

## Mikirecco of Shekacho: Rethinking The Indigenous System of Governance and Uncovering Its Democratic Features

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this study is to explore the Indigenous System of Governance of Shekacho Community in Sheka Zone, South West Ethiopia. Pertinent to this, a qualitative approach—a key informant interview—was employed. Applicable to this, the purposive sampling technique was used to select research participants. Accordingly, information was gathered primarily using key informant interviews and FGD. The deductive thematic analysis technique was employed for the analysis of the data. The following conclusion was drawn from the analysis made. The findings indicated that the indigenous system of governance of the Shekacho community is one of the longest-lived, having its own distinctive nature and structural hierarchy through which socio-political and economic affairs of the community are carried out. The issue of social cohesion and social welfare, which are embedded in the customary norms and values of the community, is one of the magnificent pillars of the indigenous system of governance of Shekacho community. Therefore, it plays an irreplaceable role in maintaining social stability and cohesion. The indigenous system of governance of Shekacho people substantially includes democratic elements that can consolidate democracy at the national level. Therefore, recognizing the indigenous system of governance can have a tremendous role in promoting democracy in Ethiopia at large.*

**Keywords:** *Shekacho; Mikirecco; Governance; Indigenous System of Governance; Gepitato.*

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## **Introduction**

The concept of governance is as old as human civilization. Based on the nature and nurture behavior of human beings, such as being egoistic, governance plays a central role in determining and ensuring peace and order on the one hand and the proper organization of economic and social life, including the distribution of wealth and resources on the other. Therefore, governance is a necessary feature of any healthy and stable human society (Heywood, 2004).

Human beings have passed through different types of governance systems, from savage to civilization. Human society desires governance to maintain order at the individual level and in society at large. Moreover, humans look for establishing and executing a governance system to bring social welfare and prosperity. This is ensured via procedures for decision-making and decision-passing. The governance system, therefore, connects both the decision-maker and the decision-taker to one another, which has a significant role in the fruitfulness and success of the law of the system. Governance, thus, pertains to sound management of resources, delivery of and equitable access to public services, and responsiveness to the views of the mass at the grass-roots level (Kabumba, 2005).

Therefore, in the long march of mankind from the cave to the complicated technology, the idea of governance has always played a central role. This is the idea that order is necessary and chaos is inimical to a just and stable existence. Every society, whether it is large or small, powerful or weak, has created for itself a framework of principles within which to develop (Shaw, 2008).

Lutz and Linder (2004) state that all human societies in the world have developed certain governance systems to

fulfill their wants and needs. This is why societies in different corners of the world have practiced their indigenous form of leadership with the objective of maintaining social justice and order. To make sure of this, they have identified and developed various forms of governance systems, and they have elected and given legitimacy to rulers to make and execute laws and make decisions. However, the bureaucracy and mechanisms by which communities make and implement these governance systems and practices vary from society to society in different corners of the world. This is the main reality that different human societies, including Africa, have developed and adopted several procedural frameworks and structures of governance in line with diverse aspects of human life.

Ethiopia is a land of plenty with a long and noble history giving rise to ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. It has more than 80 unique and rich ethnic, cultural, and linguistic groups. These ethnic groups are endowed with plenty of their traditions, cultures, values, and norms (Adamu, 2013). Shekacho Community, living in Southwest Ethiopian Community Regional State, is one of these cultural and linguistic groups with distinctive indigenous systems and values, including a governance system (Ayenew, 2020).

This indigenous system of governance has its own institutional structure and procedures that aim at maintaining and ensuring social justice and welfare. The system comprises structure, mechanisms, and processes through which the community articulates its interests, exercises its rights, and meets its obligations. However, this indigenous system is not well investigated and explored to the extent it should have been.

Therefore, this study aims at exploring and assessing the long-lived indigenous system of governance in the Shekacho community.

## Method

### *Research Approach and Design*

The study aimed at exploring Mikirecco, the indigenous system of governance of the Shekacho Community. Pertinent to the subject under investigation, a qualitative research approach was followed. Cited in Bezabih & Akako (2022), Dawson (2002) stated that qualitative research explores attitudes, behaviors, and experiences and attempts to get an in-depth opinion from participants through methods such as interviews, focus group discussions, and document review. Based on the nature of the study, a case study research design was used. Creswell (2014) noted that case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a tradition or system through detailed and in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information.

### *Sampling*

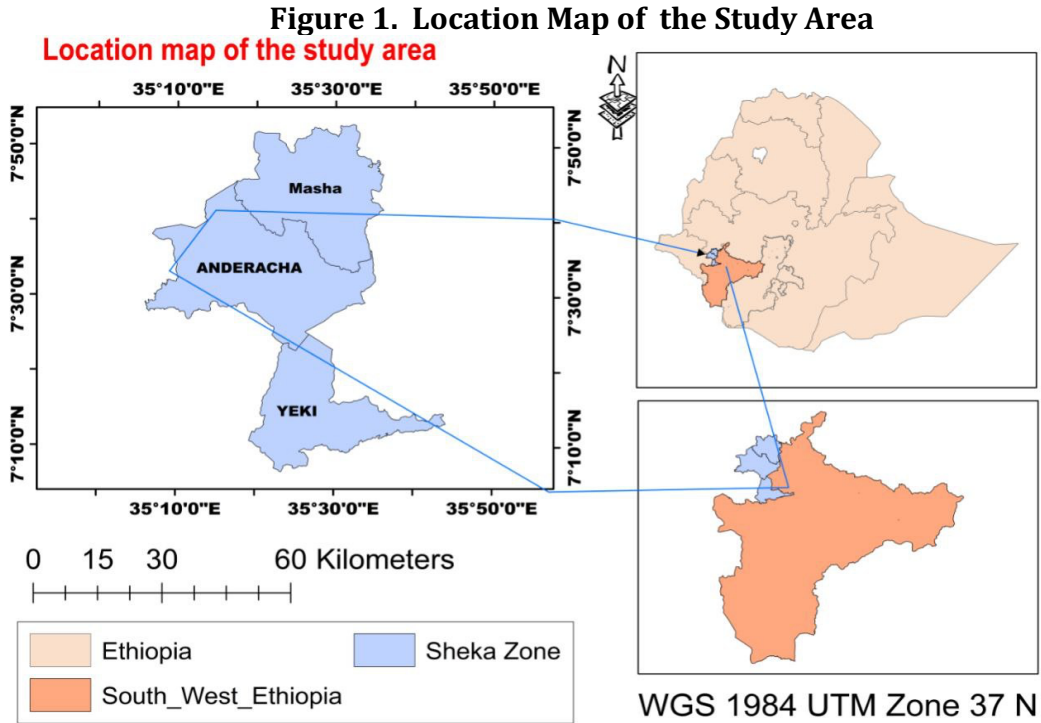
The study area and research participants are selected purposefully. Masha, Andracha, and Yeki provinces were purposely selected. From these provinces, a total of 10 kebeles were selected by the criterion sampling technique. The researchers believe that these are areas where abundant information regarding *Mikirecco*; the indigenous governance

system of the Shekacho community, is found.

By using non-probability sampling, predominantly a snowball sampling technique, elders, clan chiefs, and traditional belief leaders were selected. Accordingly, five elders, one clan chief, and one traditional belief leader were selected from the selected ten kebeles. Furthermore, key informants from the culture and truism offices and the justice administration offices of each district were selected.

### *Data collection and Analysis Technique*

Data were collected through key informant interviews, focus group discussions (FGD), and document reviews. A key informant interview was held with elders, clan chiefs, and traditional belief leaders who had been selected through a snowball sampling technique. In addition, officials from the culture and tourism offices and the justice administration were also interviewed. Regarding the FGD, it was held with elders, clan chiefs, and traditional belief leaders who were selected based on their lived experience in the *Mikirecco*; the indigenous governance system of the Shekacho community, and their recognition in the community. According to secondary sources, published and unpublished documents were reviewed. Concerning data analysis, a deductive thematic analysis technique was used.



Source: (Researchers, 2022)

## Result and Discussion

### *The Nature of the Indigenous System of Governance of the Shekacho Community*

The Shekacho community, who currently lives in South West Ethiopia, had been one of the autonomous kingdoms in the south and southwest before the inclusion of Sheka into the wider Ethiopian state through the unifying force of Emperor Menelik II in the second half of the nineteenth century. Minilik's expansion resulted in the incorporation of diverse ethnic groups with their own cultures into the empire (Adejumobi, 2007). As elders stated, following the expansion of Minilik II towards South, South Western, and South-Eastern parts of today's Ethiopia, Sheka Kingdom became part of modern Ethiopia in the 1890s, especially following the invasion of the kingdom by RasTesema (FGD result, Masha, October 14, 2021).

The community has a century's old ruling system and is enriched with its indigenous cultural practices and values. The community of Shekacho has its own age-old distinctive indigenous system of governance that maintains social welfare, fosters social harmony and cohesion, and allocates resources. This indigenous system of governance is used to run all socio-economic and political affairs in the area of the Shekacho community. The system has a structure through which socio-economic and political affairs are decided. As per the structure, there is a central organ called *Mikirecco* where the seat of power rests. In the indigenous institution, *Mikirecco* holds the most significant decision-making power, just like parliament in the parliamentary system of government in the modern governance system of states. In this respect, Bockenforde (2011) states that the parliamentary system plays a crucial

role in promoting democracy by offering the possibility of creating a broad and comprehensive government through inclusive decisions. *Mikirecco* constitutes the king at the top and the councilors. The king called *Shekitato* (the king of Shekacho) is necessarily from a clan called *Bushasho* in hereditary means of power transition. This is why the Shekacho Kingdom is utterly based on the *Bushasho* dynasty's rule since the sixteenth century.

As elder informants stated, though the political history of Shekacho before the *Bushaho* dynasty is largely unknown, the Shekacho community had developed a pre-*Bushasho* state under the rule of *Batto*. The indigenous governance system has its own institutional structure, ways of representation, power-sharing, and power transition. The clan leader, called *Gepitato*, is the key body in the indigenous system in administering and guarding its respective community as the kingdom was subdivided into clan-based administrative provinces (Interview result, Adracha, September 10, 2021).

### ***The Structure of Indigenous System of Governance of Shekacho Community***

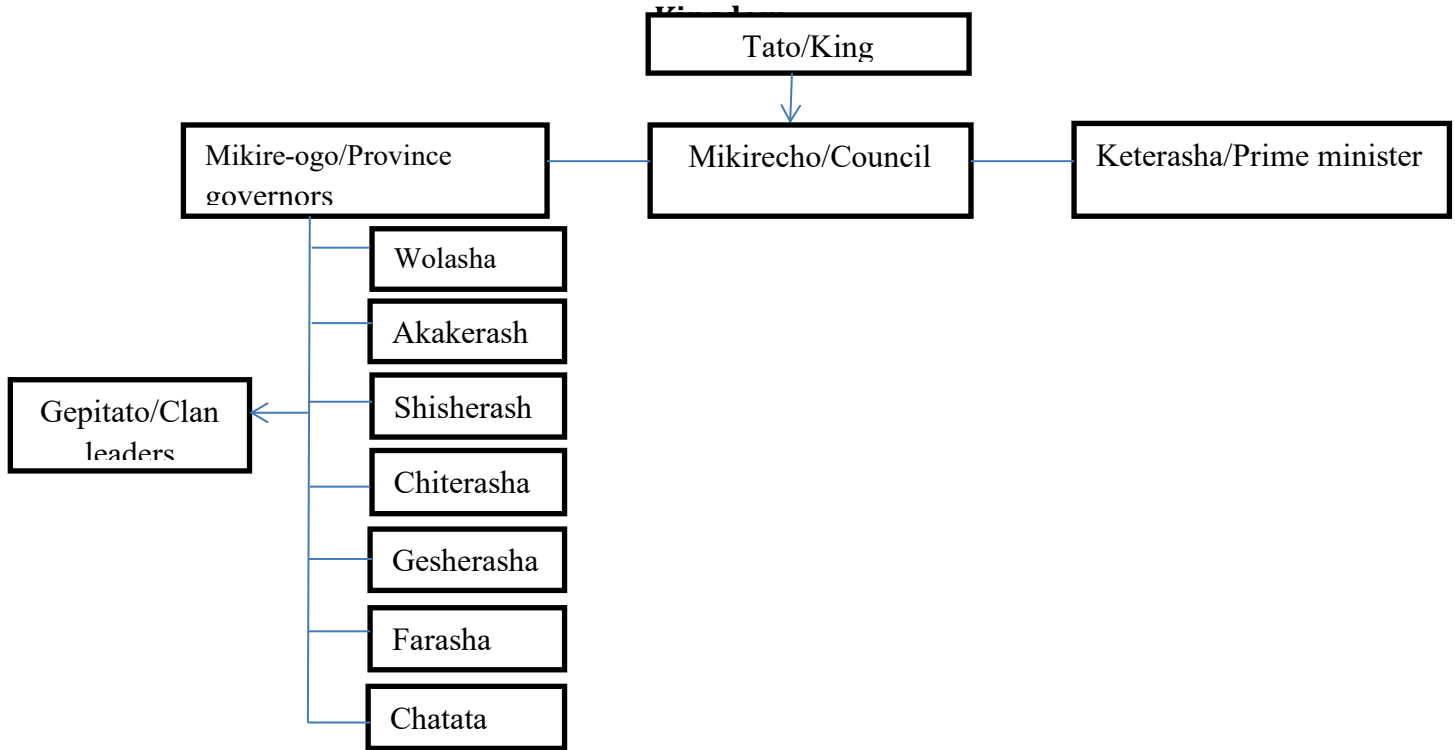
The Indigenous system of governance in Shekacho Community runs all socio-economic and political affairs as per its well-organized systemic structure. The structure unambiguously indicates who does what in the indigenous system. It sets the power and responsibility of each body from top to bottom and from bottom to top. This paves the way not only for the enclosure of the principle of inclusion but

also for the execution of basic principles of modern democracy such as accountability, transparency, and sharing of power in the indigenous system. Concerning this, in the global context, a democratic government in the world in modern times is evaluated based on principles such as accountability, transparency, equality, and citizen participation (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2011).

It is *Tato* (the King) at the top of the indigenous system of governance in the Shekacho kingdom. There are other bodies such as the council (known as *Mikirecco*), clan leaders (*Gepitato*), and individuals appointed under them next to the king according to the institutional structure of the indigenous system of governance. The indigenous system of governance maintains systematic relations among members and plays the role of guarding against social disorder, chaos, and instability. The organization also has a huge responsibility to guard against deeds that may cause and exacerbate environmental degradation (Zewdie, 2007).

It is the structure of the indigenous system of governance of the Shekacho Community that illustrates who does what. The structure of the indigenous system of governance is entirely based on clans and sub-clans, through whom the Shekacho community is divided into seven (7) clan-based provinces for administration. The structure of the indigenous system of governance of the Shekacho community is shown in the following figure.

**Figure: 2. Structural Hierarchy of Indigenous System of Governance of Sheka**



Source: (Researchers, 2022)

As per the structural hierarchy stated in the above figure, each *Gepitato* possesses the power of administering and managing its respective clan-based provinces. These areas include parts of the present-day Sheka zone and some adjacent areas. Each organ of the institution is discussed as follows:

**Tato (the King):** the king sits at the top and is assumed to be the figure of the Shekacho Kingdom. Tato (the king), unlike in many monarchical systems of government, doesn't hold absolute political power. As it is understandable from the history of the Shekacho community, the Kingdom of Sheka has been governed by an administrative system in which the highest power resides in the *Mikirecco* which constitutes the council of the provincial governors, *Keterasha*, and the king himself. The king

and members of the *Mikirecco* (the council) have general discussions on different affairs of the kingdom and pass decisions collectively. Regarding the democratic nature of the indigenous system of governance, Bitew et al. (2021) state that in Africa in general and in Ethiopia in particular, administrative activities in indigenous governance institutions run based on people's participation, and leaders are sanctioned if they try to act arbitrarily, and this is carried out according to customary laws.

Based on the ancestral dynastic rule of Bushasho, different Bushasho kings ruled the kingdom of Sheka from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century. The kings and their respective approximate reigns are stated in the following table.

**Table 1. The Chronological Order of Kings and Their Reign in the Kingdom of Sheka**

Royal Name of the Kings	Approximate Reign
Gaki Gaecci	From 1560 to 1590
Gina Gaecci	From 1590 to 1610
Gammi Gaecci	From 1610 to 1630
Shecci Gaecci	From 1630 to 1670
Bedi Gaecci	From 1670 to 1740
Giba Gaecci	From 1740 to 1780
Tugi Necocci	From 1780 to 1782
Tumo Afocci	From 1782 to 1785
Shegi Neccocci	From 1785 to 1800
Bedi Nechocci	From 1800 to 1805
Techi Necocci	From 1805 to 1810
Galli Gaecci	From 1820 to 1850
Degi Gaecci	From 1850 to 1887
Tecci Gaecci	From 1887 to 1898
Geri Gaocci	From 1898 to 1910

Source: (Researchers, according to Lange,1882 and Angelo, 2021)

**Katerasha (the prime minister)**

Katerasha functions as the prime minister of Sheka Kingdom. He is the only political officer who comes to power through merit base and the only *Mikirecco* member who doesn't have his definitive fief in the kingdom of Sheka. Personal traits such as bravery, generosity, social acceptance, and the like are the key criteria considered for the appointment of Katerasha. *Katerashais* is elected based on the majority vote of members of the *Mikirecco*. *Katerasha* acts as not only the prime minister of the Sheka king but also the administrative head and chief coordinator of the *Mikirecco*. Although the exact time of administration is not known, a variety of personalities with the title of *Katerasha*, served as the administrative head of the kingdom of Sheka. Accordingly, the sequential order of Katerashas in the kingdom looks like the following:

*Katera Nibadabochi of the Ado* clan → *Katera Gafochi* of the *Ataso* clan → *Katera Badali* of the *Deggo* clan → *Katera Gidi* of the *Ataso* clan → *Katera Didi* of the

*Ataso* clan → *Katera Kotachi* of the *Ataso* clan → *Katera Aki* of the *Abalo* clan (Lange 1982: 134).

**Mikirecco (the council)**

Structurally, in the indigenous system of governance of the Sheka kingdom, *Mikirecco* is organized by province governors, *Tato* (the king), and *Keterasha* (the prime minister). The seven members (governors of administrative provinces) are the occupants of the provinces of the Kingdom and members of *Mikirecco* simultaneously. They take power by hereditary means. They represent the clan-based province of the land in the *Mikirecco*. The seven representatives are: *Welasha*, *Akakerasha*, *Farasha*, *Gesherasha*, *Shisherasha*, *Chiterasha*, and *Chatata* and each has his advisor who can carry out activities in his absence. *Mikirecco* is the holder of the highest political power in the Kingdom. It is the power of the council to appoint and remove the king from power (Bechuro, 2021:32).

This has an exact resemblance to the way of appointing and removing political officials from office in the modern system of government. The way the upper political officers are removed, which is known as impeachment and vote of no confidence in a presidential and parliamentary systems of government, respectively, is the actual reflection of modern democracy (Cole & Garvey, 2015; Norton, 2016). This body also has the power to appoint all political officers in the provinces of the Kingdom. The residing of power in the hands of *Mikirecco* indicates the exercise of representative democracy, which is one of the principal attributes of modern democracy. *Mikirecco* conducts meetings to discuss diverse affairs and pass decisions. The council holds general meetings once a year in September, though it can also hold urgent meetings on emergency issues like war (FGD results: Andracha and Masha, September and October 2021).

Since the seven members of the *Mikirecco* are the governors of the administrative provinces of the Sheka Kingdom, they are feudal lords with their own fief and army. The armies of each *Mikirecco* are united during times of national crisis. The *Mikirecco*, having different clan leaders (*Gepitato*) under them, are given the power to govern their respective provinces of the kingdom. Any head of a clan residing on the land of a particular *Mikirecco* is directly responsible to the landlord for different activities like tax collection and mobilization of the army (FGD result (2021), interview result (2021), Lange (1982), and Bechuro (2021)).

The provinces of the seven *Mikirecco* are the seven country sides of Sheka Kingdom, and they are currently the entire province of Sheka zone and some parts of adjacent areas such as Godere

woreda of Majang zone and Sele Nono woreda of Illu Abbaa Booraa zone. The seven provinces have boundaries that separate one administrative province from the other. The seven provinces and their respective governors are discussed in the following section.

### 1. *Wolasha*

*Wolasha* is one of the occupants of the provinces of the Kingdom of Sheka, and he is the most prominent member of the *Wolo* clan. In the Sheka Kingdom, *Wolasha* is also the single most powerful official, and his close relationship with the King differentiates him from other *Mikirecco* members. Moreover, *Wolasha* acts as the general commander of all district forces during national emergencies (Lange, 1982). The administrative title of *Wolasha* is given to a person who is from the *Wolo* clan. Although the exact time of administration is not known, a variety of personalities with the title of *Wolasha*, served the administrative province of the kingdom of Sheka. According to the sequential order, the Sheka *Wolashas* were:

*Wolasha Deggigaygo* → *Wolasha Katanochi* → *Wolasha Kutibashochi* → *Wolasha Kakibashochi* → *Wolasha Marochi* → *Wolasha Awagi* → *Wolasha Ari* → *Wolasha Wari* → *Wolasha Alali* → *Wolasha Diri* → *Wolasha Gay* → *Wolasha Shegi* → *Wolasha Angelo* (Lange 1982: 139)

*Wolasha*, as a political official of the province of Sheka Kingdom, is a feudal lord with his own fief and army. *Wolasha*, having different clan leaders (*Gepitato*) under it, is given the power to govern their respective provinces of the kingdom. Just like other *Mikirecco*/councilors, *Wolasha* possessed his fief and a military force called *macho*. Similarly, he also possessed drums, which were used for different purposes, like sounding during his travels



and burial ceremonies. Like other heads of a clan on the land, councilors do, and the head of a clan residing on the land of *Wolasha* is directly responsible to him for different activities like the collection of taxes and mobilization of the army.

The person who is entitled to *Wolasha* jointly governs the province of diverse clan leaders (*Gepitato*) such as *Woltata*, *Abeltata*, *Atestata*, *Shibitata*, *Batitata*, *Yaphitata*, *Keyitata*, *Humachitata*, *Chagitata*, *Akaritata*, *Akitata*, and the like. Other provinces under the leadership of some *Gepitatos* such as *Shietata*, *Guchitata*, *Kachitata*, and *Shawunaotata* also shifted from *Akakerasha* to *Wallasha* due to maladministration. As elder informants stated, the administrative province of *Wollasha* includes the present-day kebeles of Masha woreda and a few kebeles of Andracha woreda of the Sheka zone that are called by the names of the clans under this province of the kingdom. The administrative area of this province stretches from the Baro River, which is a boundary between the present-day Sheka zone and Oromia region, to the boundary between the Sheka zone and Kaffa zone. The province is bordered by the Ganji River with the province of *Akakerasha* in present-day Andracha Woreda. Therefore, *Wollasha* is elected to govern all the aforementioned provinces, which are entirely under his administrative territory of the Shekakingdom. (FGD results: Andracha and Masha, September and October 2021)

## 2. *Akakerasha*

Unlike other province governors (the rest six governors), the title of *Akakerasha* is not exclusively given to a single clan. Therefore, the indigenous administrative title of *Akakerasha* is given to a person who is necessarily from one of the six clans under it. Accordingly, the

office of the *Akakerasha* is alternatively occupied by clans such as *Hadimo*, *Mashago*, *Abako*, *Nitto*, *Shawinao*, and *Gucho*. Although the exact time of administration is not known, a variety of personalities, with the title of *Akakerasha*, served the administrative province of the kingdom of Sheka. According to the sequential order, some of *Akakerashas* were:

*Akakerasha Enihochi* → *Akakerasha Nibadabochi* → *Akakerasha Erochi* → *Akakerasha Shuchi* → *Akakerasha Bulochi* → *Akakerasha Shami* → *Akakerasha Biraychi* (Lange 1982: 139)

The person who is entitled to this title jointly governs the province of diverse clan leaders (*Gepitato*) such as *Aditata*, *Hadimitata*, *Mashagitata*, *Nititata*, *Gahotata*, *Fa'otata*, *Gisitata*, *Gutitata*, and the like. Any head of a clan residing on the land of *Akakerasha* is directly responsible to him for different activities like the collection of taxes and mobilization of the army, called *macho*. As elder informants stated, the administrative province of *Akakerasha* includes the present-day kebeles of Andracha woreda of the Sheka zone that are called by the names of the clans under this administrative province of the Sheka Kingdom. Therefore, *Akakerasha* is appointed to govern the entire aforementioned provinces, which are under his administrative jurisdiction (FGD results: Andracha and Masha, September and October 2021).

## 3. *Shisherasha*

The administrative title *Shisherasha* is given to a person who is necessarily from the *Shisho* clan. The person who is entitled to this title jointly governs the province of diverse clan leaders (*Gepitato*) such as *Shishitata*,

Damawitata, Boharitata, Kohitata, Motata, and the like. Although the exact time of administration is not known, a variety of personalities with the title of *Shisherasha*, served the administrative province of the kingdom of Sheka. However, some of these province governors are not remembered by the informants and were not disclosed in documents. According to the sequential order, some of the Sheka *Shisherashas* were:

*Shisherasha Gawochi* → *Shisherasha Ganochi* → *Shisherasha Hinnishi* → *Shisherasha Adochi* → *Shisherasha Machi* → *Shisherasha Nishi* → *Shisherasha Bayti* → *Shisherasha Matti* → *Shisherasha Kalli* (Lange 1982 & FGD result Andracha and Masha September and October 2021).

Just like other province governors, *Shisherasha* possessed his fief and military force. Similarly, he also possessed drums, which were used for different purposes during his travels and burial ceremonies. Like other heads of the clan do, the head of a clan residing on the land of *Shisherasha* is directly responsible for different activities like the collection of taxes and mobilization of the army, called *macho*.

The elder informants stated the administrative province of *Shisherasha* includes the present-day kebeles of Andracha woreda of the Sheka zone that are called by the names of the clans under this administrative province. Therefore, *Shisherasha* is appointed to govern the entire aforementioned provinces, which are under the administrative jurisdiction of Sheka Kingdom (FGD results: Andracha and Masha, September and October 2021).

#### 4. *Chiterasha*

The administrative title of *Chiterasha* is given to a person who is usually from the *Fa'o* clan, with a rare opportunity for the

Ado clan to be included. Although the exact time of administration is not known, a variety of personalities with the title of *Chiterasha*, served the administrative province of the kingdom of Sheka. According to the sequential order, *Chiterashas* of the Sheka kingdom were:

*Chiterasha Yowoshi* → *Chiterasha Yerochi* → *Chiterasha Abi* → *Chiterasha Kashihochi* → *Chiterasha Geri* → *Chiterasha Nehochi* → *Chiterasha Kafi* → *Chiterasha Yobi* → *Chiterasha Shegi* → *Chiterasha Yeri* → *Chiterasha Afi* → *Chiterasha Dinni* → *Chiterasha Chidi* (Lange 1982: 144)

Just like other province governors, *Chiterasha* possessed his fief and military force. Similarly, he also possessed drums, which were used for different purposes during his travels and burial ceremonies. Like other heads of the clan on the land councilors do, any head of a clan residing on the land of *Chiterasha* is directly responsible to him for different activities like the collection of taxes and mobilization of the army, called *macho*.

The elder informants stated that the person who is entitled to this title jointly governs the province of diverse clan leaders (*Gepitato*) such as Nibahitata, Shoditata, Adalitata, Dopitata, Gehitata, and the like. The administrative province of *Chiterasha* includes the few present-day kebeles of Andracha woreda in the Sheka zone. Therefore, *Chiterasha* is elected to govern the entire aforementioned provinces, which are under its administrative jurisdiction (FGD results: Andracha and Masha, September and October 2021).

#### 5. *Gesherasha*

The administrative title of *Gesherasha* is given to a person who is necessarily from *Fa'o*clan just like

*Farasha*. The person who is entitled to this administrative title jointly governs the province of diverse clan leaders (*Gepitato*) such as *Kabitata*, *Agaritata*, *Umbitata*, *Ambiyitata*, *Bagayitata*, *Mashna'etata*, *Hinabritata*, and the like. *Gesherasha* of Sheka and *Gesherasha* of Kaffa are not the same and are distinguishable in terms of geographical location and the land they controlled. *Gesherasha* of Sheka Kingdom controlled and governed the land area of *Gesha* of Sheka which stretches from the *Shaki* River to the *Gayri* River in the east. The territorial land of *Gesherasha* stretches to the *Beko* River, excluding the land governed by *Chatata* in *Yeki* (*Bechuro*, 2021). Like other heads of the clan on the land councilors do, any head of a clan residing on the land of *Gesherasha* is directly responsible to him for different activities like the collection of taxes and mobilization of the army, called *macho*.

Although the exact time of administration is not known, a variety of personalities with the title of *Gesherasha*, served the administrative province of the kingdom of Sheka. According to the sequential order, the Sheka *Gesherashas* were:

*Gesherasha Sodihochi* → *Gesherasha Tumochi* → *Gesherasha Gerochi* → *Gesherasha Katochi* → *Gesherasha Yemoshi* → *Gesherasha Baccochi* → *Gesherasha Yayhoshi* → *Gesherasha Cheri* → *Gesherasha Bayti* → *Gesherasha Chegi* → *Gesherasha Wollli* → *Gesherasha Chini* (*Lange* 1982: 142)

As elders stated, the administrative province of *Gesherasha* includes most of the *Kebeles* of present-day *Yekiworeda*, a few of the *Andrachaworeda* of *Sheka* zone, and most of the present-day *Majang* zone. Therefore, it includes most parts of

*Yekiworeda*, which extends up to the *Beko* River (the boundary between present-day *Sheka* and *Bench-Sheko* zones), most of the present-day *Majang* zone, and some parts of *Andrachaworeda*. This is the largest administrative province of the *Sheka* Kingdom in terms of its landmass. *Gesherasha* is elected to govern all the aforementioned provinces, which are under its administrative province (FGD results: *Andracha* and *Masha*, September and October 2021).

## 6. *Farasha*

The administrative title *Farasha* is given to a person who is necessarily from the *Fa'o* clan. Accordingly, the office of the *Farasha* has been occupied by an officer from *Fa'o*clan. The *Farasha* of the *Sheka* kingdom controlled and administered western lands. Various clan leaders (including the clan leader of the *Fa'o* clan called *Fa'e-tato*) of this territory of *Sheka* Kingdom are directly responsible to *Farasha*. They are responsible for shouldering different responsibilities, including supervising the work of the population.

Although the exact time of administration is not known, a variety of personalities with the title of *Farasha*, served the administrative province of the kingdom of *Sheka*. According to the sequential order, some of the *Sheka Farashas* were:

*Fara Alali* → *Fara Magihochi* → *Fara Gabiti* → *Nechochi* → *Fara Gabochi* → *Fara Berochi* → *Fara Batati* → *Fara Iberi* → *Fara Adi* → *Fara Akaki* → *Fara Gami* → *Fara Dokachi* (*Lange* 1982: 143)

The person who is entitled to this title jointly governs the province of diverse clan leaders (*Gepitato*) such as *Fa'etata*, *Yebaretata*, *Gatimitata*, and the

like. The status of the *Farasha* territorial occupation before the Oromo conquest was much greater than in the succeeding periods. Any head of the clan residing on the land of *Farasha* is directly responsible to him for different activities like the collection of taxes and the mobilization of the army. Elder informants stated the administrative province of *Farasha* includes some present-day kebeles of Andracha woreda of the Sheka zone. Therefore, *Farasha* is elected to govern the aforementioned districts, which are under its administrative province (FGD results: Andracha and Masha, September and October 2021).

## 7. *Chatata*

The indigenous administrative title of *Chatata* is given to a person who is necessarily from the Weshero clan. As elder informants stated, *Weshero* of Sheka and *Weshero* of Kafa are not identical and are different in terms of geographical location. The person who is entitled to this title jointly governs the province of diverse clan leaders (*Gepitato*) including *Wosharitata*, *Hinibaritata*, *Achitata*, *Yashilamitata*, *Shirotata*, *Filtata*, *Amarotata*, *Mechotata*, *Hinibawotata*, *Masotatta*, *Ge'otata*, *Awusotata*, and the like (Angelo, 2021). Elder informants stated the administrative province of *Chatata* includes some present-day kebeles of Yeki woreda of Sheka zone, which are bordered by present-day Bitaworeda of Kafa zone and Sheko woreda of Bench-Sheko zone. Therefore, *Chatata* is elected to govern the aforementioned districts, which are under its administrative province (FGD results: Andracha and Masha, September and October 2021). Unlike other province governors, the sequential order of the *Chatata* is not identified or disclosed in both oral traditions and documents.

## **Gepitato (clan leader)**

According to the organizational structure of the indigenous governance of the Shekacho community, it is the institution of *Gepitato* that comes next to *Mikirecco*. The *Gepitatos* have the power to govern their corresponding clans and are responsible for administrative activities in their respective administrative areas of the locality. This is basically because in the indigenous system of governance of the Shekacho community, the administrative areas are structured and divided into administrative provinces based on clans. In the administrative tradition of the Shekacho community, the name of each local administrative unit (currently named kebele) is coined after a corresponding clan. *Gepitato* administers different clans that are classified based on their kinship intimacy. *Gepitato* administers an area of land that could be equivalent to the size of the present-day Kebele administration. According to the FGD discussants, the names of different *Gepitato* titles also derive from the names of corresponding clan names, like the following ones:

- Waltata from Wolo clan
- Atastata from Ateso clan
- Abeltata from Abelo clan
- Shibtata from Shibo clan
- Yaphitata from Yapho clan
- Batata from Bato clan
- Akitata from Ako clan
- Yewtata from Yewo clan
- Adtata from Ado clan
- Hadmitata from Hadmo clan
- Mashagitata from Mashago clan
- Adaltata from Adalo clan

The position of a clan leader in the indigenous system is a key issue as it relates to carrying out and executing very decisive roles, including guarding and maintaining social order and harmony. Therefore, clan leadership among the

Shekacho community is the most influential traditional position that an individual acquires through inheritance in administering clan-based localities in the community (FGD results Andracha and Masha, September and October 2021).

The clan leader assumes and shoulders a range of responsibilities that have a big attachment to overall socio-cultural, religious, and economic affairs. In the Shekacho community, a clan leader is responsible for diverse activities. Therefore, a clan leader is both a ritual leader and an administrator responsible for the arbitration of disputes among clan members.

The major roles of *Gepitato* in the indigenous system of governance of the Shekaco community include the following:

- **Religious and ritual role:** *Gepitato* plays a decisive role in the religious and ritual affairs of the community by performing and leading various religious ceremonies and rituals. Accordingly, the *Gepitato* provides a blessing to their land and prays for the peace and well-being of his community, cattle, crop, and the whole environment.
- **Natural resource governance.** It is *Gepitato* who plays a leading and paramount role in administering and managing natural resources, including the Sheka forest. *Gepitato* guides and administers natural resources such as forests and wetlands. He guides the effective use of natural resources, mainly forests, to avoid inappropriate use of forests that likely leads to deforestation, consequently resulting in drought and environmental degradation. Therefore, it is this indigenous knowledge of forest governance that played an indispensable role in

preserving the natural forest of the Shekacho community. In this respect, *Gepitato* takes the lion's share in the preservation of the century-old Sheka forest, which was recorded by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) under the name "Sheka Forest Biosphere Reserve" in 2011. The Sheka Forest has not only long been the major source of livelihood and spiritual practices in the area but also remains one of the few Afromontane forests, supporting diverse wildlife populations (Henniniger, 2008). Traditional and cultural land administration and management systems have played an irreplaceable role in the preservation of the Sheka forest. In the Shekacho community, the forest is assumed to be life and a means of survival because the life of every person in one way or another depends on the forest and forest production. This is why, in the Shekacho community, it is frequently stated that if there is no tree, there is no life, and thus no bee; and if there is no honey, there is no money. These are all the deeds of the *gepitato* in managing and preserving natural resources in general and forests in particular.

- **Conflict resolution:** *Gepitato* is the most influential and respected person in resolving conflict, restoring peace, and consolidating social cohesion in the community of Shekacho, as safeguarding the well-being and order of his corresponding community is one of his primary responsibilities. *Gepitato* plays a primary role in customary dispute resolution using

traditional mechanisms of resolving conflict by bringing the parties in the conflict together. The decisions made by the Gepitato at the end of the resolution are final and binding, and both parties are bound by the decision. This straightforwardly avoids the escalation of the conflict that can affect the well-being of the community at large (Woldemariam and Getaneh).

- **Imposing punishments:** *Gepitato* has the responsibility of guarding his community by punishing wrongdoing. He imposes and enforces punishments against the violation of traditional rules related to social security, social interface, resource management, the celebration of religious ceremonies, and the like. The punishments usually involve fines in kind, advice, ostracism, etc. *Gepitato* identifies offenders using different traditional mechanisms, like swearing and cursing. Different materials, such as fire, eggs, water, and ash, are used during the swearing process, while a spear is commonly used in the cursing process. Therefore, clan leaders of the Shekacho Community have huge power and responsibility for performing activities related to different social, cultural, and economic affairs that are substantially related to managing the livelihood of the community (Bekele and Akako, 2022). They perform these activities according to the structure of the indigenous system.

### ***The Nexus between the Indigenous System of Governance of Shekacho***

### ***Community and Modern System of Local Governance***

Broadly speaking, governance is a system through which the socio-economic and political affairs of society are articulated. Governance is an institution having mechanisms and processes through which individual citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their rights, and meet their obligations (Committee of Experts on Public Administration, 2006).

Governance is an institution (whether formal or informal) in which decisions and distributions are made and power and authority are exercised (Dodson and Smith, 2003). To attain the targets of governance, governance can be divided into three categories: the state, the private, and the civil society, of which the indigenous institution is a part (Dejene and Yigeremew, 2009). A formal system of governance is not the only mechanism for making decisions and distributions and exercising powers and responsibilities regarding the socio-economic and political affairs of a society. An indigenous system of governance can be implemented as a mechanism for running all aspects of human society, and this has been witnessed in different corners of the world using indigenous knowledge.

Negari (2018) describes indigenous knowledge as ancestral teachings that are explicitly attached to particular ethnic groups as cultural knowledge of groups classified as indigenous. The World Bank (1998), in its part, interprets indigenous knowledge as local or traditional knowledge that is brought down from earlier times by the local community via oral tradition. Indigenous knowledge and indigenous institutions are run at the local level by local communities for different purposes, including making decisions concerning

diverse aspects of their lives (Gorjestani, 2000).

The community of Shekacho has been experiencing indigenous knowledge, including a system of governance to run the overall socio-economic and political affairs such as maintaining peace and security, natural resource management, human health, and other vital issues. As elders stated, the indigenous system of governance is cautiously structured and run based on aspects that modern democratic local government comprises, such as representation, accountability, power devolution, check and balance peacebuilding, and the like. This undoubtedly implies not only the vital role played by the indigenous institution in delivering local services at the grassroots level but also the inclusion and implementation of the principles of modern democracy in a general and democratic government, in particular in the indigenous institution. The way the members of the state council (*Mikirecco*) are selected indicates how much emphasis is placed on representation by the indigenous institution. This is why the members of the council (*Mikirecco*) are necessarily elected from each administrative province, and they also simultaneously represent different clan leaders (FGD results: Andracha and Masha, September and October 2021).

Power devolution is executed and exercised in the institution because power is structurally decentralized from the center to the local province, aiming to satisfy the needs and interests of people at grassroots levels. The concentration of the highest power in the hands of the state council (*Mikirecco*) is another attribute of democracy that aims at avoiding power concentration in the hands of a single person, the king (*Tato*), which may lead to tyranny. Furthermore, this paves the way

for inclusive and participatory decision-making processes. With this, Hackman and Johnson (1996) associate democratic government with the level of participation and satisfaction of the community.

On the other hand, the indigenous system of governance of the Shekacho community is not perfect and free of limitations. Like many indigenous institutions throughout the world, this institution has some defects and limitations. Most indigenous institutions are often criticized and blamed for their marginalization of some social groups, especially women (Baldwin & Holzinger, 2019; Bitew et al., 2021). In the indigenous governance system of the Shekacho community, women do not assume decision-making positions, including *Mikirecco* and other high positions. Therefore, women are marginalized from significant positions and decisive decision-making processes in the community. With gender-based marginalization, Tigist (2009) argues that such exclusion could deteriorate equality, especially gender equality, which may lead to the omission of the wills and interests of women in a community as a result of disempowering women. However, despite this, the indigenous system of governance of the Shekacho community is principally democratic and smoothly compatible with modern democratic governance because it is structured and executed based on fundamental democratic attributes.

## Conclusion

The indigenous system of governance of the Shekacho community is an age-old distinctive system that maintains social welfare, fosters social harmony and cohesion, and allocates resources. This indigenous system of governance is used to run all socio-economic and political affairs in the area of

the Shekacho community. The system has a structure through which socio-economic and political affairs are decided and executed. The king (*Tato*) and the councilors (*Mikirecco*) are the main bodies included in the institutional structure of the indigenous system of governance, and the structure clearly illustrates who does what.

The indigenous system of governance of the Shekacho community is deeply rooted in the values and customs of the community. The indigenous system of governance is cautiously structured and run based on aspects that modern democratic local government comprises, such as representation, accountability, power devolution, check and balance peacebuilding, and the like. This undoubtedly implies not only the vital role played by the indigenous institution in delivering local services at the grassroots level but also the inclusion and implementation of the principles of modern democracy in a general and democratic government, in particular in the indigenous institution. Therefore, this should be institutionalized and included in modern local governance so as to practice it on the ground.

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