabilitation mechanisms for the displaced people. These have resulted in inequalities and injustices in the land administration and the overall urban governance system in Laga Xafo-Laga Dadhi town.



Map 1. Major towns surrounding Addis Ababa. Source: GIS in the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, AAU.

⁴ This is a coalition of four organizations; that is, Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO) and Southern Peoples Democratic Movement (SPDM).

In addition to the above historical and empirical reasons, there is a political dimension behind establishing new municipal administrations for small towns around Addis Ababa. In 2005 the Oromia Regional State, the region in which Addis Ababa is located and where there is a heated contention over who should administer the city, declared the establishment of eight municipal towns including Laga Xafo-Laga Dadhi (See Map 1). The decision to establish new municipalities around Addis Ababa sounds reasonable and logical at face value to check the expansion of the city and to help the farming communities to stand up to the pressure of the ever-expanding AA through their own local administration under the new municipalities. But politically, the regional government was in fear of losing more administrative territories, which may make it lose its power in the contentious suburbs. Paradoxically, although the Regional Government is proud of the result of the decision, it is palpable that the new towns themselves have consumed large size of farm land in their localities exacerbating the pressure on the farming communities. It is these historical, empirical, and political complexities that the local farming communities grapple with to frame in their everyday language.

According to the data from the municipality, the population of the town is about 18,000, of which 90% are Orthodox Christians, 5% are Muslims and the remaining 5% are followers of other religions. The town is expanding into the farmlands of the surrounding farming communities in three directions (south, east and north) and the population is also growing. In the west, the town is almost connected to Addis Ababa where Xafo River is the boundary separating the two.

While this study is primarily the result of qualitative data from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with community members and key informant interviews with officials from the different sector offices of Laga Xafo-Laga Dadhi town, it is spiced with a literature review of African indigenous value systems documented by scholars in the field of social sciences some of whom have used an anthropological lens in analysing these values. It is this anthropological lens that this study employs to examine how the concept of '*fafee*' is used by the farming communities to frame their understanding of the impact of urbanization on their livelihoods, express their grievances and understand the urban governance system in the study area. However, before we look at how the concept is used, let us have a brief overview of how indigenous African value systems have served for human wellbeing.

African Indigenous Values as a Base for Human Happiness

African societies have had their own indigenous governance systems with which they used to enforce moral value principles in their respective communities. They have their own philosophy of life and living which were used to shape and monitor the daily practices and moral values of members of the specific societies. Of course, though not as efficient as they were, some of these indigenous value systems are in use with less potency to influence modern governance which have to do with collective or individual everyday engagements. Since many African nations have copied their laws and constitutions from the West, it seems that they do not have sufficient room to accommodate indigenous value principles in formulating modern governance systems. Even if one claims that he/she has done this, it remains only a lip service. In this section, we

will briefly review a few of the indigenous value principles selected from among African societies to provide a broader conceptual background to discuss about the concept *fafee*, a negatively charged expression but used to encourage and uphold positive behaviour while explaining the injustice in the existing urban governance systems and the administrative actors. The concept may serve to stimulate people's mindfulness and call for possibilities to create a new order that accords with people's expectations.⁵

Despite the effect of colonization and the weakening of indigenous governance systems, many African societies have maintained their indigenous value systems which are still at work at their respective community levels. These value systems grounded in their indigenous philosophies possess the potential to ensure the wellbeing of humanity and call for their enhanced role in the modern governance systems. To begin with, one widely cited and most ubiquitous in almost all parts of the African countries where the Bantu language is spoken is the Ubuntu indigenous philosophy. It is integrated into all aspects of the day-to-day life of the more than five million Bantu speakers in Southern, Central, West and East Africa (Metz 2012). Ubuntu philosophy believes in group solidarity, which is crucial for the survival of African communities where it is exercised (Mbigi 1997). Based on the 'ideals of trust, conviviality and support' (Nyamnjoh 2019: 1), Ubuntu philosophy guides the societies to evaluate whether what they are doing is for the betterment of human happiness.

Broodryk (2009: 175) further illustrates the positive attributes of African Ubuntu indigenous value system by using the term itself as an abbreviation for several values that prevail in humanity. These concepts include universality of human brotherhood, the importance of developing the behaviour of humaneness where unity is so crucial for solidarity and social bond in the community. Ubuntu values the importance of negotiation, consensus, and equality which could be ensured through tolerance, patience, mediation, understanding, and forgiveness to ensure the universal values that one wishes to see in African modern governance system today. That is why a commentator in *News 24.com* in its user's comments on 15 November 2011 stated: 'If more people embrace this realizing the value of Ubuntu moral principles..., I believe that we can see a Renaissance of global proportions which would ensure the survival of the human race as a species and further our own evolution as being who can actually decide between right and wrong'. Moreover, Gutierrez (2017) believes that '[...] the African Ubuntu can bring about a revolution of tenderness if the people of the world allow themselves to drink of its spirit'.⁶

In Ethiopia, there is a variety of cultural groups with their own cultural value principles in all spheres of their everyday life. This is reflected in the indigenous environmental protection systems of the Gedeo people (Senishaw 2014) and indigenous land fertility management systems with diverse traditional applications among the agriculturalist Amhara, Oromo, and Tigray communities in the highlands of the country (Lemmma and Haile 2000, Demissie et al. 2000). The practice of '*Kwor*' as a moral principle for ensuring justice and order in the traditional peace-making processes among the Anuak society (Tasew 2000) in the western part

⁵ This explanation is made following peer-reviewers' comments.

⁶ <http://aefjn.org/en/ubuntu-an-african-culture-of-human-solidarity-2/>, accessed on 25 09 2019.

of the country is an indicator of the diverse cultural practices which can be alternative sources of knowledge for modern governance systems in a multinational and multicultural country like Ethiopia.

As the main aim of this article is exploring how the concept *fafee* is used to explain the everyday encounters of the farming communities in Laga Xafo-Laga Dadhi town, it behoves upon us to exert some energy into the understanding of basic moral values in the Oromo Gada System⁷ which are common, though not equally practiced everywhere today, among the nearly forty⁸ million Afaan Oromo⁹ speakers in Ethiopia. Of course, it is the basis for the main theme of the discussion in this article. Gada is a generation and age set system (Legesse 1973, 2000; Jalata 2012; Taddese 2009; Fituma 2017). It embraces crucial legal, political, social, religious, and economic aspects which together build a basic framework for order and execution of meaningful life to prevail. As a governance system, Gada guides the life course of individuals and regulates political, economic, social and religious activities of the community. In his study of ‘African Indigenous Leadership Philosophy and Democratic Governance System: Gada’s Intersectionality with Ubuntu’, Abdurahman Abdulahi (2020) has made an exhaustive comparison of Ubuntu and Oromo Gada System and outlined a list of overlapping value principles. The principle of human universality in Ubuntu is termed as *Namummaa* (humanness) in the Oromo Gada System referring to respect, equality, and dignity of all mankind. Human freedom and the value of respect for human rights, equality of mankind irrespective of any ascribed or achieved capital at both collective and individual level, are other principles that the author explored in the value principles of the Gada System. In addition, *Safuu* (morality) (Alemayehu 2015, Megerssa and Kassam 2019, Abdulahi 2020) — which is expressed as tolerance or unity in Ubuntu value principles — is used to transform conflict and restoration of peace and healing (*nagaa*) for better relationships among the Gada practitioners. Other principles such as decision-making through consensus, rule of law, separation of power, and division of power are Gada System treasures of values that overlap with the modern governance system (Abdulahi 2020, Fituma 2017). This is why Abdulahi (2020) has also explored how the value principles in Gada System are seen in the UN, OECD, and AU good governance principles today.

The above overview of African indigenous value principles, and particularly the moral values in Oromo Gada System are the basis for looking into the concept ‘*Fafee*’ as an everyday expression in Oromo language, though not strictly considered as one of the guiding value principles in their culture.

⁷ The Gada system has been added to UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity since 30 November 2016.

⁸ Since numbers are always politicized in multi-national federal Ethiopia, these days it is difficult to get uncontested figures on the population size of a given ethno-national group. The Oromos always claim to constitute at least 50% of the Ethiopian population.

⁹ This is an Afroasiatic language that belongs to the Cushitic branch. It is native to the Ethiopian state of Oromia and is spoken predominantly by the Oromo people and neighbouring ethnic groups in the Horn of Africa. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oromo_language

***Fafee* — An Everyday Oromo Expression for Framing Modern Governance Systems**

Like any other oral society, the Oromo people have a long-established way of transmitting the cultural values they feel worth sustaining. In doing so, whatever they do or encounter, good or bad, is the result of the will of *Waaqaa*, the creator God. Although the majority of the Oromo in the study area are Orthodox Christians, the traditional understanding of *Waaqaa* is still there because ‘the indigenous Oromo religion which had been practiced long before the introduction of the two major religions, Christianity and Islam into Northeast Africa, was known as *Waaqeffanna*. It is the term derived from an Oromo word, *Waaqaa* which literally means sky God (above all else) and a believer in it is called *Waaqeffata*’ (Ta’a 2012: 90).

For everything that takes place, the people say *Waaqatu godhe* (God did it); *hojii Waaqayyooti* (It is God’s work). This can also be used by an individual, a group, or a community being under different forms of stressful conditions or state of helplessness. Under His all-powerfulness, it is believed that there are some misfortunes that happen to an individual, a group, or the larger community that are perceived as the outcome of God’s wrath; that is, His withdrawal, leaving one to the mercy of minor evil powers for wrong doings or a curse from forefathers, which are still under the will of God because *Waaqa* is the ‘Father of Truth and Justice’ (*Abbaa Dhughaa*)’ (Megerssa and Kassam 2019:206). All these fortunes/misfortunes are culturally conceptualized and interpreted in the everyday language of the society.

One of these useful concepts is *fafee*, which we picked up during the fieldwork in Laga Xafo-Laga Dadhi town. We picked the concept from the interview we had with a farmer who was forced to give away his landholdings for a real estate development project. In an attempt to understand what had happened to him and his fellow farmers after their lands were expropriated, he summarized their agonizing experience saying: ‘[...] *Asis dhaqinee achis dhaqinee nama nudhagahu dhabnee, waan fafeetu nu’argaate.*’ (We went here, we went there, nobody listened to us; we felt unfit). In this statement, ‘*waan fafeetu nu’argate*’ means we experienced something culturally unacceptable, ignominious, and morally wrong.

Though not perceived as one of the widely known traditional value principles in Oromo culture, *fafee* is an everyday expression with which the Oromo people in the study area evaluate and interpret their contemporary social practices. Although it seems a negatively charged concept, it is understood as a means of striving towards efficiency in achieving law and order in systems of governance or among the community members to deliver what is morally/culturally expected of them.

Contextual Application of the Concept of *Fafee*

This section discusses the meanings of *fafee* and its applicability to a variety of contexts in the daily lives of the Oromo people, particularly the Tulama Oromo who have lost their farmlands due to ‘development’ projects. In most of the literature we reviewed for this section, *fafee* often explains incompleteness, incompetence, acts out of the accepted norm, ineptitude, uselessness, and similar concepts that stand for lack of skill, capacity, or vigour to assume a certain responsibility in the community.

After staying longer with the farming community in Laga Xafo-Laga Dadhi town, we learned that *fafee* is widely used to allude to wider issues. Therefore, it is important to deal with this wider understanding of the concept as an everyday common expression before we discuss how it is used locally to frame the impact of urban expansion and the structural malfunctioning of the urban governance system in the town.

During the interview we conducted with the elderly people to generate data for this study, we learned that there are cultural concepts related to some behaviours which are perceived to be *fafee* in the community. But we will briefly discuss only a few of them which we thought would elaborate the concept. First, the concept is related with physical incompleteness, particularly congenital ones. A family who has got a child with some kind of impairment, say an eye, a leg, or any incomplete part of the physical body, is assumed to have been cursed. It is believed that the family has committed an act against the will of God, and hence He has revenged by withdrawing His blessing. Our informant, Baqala Dadhi, said that this type of *fafaa* or the word *fafee* is not often used because it is a taboo word. For the Oromo, it is a taboo to call terms like *jaamaa* (blind), *duudaa* (deaf), *naafa* (lame), and *kan hin dubbanne* (dumb) in front of a physically impaired person (Takele 2017:192). Instead, they use euphemistic expressions such as visually impaired for 'blind' and hearing impaired for the deaf as a sign of respect for the person.¹⁰ In addition, no one chuckles at someone who is congenitally *fafee*. This is mainly for fear that someone who laughs at or ridicules such a person or an animal with some kind of physical deformity, *fafee*, may encounter *fafachuu*, being *fafee*, in his/her family in the future. That is why there is a proverb which says '*kan ilkaan dhalchu, kormi hin dhalchu*' (roughly, what a tooth begets, a bull does not). This means that if you laugh at the natural defect of a person, you invite similar mishaps/defects to your descendants.

The concept can also be associated with marriage or sexual affairs. Among the Tulama Oromo of the study area, one of the most serious cultural practices that need inspection is marriage. Therefore, a naturally competent person is expected to marry because a man or a woman who remains unmarried is considered incomplete, *fafee*, in the community. In a related manner, a person who has a sexual affair with his/her close or distant kin is *fafee* because he/she was involved in incestuous relationship, *haraamu*, in Afaan Oromo.

Cowardice is another meaning attached to *fafee* at individual or group level. *Lunnoomuun fafa* (being a coward is frivolous). In their history, the Tulama Oromo are known for being great fighters and for their bravery. It is not allowed to retreat from any form of group fight or individual confrontation of any cause. A young man who loses in a fight against his fellowman is not accepted by his family, and his father is liable to be ridiculed in the village.

It is equally *fafee* for a man and a woman not to live on their own income in the context of the value the Tulama Oromo attach to work ethics. A grownup healthy person who has the land and other requisite resources is expected to engage in farm activities and produce for his/her family's sustenance. But sometimes there could be a few deviants who, despite their possession, wander around in the village to share from and eat what others have got. Such an individual is socially excluded and not invited even for traditional work parties. In case such a

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion on this, see Birhanu Takele (2017).

person happens to join a work party organized by a co-villager, s/he is always ridiculed through songs customarily sung during cultivation or harvesting in the field. The norm encourages hard work for a member of the community to be fit and socially accepted.

In the context of this study, *fafee* is used to explain the individual capability, skill, and commitment at all levels of the administration in Laga Xafo-Laga Dadhi town. Similarly, it is also used in a wider context in which there is no clear structure with any defined responsibility and accountability in the town's governance structure. In the eyes of the farmer who commented in the public meeting held on 13 December 2012, the procedure followed to assign the town administrators is equally *fafee*.

'*Akka aadaa keeynatti bulchaa keeyna nuti fillata. Amma garu gararraadhaa gadi nutti fidani; maal goona?*' (In our culture, we should elect our leaders. Now they are brought from above. What can we do?). For this commentator, it is *fafee* to assign a manager or a mayor without the knowledge and consent of the local community. Until the advent of Abyssinian colonial expansion to the Oromo land, the Oromo Gada System was encouraging participatory system of governance, and the administrator (*bulchaa*)¹¹ elected in this way was 'expected to be a responsible, dependable and trustworthy person, acting like the proverbial shepherd in respect to his flock' (Megerssa and Kassam 2019:196). Far from being acting like a proverbial shepherd, from the discussions we had with the informants, it was clear that they were all aware that the government was dispossessing their land in the name of development which seems mainly to serve the interests of the immigrant haves. According to the informants, these immigrants are called *Ormma*, stranger or alien, not native to the area, which includes all the non-farming people in their communities. We also learned that this group also includes real estate developers and their clients, the government policy implementers, the *dalaala* ([land] brokers), and the diaspora. Informants believe that dispossession of their land is facilitated by the locally appointed civil servants such as the land administration officers, engineers, and the locally emerging businessmen including the *dalaala*. Since these local level officers and experts are not working fairly, which would have benefitted members of the local community, the latter calls them *fafee* — incomplete, incompetent, inefficient, and incapable.

With regards to inadequacy of individuals' capacity to manage the situation and the farmers' helplessness in the face of massive land dispossession, an informant, a farmer, said: '*Nui maal beekna? Isaan afaan tokko dubatuu silaa*' (What do we know? They speak the same language). This shows that the individuals who were employed and being paid to serve the community betrayed 'their' people and spoke the language of *Ormma*. They have their own development language which, to a greater extent, is unintelligible to members of the local community.

Regarding the use of the concept to explain the sternness of how Laga Xafo-Laga Dadhi municipality provides its daily services, particularly in handling the cases of farmers dispossessed of their lands, the data gathered from the interview conducted with different people such as the municipal administrator, experts in the Office of Agriculture, and the farmers

¹¹ The 'word *bulchaa* is derived from *bulchuu*, "to care for; to support; to govern; to lead"' (Megerssa and Kassam 2019: 196).

themselves illustrated that the system was incompetent. In the first week of May 2012, we went to interview the municipal administrator to get an overview of the structure of the town administration and asked him if he could serve us with a copy of the approved structure. In the interview, he told us that the town did not have a clear administrative structure except for fragmented units that were not up to the standard of the present-day urban administration system in Ethiopia.

Similarly, we also inquired if the Office of Agriculture was established with a legally defined role in urban setting and included accordingly in the administrative structure of the municipality. When we visited the office in March 2012, we found four people who were performing their daily office routines packed in a small room. Except the Team Leader, *Obbo*¹² GT, all the three experts were born in that area, which is now at the heart of the town, where urbanization is deepening its roots. Those agricultural development experts and their parents were victims of the process of land expropriation and its attendant effects. Therefore, they had a fresh memory to bear witness on the matter. Leaving the other three for later interviews, we decided to have an in-depth discussion with the Team Leader.

Our first question to *Obbo* GT was about the responsibility of the Office of Agriculture in the municipality because it was the question for many of our informants in the town. At first, he was very suspicious and reluctant to respond to our questions. Though he recalled that the office was established in 2012, he insisted that he did not have detail information and, thus, advised us to inquire further on this matter with the higher-level town administration officials. He admitted, however, that his office did not have any clear objective and structure which in principle had to be part of the structure of the town administration.

In our further discussion, *Obbo* GT emphasized the need to have *caasaa* (approved structure) and budget for the office he was a Team Leader to at that time; but there was none. He said, ‘*caseeffami odo jiraatee waan baayyee hojjechuun hindanda’ama*’ (If there were a structure, we could do a lot). From all the discussions we had with informants at all levels, we learned that lack of a formal government structure was the major cause for malpractices in land administration, land valuation, and compensation payment processes.

This indicates that the administration does not have the requisite structure and is, therefore, incompetent to provide the required services. From the above discussion, the overall concept of *fafee* among the Tulama Oromo could be summed up with the following simple conceptual framework which illustrates how, under the will of God, a specific epoch or a historical period may make an individual or institution remain *fafee* — incompetent, ineffective, and/or inefficient to meet the expectation of the contemporary society. Thus, this individual and/or institutional inefficiency could result in the emergence of illegitimate social actors with their own vested interests which may, sooner or later, end up with new economic or social relations that may, in turn, call for change through resistance on the ground. This goes with the findings of De Figueiredo et al. (2019), who show how the development approach to restructure Rio de Janeiro with the goal of increasing the economic competitiveness of the city resulted in negative impacts on its economy and its urban dynamics.

¹² This *Afaan* Oromo word is the equivalent of Mr.

The farming community members in the study area had accepted that all the aforementioned incapability and inefficiency of services at individual, group, or institutional level, and all the challenges they faced were the will of God. It is believed that God has already set specific time for something positive or negative to happen on the earth (*lafa*). That is why BD, one of the informants, said ‘*Waaqatu bara akkasii nutti fide*’ (It is God who brought such a time upon us). A wider interpretation of *fafee* can be made in such a way that one *fafee* can be a cause of another and yet a consequence of another *fafee*. For the moment, the concept can broadly be understood at individual and institutional levels.

Individual level *fafee* in the town administration mainly focuses on individual civil servants who work in offices such as the office of land administration and finance. This was clearly indicated in the public meetings and individual interviews with some of the farmers. The following is an excerpt from the interview conducted with one of the youth leaders of the farmers’ movement during the open resistance movement that continued in the town from August to December 2012.

‘Namooti ganda irratti shoomamani dandeetti hinqaban. Uummatas hinfayyadan. Fakkeenyaaf bulchan ganda 02 Obbo. BM (naanno Laga Xafoo) waggaa ja’aafi gandicha bulche.waggaa kana keessatti mana woofchoo lama kaba; hoteela tokkoofi grosarii tokko qaba; makinaa galbachii lamafi makiinaa mana tokko qaba.’ This translates as: ‘People who are assigned to administer the *ganda*¹³ do not have the capacity. For example, Obbo BM, who used to administer Ganda 02 (Laga Xafo River area) for six years has accumulated wealth, i.e., two flour mills, a hotel and a restaurant; he has two dump tracks and an automobile.’

In the above interview, the informant felt that the administrators occupying various levels in the administration structure had no capacity (in terms of training or of education level) to accomplish their duties to the expected standard. It also shows that the administrators had embezzled public resources and hence they are *fafee*, unfit for the position they held.

Similarly, a man who was taking part in a public meeting held on Friday 28 November 2012 said the following to the person who was chairing the meeting representing the Oromia regional government.

‘Akka aadaa keenyatti warri nubilchan uumatatu isaan filata. Amma achumaa gadi nutti fiddan; nui waan goonu hinqabnu. Warri dur nubilchaa turan mere essa jiru? Doolchee afuriin lafa keenya gurgurate. Ammamo nubilchuuf dhufe. Amma nuyyuu nama barate qabna. Maali?’ This translates as: ‘In our culture, leaders are elected by the community. Now you brought (them) from up there. We can do nothing. Where are the previous administrators? A person who sold our land for forty cents has returned to administer us. Why? Now we have our own educated children.’

¹³ This is the lowest administrative unit in the urban administrative structure of the Oromia Regional State.

For this speaker, the people who had been administering them or are coming to administer them now are morally and socially *fafee*. They are morally *fafee* because they expropriated the farmers' land for extremely low compensation, just forty cents/meter square. They are also *fafee* for they were not elected by the community and, therefore, not legitimate to administer them. Unlike in the past when they did not have educated people of their own, now they have educated people among their children who can manage their communities' issues.

Institutional level *fafee* encompasses wider understanding of the concept. At present, the Ethiopian government has urban development policies and administration structures that are supposed to facilitate smooth delivery of services. It is expected that regional states also have their respective urban development policies and administrative structures. Oromia Regional State, through its different level urban development offices, provides legal frameworks and institutional arrangements for the towns and cities in Oromia. Having this in mind, we interviewed the municipal manager of Laga Xafo-Laga Dadhi town, AO, in April 2012, to know if the town had clear structure for proper functioning of the town administration.

Amma yoonatti hinqabnu. Magala jiran hundaafuu Biroo bulchinsa Magala Oromiatu qopheessa. Eegataa jirra. This translates as: 'Up to now, we do not have administrative structure on paper. It is Oromia Urban Development Bureau that prepares organizational structure which is applicable in all towns in the region. We are still waiting for that.'

So far, there is no defined administrative structure for the town. This situation made the urban services to be complicated and ineffective in the eyes of the *farmers* who reside within the administrative boundary of the town. The farmers complain that they do not have any legal status to consider themselves as urban dwellers. That is, there are farmers within the jurisdiction of the city administration whose lands have been expropriated in the name of development, and who still continue to reside in the city on the remaining small piece of land.

Presumed Consequences on the Ground

When an institution or a system, or an individual for that matter, fails to meet the expected standards in service delivery, there is a likely occurrence of unexpected consequences or uncertainties. If all the above understandings are prevalent in the present context of the urban administration in Laga Xafo-Laga Dadhi town, it is evident that some forms of prejudices are likely to manifest themselves.

In this study, we observed that there were two forms of prejudices which we have labelled as subconscious and conscious ones. The 1995 FDRE Constitution, the Oromia Regional State Rural Land Holdings Proclamation No.137/2007, the Land Expropriation and Compensation Proclamation No 455/2005, the Urban Land Lease Proclamation No.721/2011 and many other legal documents of Ethiopia affirm the equality of all people before the law. Accordingly, Art. 25 of the Constitution states:

'All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall guarantee to all persons equal

and effective protection without discrimination on grounds of race, nation, nationalities, or other social origin, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, birth or other status.’

The Constitution ensures the just treatment of all persons irrespective of their background. In this regard, all the legal documents are very much conscious of the rights of people.

If all these legal documents ensure the equality of the citizens, the constitutional right to property ownership, free access to land and protection against eviction, where does the cause of prejudice and marginalization lie? First, even though the law claims that it treats all persons equally, there is no clear and transparent system of accountability and control mechanism of conscious malfeasance within the subconscious system. Informants reported that individuals who abused public office and used land and its resources for personal gain are rarely held to account for their corrupt behaviour.

During the fieldwork, we learned that the administration of the town did not clearly show or somehow indicate the status of the farmers whose livelihood was literally dependent on farming but live within the administrative boundary of the town. Although we are aware that, as set out in the federal and regional legal documents, the system was not set to discriminate against any section of the residents in the town, some of the informants felt that they were not treated equally, or they were marginalized by the individual actors who favour the newcomers attracted to the area in the name of ‘development’ or investment. The perception is clearly stated in the following excerpt from an interview with a farmer: ‘*Hunddi issaanii tokko. Afaan tokko dubbatu*’ (They are all the same. They speak the same language). Is there any ground to blame the government structure? Obviously yes. In spite of the existence of clear government policies and regulations, there was no legal instrument to ensure transparency and establish accountability in the process of land measurement, valuation of properties, and payment of compensation upon land expropriation. The following excerpt is from an interview with a farmer, SL, on the Voice of America (VOA).

‘If we see the way Laga Xafo-Laga Dadhi town administration expropriates land, firstly, more than 75% of the land dispossessed from the farmers is used for residential house construction. But we do not know who takes the land. The administration sells it. We do not know the people who are constructing the houses here (on those lands).’

Although the land belongs to the state and the people (of Ethiopia), it is the farmers who have been using the land. We know that a farmer should give his land for development purposes. However, when he gives the land, certain requirements should be fulfilled; but practically these requirements are not there.

A farmer is not informed why s/he should leave the land. He/she does not know the boundary. The compensation payment process is not transparent. The land is measured without the presence of the farmer. Farmers are not asked. The administration sends the engineers and local administrators. After the size of the land is somehow known, the amount of compensation is determined, the data is taken to the municipal administration, then the land losing farmer is

called to collect the cash compensation. If a farmer complains that he/she did not understand about the compensation procedure and the legal entitlement he/she has on the remaining plot of land, he/she is taken by the police and the local militia to the police station for detention.

The above interview shows that the farmers had developed a sense of being excluded from the process of land measurement, land valuation, and compensation determination. This obviously eroded the bargaining power of the land losing farmers and made them lose trust in the governance system. In this sense, no one can see an open discriminatory action but individuals who exercise their power in the urban governance system evade the regulations or laws to control the land resource to advance their individual or group interests. This is what we call a conscious act in a subconscious system. The acts are conscious in the sense that the actors, irrespective of what the laws say, accumulate the land resources in the hands of their relatives, brothers, sisters, or friends appropriating it under the guise of development. In a public meeting held on 10 December 2012, one of the youths in attendance at the meeting said:

‘Obbo AY, bulchinsi laafaa duraanii bootaa afurtamii ja’a qaba. Haati mana isa biiroo gali hojetti. Lafa kana hunda maqaa fira isaniitiin fudhatan. Maqaa saree isaniitiin illee fudhataniru.’ This translates as: ‘Mr. AY, the former head of the Land Administration Department, owns 46 plots of land in this town. His wife is working in the Revenue office. They took all this land in the name of their relatives and even in the name of their dog!’

Such a conscious act within the subconscious system results in another conscious act (such as, the accumulation of public resources in the hands of a few corrupt civil servants and their associates) within the subconscious system, though a blatant violation of the law results in another conscious but opposite act (for example, resistance and protest, which depending on circumstances could either be violent or peaceful in the form of street protests or petitioning the government) by way of delegitimizing or withdrawal of legitimacy of the subconscious together with its conscious actor(s). This, in turn, results in the conscious actors’ feeling that they are discriminated and marginalized. The effect is much wider, resulting in the discrimination of the whole system together with its actors. This form of prejudice is very much informed, which we label as conscious discrimination. From the point of view of the informants, since the system did not serve in the way it was legally mandated to, they totally rejected it saying it was not theirs and the targets of the delegitimization exercise are the institutions, the system and the individuals who work for the smooth functioning of the dysfunctional city administration structure.¹⁴ The community is conscious that the actors of the system consciously work against their interests manipulating the latter and, therefore, both the actors and the system deserve discrimination.

But if the system consciously declares and publicizes that all persons are equal before the law, why is it not conscious enough about the conscious malfeasance of the actors in the city administrative structures? Two main reasons can be drawn from the in-depth interviews

¹⁴ On legitimacy and legitimation, see the mainstream discussions published in this journal (Pardo and Prato 2018).

conducted with several people in the study community. First, even though the laws and the regulations categorically prohibit any form of corrupt practices, there were no transparent control mechanism to prevent the manipulation of the law by individual actors. Of course, one may argue that there are legal procedures and institutions such as the criminal justice system and other legal instruments such as the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission. However, since the abuse of public office to use land resources for personal gain was done in a very sophisticated way, there were no robust federal or regional government institutions to counteract against such a corrupt system. Second, the moral integrity and competence of the individual actors are challenged by the community. Soon after the peasants began resistance against the massive land expropriation that was going on in the town, most of the civil servants in the town administration stopped providing services for they were easily agitated and frightened by the resistance movement. The following is extracted from an interview conducted with an employee of the Justice Office:

‘Amma hojiin hinjiru. Hojjetaan hojii dhabeera. Akka kootti sirri dha. Namni tokko biiroo keessatti dhufee yoo itti tufee maalgodhu. Yeroodhaaf miliquu wayya. This translates as: There is no work now. ‘People have stopped work. I think they did the right thing. What if someone comes to their office and spit on them? It is good to disappear for a while.’

However, the expansion of both public and private development projects has forced the farmers to be involve in a wider range of relationships with diverse group of actors, often with competing interests. The issues they discuss and the modes of communications were also varied. They communicate with government employees, the private project owners and their clients, the *dalaala*, the new migrants who came to the town seeking jobs in the real estate construction projects, manufacturing, or other sectors. Therefore, the increase in the number of issues to manage and actors to engage with made the farmers busier than usual. Whenever such multiple actors appear with different, sometimes incompatible, interests, it may result in different forms of resistance by individuals or groups who think their interests were not accommodated.

Concluding Remarks

In this article, we have shown how deep and humanly the African indigenous moral principles are by taking a particular concept from the Oromo culture. We have seen that African value principles are reflected in the everyday practices of their respective communities to ensure respect, human dignity, justice, and compassion. *Fafee*, despite the fact that it encompasses some value outlooks that treat disability as an incompleteness resulting from *Waaqaa*’s withdrawal, the concept is used in the everyday language of the community to explain people’s cultural perceptions in response to injustice and inequalities that arise as a result of rapid urbanization.

But the question is, if African societies have these values that protect human dignity and justice in their indigenous philosophies and everyday language, why does the modern African governance system shy away from utilizing these potentials? There are two possible reasons.

One is fear of holding accountability. Most African governments have restrictive laws in order to protect their entrenched leaders and to legitimize the abuse of term limits in office. In addition, they develop weak national, regional or continental mechanisms of human rights protection thereby corrupt their own systems for which they should be held accountable if modern justice systems are non-*fafee*.

The other possible reason is that modern African governments could not liberate themselves from seeking foreign solutions for African problems that arise from system inefficiencies. Here we do not take any position to oversimplify the complex relationship between Africa and the West or the ‘traditional’ versus ‘modern’ perspectives, but we cannot deny that we Africans have been seeking wisdom from abroad since the coming of ‘modern’ governance system. Our constitutions are copied, our modern education systems lack the spice of local wisdom, and our urban governance systems are alien to the local cultures.

So, recognizing where our *fafee/fafeness* lies in our urban governance practices will help to listen to our own people and speak the everyday language of the community. From the forgoing discussion, we can understand that *fafee* is a negatively charged concept, but it guards against any deviation from the acceptable moral and ethical values of the community, which will eventually be judged both by earthly laws and *Waaqaa*’s final verdict.

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