

# **THE JOURNAL OF OROMO STUDIES**

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**VOLUME 12, NUMBERS 1 & 2, JULY 2005**

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# THE JOURNAL OF OROMO STUDIES

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**THE JOURNAL OF OROMO STUDIES**

**VOLUME 12, Numbers 1 & 2, July 2005**

**The Journal of Oromo Studies**

Department of Africana Studies  
The University of Michigan-Flint  
Flint, MI 48502

**The Journal of Oromo Studies (JOS)** is multi-disciplinary international journal of the Oromo Studies Association. JOS publishes original research and book reviews on the Oromo and northeast Africa. The journal welcomes contributions in all areas of Oromo studies and related fields. All manuscripts for publication are anonymously reviewed by peer referees in the appropriate field. Decision for publication is based on positive comments and recommendations of peer reviewers. Whether we publish or reject a manuscript, it is our commitment to respond to authors with appropriate comments and feedback.

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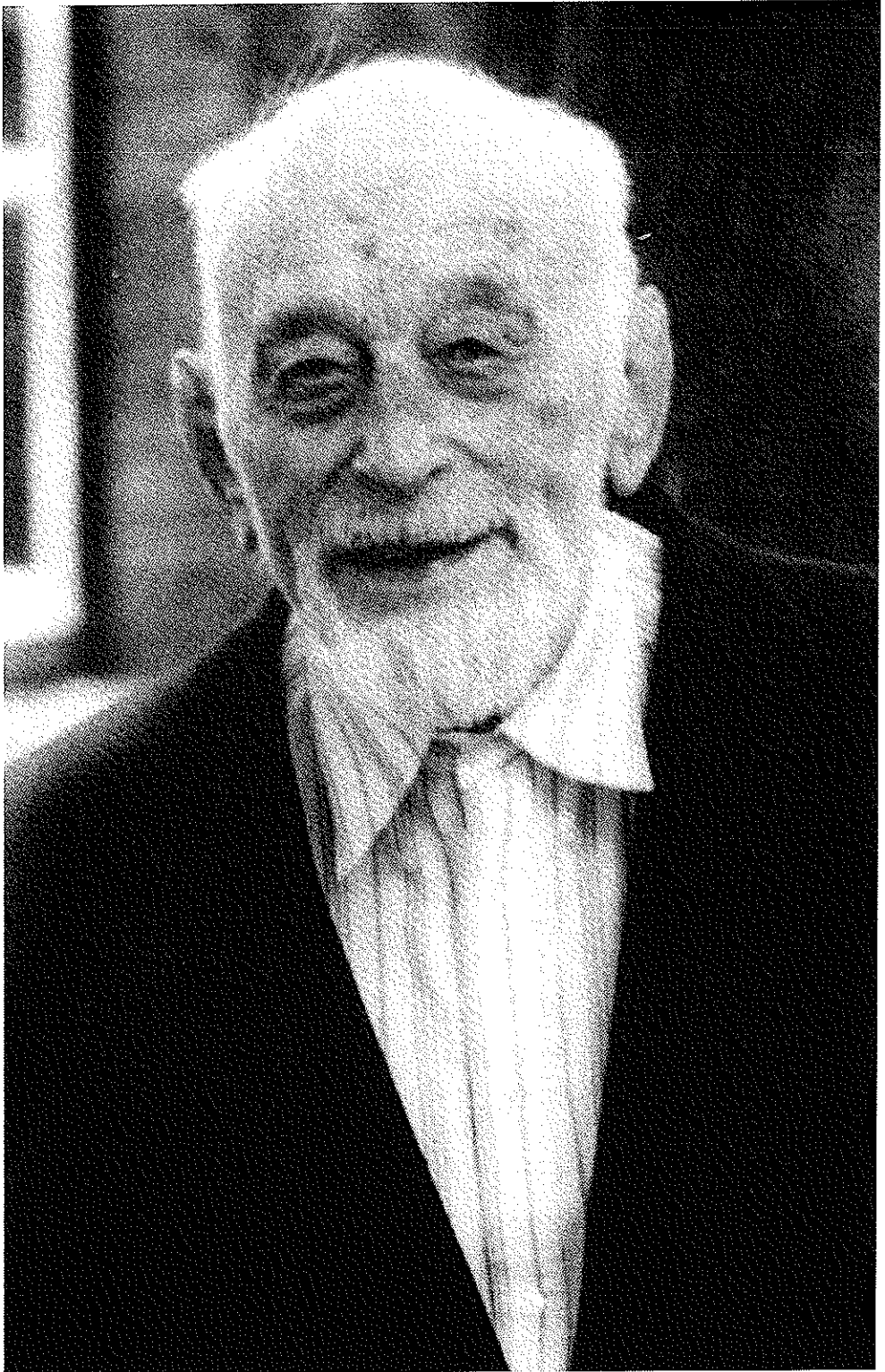
## Special Issue Dedicated to the Memory of Father Lambert Bartels (1915-2000)

Guest Editors: Paul T.W. Baxter and Aneesa Kassam

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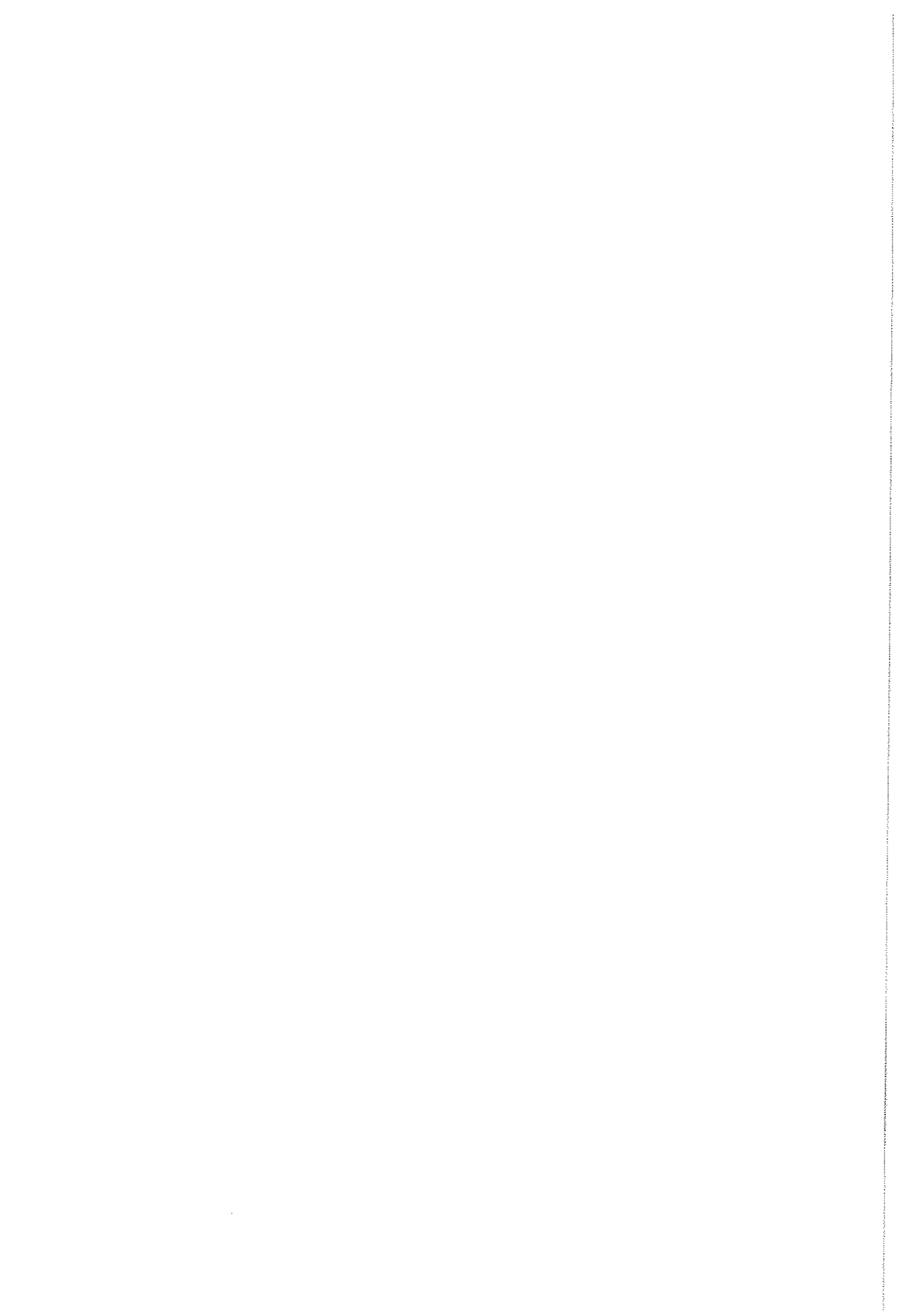
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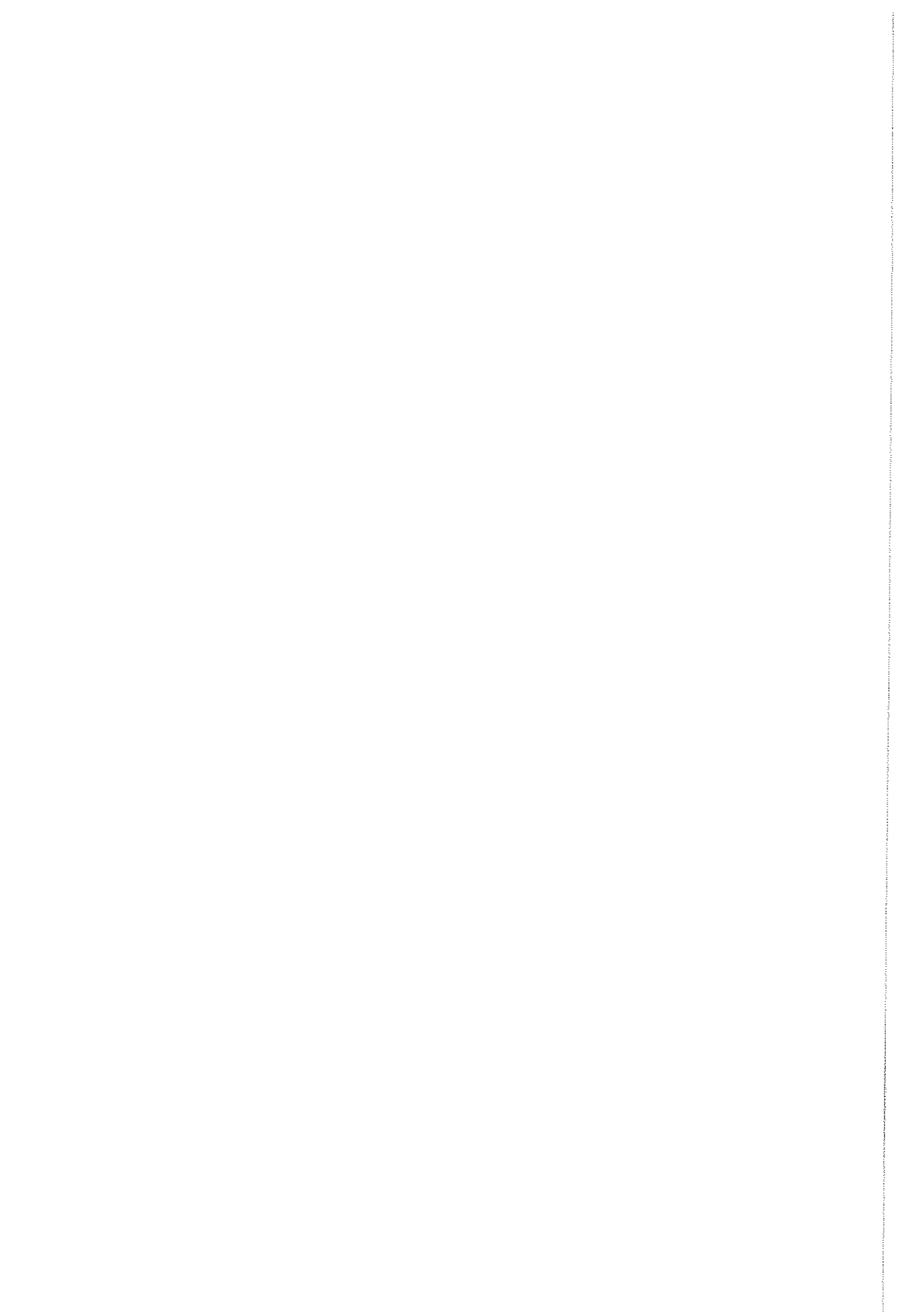




finalize this project. With Paul Baxter, she also meticulously edited all lead articles. I also thank Dr. Mohammed Hassen for accepting my invitation to write a review essay, in addition to his paper in this volume. Hoping to see such enthusiastic collaboration in the future, I invite all of you to continue your subscriptions and contributions to this *Journal*.

Guluma Gemedo, Ph.D.  
Editor  
University of Michigan-Flint

June 2005



## EDITORIAL OVERVIEW

This volume of the *Journal of Oromo Studies* is dedicated to the memory of Fr. Lambert Bartels, missionary-anthropologist who had studied the Oromo religion for many years before he died in 2000. As the contributors to this volume clearly show, Fr. Bartels' work is very important for understanding the rituals and symbols of Oromo religion. Unlike some missionaries who worked in Africa, he did not judge the traditional religious practices of the people from his own Christian perspective, but tried to understand them on their own. Aneesa Kassam and Paul Baxter, guest editors of this volume, argue that Fr. Bartels' work is very different from other studies of African traditional religions. Other contributors also indicate how Bartels' training and earlier brief missionary service among the Indians in Brazil influenced his approach to the study of Oromo religion. In many ways, his work is, indeed, unique.

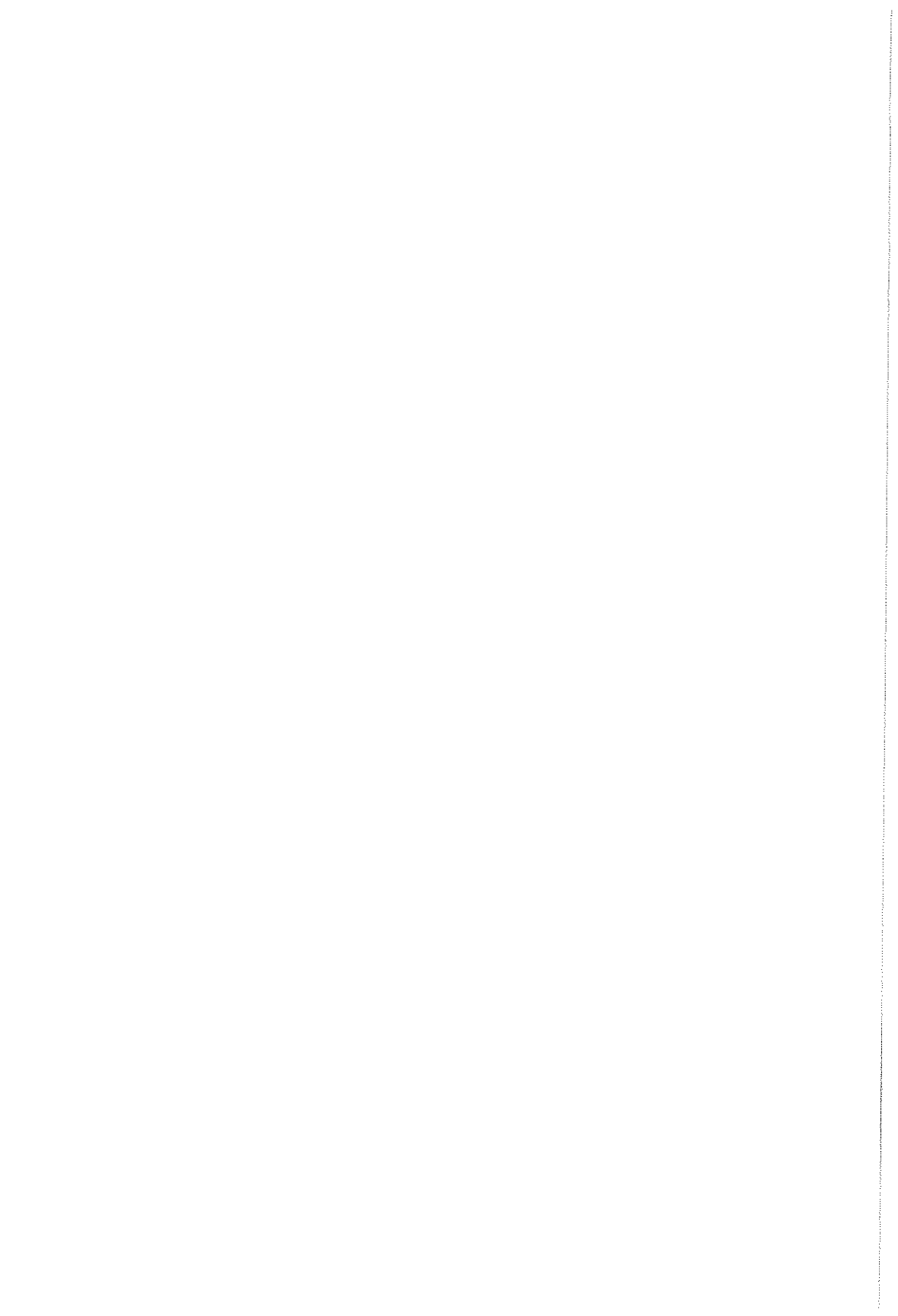
On the other hand, Fr. Bartels' work is part of a tradition of missionary contribution to Oromo studies. Earlier, some missionaries who contacted the Oromo were fascinated by their spiritual life and religious philosophies. These missionaries wrote valuable accounts and documented aspects of the culture and history of the Oromo people. In the seventeenth century, even the Jesuit missionaries who had very limited contact with Oromo people recorded some traditions. In the second half of nineteenth century, while planting the first Catholic missions among the Oromo in Guduru and the Gibe region, Cardinal G. Massaia studied the Oromo language and culture. His multi-volume work includes valuable information on Oromo religion and history. His successors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continued similar work on Oromo culture. In 1901, for example, Fr. Martial de Salviac made another major contribution to Oromo

studies by collecting traditions and oral histories. Fr. Bartels and others continued the commitment in the second half of the twentieth century. The field of Oromo studies owes a lot to these dedicated missionaries. It is in recognition of such commitment and distinct contributions that we dedicate this issue of the *Journal of Oromo Studies* to the memory of Fr. Lambert Bartels.

This volume represents both original research and analysis of Fr. Bartels' works. All contributors are specialists in Oromo studies and related fields. Some personally knew and worked with Fr. Bartels; others knew him through his works. Partly using the documents that Fr. Bartels had collected or his approaches, the contributors examine various aspects of Oromo religion and culture. They also used their own data to analyze some key issues in Oromo religion in comparative perspective. Obviously, the contributors do not agree on several issues in the field. Rather, they suggest different conclusions that encourage and inspire further research. As editor, I welcome such diversity of ideas and conclusions because, I believe, it is through a vigorous debate that we can establish the Oromo studies on solid foundations.

Contributors profusely use Oromo terms, short and long texts in their articles. But, in some cases, readers may encounter different spelling styles for the same words. Both the guest editors and I have made some effort to minimize the confusion by adhering to the *qubee* system which is currently used more widely. But realizing that standardization of the spelling of Oromo language is still work in progress, we largely retained the spelling system used by the authors instead of imposing the *qubee* uniformly. We hope the differences are relatively minor and would not cause much confusion to the readers.

Finally, I would like to thank all contributors to this volume. Responding to the guest editors' calls and writing quality articles, they have made the publication of this volume possible. My special thanks go to Dr. Paul Baxter and Dr. Aneesa Kassam, who initiated the idea of dedicating this issue to the memory of Fr. Bartels and followed it up with invitation to contributors. Dr. Kassam worked very closely both with me and the contributors to



**PERFORMING THE SOODDUU RITUAL:  
INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE OF THE  
JOURNAL OF OROMO STUDIES IN MEMORY OF  
FATHER LAMBERT BARTELS**

*Paul I.W. Baxter  
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*Aneesa Kassam  
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**Placing Commemorative Stones and Plants (*Sooduu  
Dhabaabuu*)**

Father Lambert Bartels, author of *Oromo Religion* and of a number of other published and unpublished writings on ritual and religion (see below), died on the morning of 2 October 2000 at the St. Maarten Hospital of Venlo in the Netherlands, after having received the sacrament for the sick in full consciousness on the previous day. He was buried at the cemetery of the Lazarist Mission at Panningen on 7 May. *Biyyeen isaa sablatinna*,<sup>1</sup> “may the soil be light for him”. May his soul rest in eternal peace.

Amongst the Boorana Oromo of southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya, when a person dies, or rather, as they prefer to say, when “he/she has grown or become old” (*innilissin ya jaare/jaarte*), as part of the funerary rites, the family of the deceased perform the ceremony of *soodduu dhabaatani*<sup>2</sup>. The word *soodduu* is derived from *sodaa*, “fear”, and is performed to placate the spirit of the dead (Leus 1995: 753). The expression *soodduu dhabaatani* refers to all the objects and substances that are placed at the graveside and all the actions that are performed by the family in remembrance of the deceased parent.

In Boorana, the family of the deceased perform this ceremony on the eleventh day (*ayyaana dhakaa*, the “day of stones”) of the month of *algajimma*. A full description of these rites can be found in Leus (1995; in press). As part of these rites, the eldest son stands near the grave facing eastwards and plants a *callanqaa* (*Commiphora flaviflora* or *madagascariensis*) tree and an aloe (*hargeesa*) succulent to his right<sup>3</sup>. He then places a small upright stone firmly into the ground. All the other sons follow suit, encircling the grave with stones. All the sons and daughters then place four sticks of *haroooreessa* (*Grewia bicolor* or *mollis*) onto the grave and the daughters plant some vine (*cophii*) (*Cissus quadrangularis*). Finally, they pour a libation (*dhibayyuu*) of milk on the foot of the grave<sup>4</sup>. As Eliade (1978) suggests, plants and rocks have a religious valence. The plants are symbols of fertility, a concept that permeates the whole of Oromo culture and religion. The stones “reveal duration without end, permanence, incorruptibility-in the last analysis a modality of *existing* independently of temporal becoming” (Eliade 1978: 115). This citation fits well with the Oromo conception of time (*ayyaana*).

Similarly, we too, in this volume, would like to honor Fr. Bartels, who was a different sort of *pater* to the Oromo, by planting “trees” and placing “stones”, figuratively speaking, in his memory. In our case, however, our offerings are literary ones. In doing so, we hope that the papers will bear fruit and inspire a new *gada* of young scholars to carry on the work that Fr. Bartels began on Oromo culture and religion. Our purpose in this special volume of the *Journal of Oromo Studies* on ritual and religion dedicated to Fr. Bartels is, therefore, to pay collective homage to him as a priest and scholar<sup>5</sup>.

### **Abba Lambert Bartels: “Priest-Anthropologist”**

Lambert Bartels was born in Breda in the Netherlands on 15 August 1915<sup>6</sup>. As a young boy, he had first wanted to join the navy. He was only eleven years old at the time, but he had already decided to enrol. One day on a visit to his local Catholic Church,



he confessed to the priest that he had changed his mind and wanted to be a missionary instead. Fr. Bartels explained that this idea might have come from playing at being a priest with his younger brother, Theo, and from their childish disputes over the interpretation of some of the biblical texts. His father was not happy with this decision, but took Lambert to visit two Catholic seminaries in the area. Lambert chose the second, belonging to the Vincentian (Lazarist) Order, due to its unconventional and relaxed atmosphere and beautiful natural surroundings, and was accepted as a student. He was ordained in 1941.

During the Second World War, he served at a mission near the German border, where he hid a Jewish boy in the church. At college before the war, Fr. Bartels had first wanted to go to China as a missionary and had started to prepare himself by reading about Southeast Asia. Later, he was offered the opportunity to go to Brazil and had begun to read about the culture of the indigenous Indian tribes. However, during the war, he contracted tuberculosis. He saw this illness as a “test” that had been sent to “try” him in “shamanic” terms, rather than as a set back.

He eventually began his missionary work in Brazil in 1959, where he maintained the contact that had been established with the tribal Indian peoples from the forest. He felt that an essential part of his pastoral care was to acquire a sympathetic understanding of the lives, thoughts and spiritual experiences of his parishioners. When he went back to the Netherlands on home leave in 1962, he decided to study anthropology as a part-time student at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. When he returned to Brazil, he found that the Indians had suffered savage exploitation by loggers and that the few that had survived near total annihilation had returned deep into the forest. He was greatly distressed by this situation, but his protests on the ill treatment of the Indians went unheard by government authorities. He returned to the Netherlands and for some time, he taught theology at the Catholic Seminary.

In 1967, he was given the opportunity to continue his missionary work amongst the Macca Oromo of western Ethiopia. He felt that the encounter with the South American Indians and his

exposure to their cosmology and world-view had prepared him for his work with the Oromo, which would occupy him for the rest of his life. He began to write his doctoral thesis and was awarded his Ph.D. at the University of Nijmegen in January 1970. In July 1974, he became a member of the Ethiopian province of the Congregation of the Mission. However, the Dergue, which took power in 1974, did not allow him to return to Wallaga, and from 1980 onwards he was confined to his Mission House in Addis Ababa, where he continued his anthropological work from his desk. His book on *Oromo Religion* was published in 1983.

Fr. Bartels had planned to write a second book, of a more theological nature, based on what he called his “visions” and “revelations” of a deeper religious reality and on his work on mutual inculturation with his young Christian Oromo assistants (see Tablino, this volume). In the latter part of his life, he had become more and more mystical in his thinking. He read works by Swedenborg, and Blavatsky on theosophy and thought that Oromo religious concepts might have a Hindu Indian origin. In the mid-1990s, the Government of the Netherlands awarded him a medal for his contribution to missionary and anthropological work in Ethiopia. He was repatriated to the Netherlands on 28 November 1999 due to ill health and retired to the Lazarist Mission house in Panningen, where he was lovingly cared for by his community and by his brothers and sister. He died after a short illness in October 2000. His last words were: “I have had a wonderful life, but now I am going to a better life.”

### **A “Socrates among the Oromo”: Father Bartels’ Approach to the Study of Oromo Religion**

Fr. Bartels (1983: 38-40) does not actually qualify his approach to the study of Oromo religion. Nevertheless, from a comparative point of view, it can be described as a “religio-phenomenological” one (Westerlund 1985: 26), in that it can be said to apply “general phenomenological methods to the whole spectrum of religious ideas, activities, institutions, customs, and

symbols” (Bettis 1969). His work therefore shares a number of characteristics with the phenomenological approach in the social sciences (cf. Hammond et al. 1991).

Firstly, his work is primarily descriptive in nature and focuses on what theoreticians of phenomenology call the everyday, lived experiences (*Erlebnis*) of ordinary people operating within a shared life-world (*Lebenswelt*), rather than on the theoretical aspects of socio-cultural and religious phenomena. His studies are therefore “empirical”, in that they are based on real experiences, but are humanistic, rather than positivistic or “scientific” in nature. Secondly, Fr. Bartels seeks to observe and understand typical meaningful religious actions and events and to present them *emically*, from the point of view of the culture-bearers themselves. He describes his attitude as one of “listening to what the Oromo themselves have to say” and notes: “Throughout [this book], I will allow the people to speak for themselves” (Bartels 1983: 40). In this way, he avoided “hellenizing” *Waaqa*, the God of the Oromo, by attributing to Him descriptive terms like “omnipotence”, “omniscience” and “omnipresence” derived from Greek philosophy (P’Bitek 1971: 80; 86-88). Instead, he is able to describe *Waaqa* as the Oromo themselves perceive Him. Thirdly, his interpretations of the data are based on a two-way dialogue with his interviewees and assistants, which Tablino (this volume) has aptly described as being “Socratic” in form. This procedure is based on what Weber terms “empathetic understanding” (*Verstehen*) of the phenomena. Through this method, Fr. Bartels is able to identify the abstract categories and underlying cultural principles that make up the world-view (*Weltanschauung*) or conception of the world of the Oromo (cf. Megerssa, this volume). The individuals, like Shegerdi Bukko, Mirresa Gamtesa, Gemetchu Megerssa, Waquma Tollera, and others who participated in this elaboration retain their identities and are fully acknowledged (cf. Bartels 1983: 43-49). Unlike Tempels (1959) and Griaule (1965), however, Fr. Bartels did not attempt to systematize this conceptual system and to describe its philosophical underpinnings. It was Gemetchu Megerssa who later assumed the difficult task in his

doctoral thesis of showing how the concepts Fr. Bartels had identified were interrelated and formed part of a unified whole in the system of thought and knowledge in relation to the principal institutions of the Oromo (Megerssa 1993). Father Bartels' own analyses tend, therefore, to be modestly minimalist, as he prefers to allow the data to speak for themselves.

This tendency can be said to arise from what can, fourthly, be described as Fr. Bartels' "textualist" method, a preoccupation that he shares with other practitioners of hermeneutic phenomenology. As Giddens (1977) notes, there are two variants of phenomenology: hermeneutic and existential, each of which employ different techniques for accessing the structures of the life-world. "Hermeneutic phenomenology tends to focus on the collective aspect of culture as exemplified by its overriding concern with language. Texts provide the objective evidence for analysis" (Wuthnow et. al 1984: 30). Hermeneutics is also one of the methods used in the interpretation of biblical texts and Fr. Bartels' theological studies probably influenced this choice of approach. Baxter (this volume) describes Fr. Bartels' use of ethnographic texts as a primary research tool and his methods of analyzing the words, concepts and symbols contained in them. As Fr. Bartels' noted about his approach in general; the method has a number of advantages. "First, it makes the texts on which my conclusions are based available to anyone. Secondly, it leaves room for other interpretations on the base of further research. Thirdly, it leaves room for the Matcha's own understanding of them" (Bartels 1983: 40). These written texts and the audible recordings made of them can, therefore, be preserved and become a source of knowledge that can be transmitted to later generations (Wuthnow et al. 1984: 36).

Fifthly, due to the fact that phenomenologists "bracket out" or suspend questions relating to history, causality, epistemology, etc. as part of the method of "reduction" and focus instead on the "essence" or meaning of a culture, some of Fr. Bartels' work tends to be a-historical, or put more politely, "dateless" (James 1987; Baxter, this volume). *Oromo Religion*, for instance, does not show

how the religious system developed, how it relates to the socio-economic and political institutions, how it functions to maintain the social order, or how it has changed, at least not systematically. In this study, Fr. Bartels dedicates a chapter to the social strata in Matcha society, but does not really deal with problems of power and domination and the control of religious and other knowledge by social groups like the *borana*. However, in other studies, such as those on *ayyaana*, he gives an historical overview of the concept through the literature, and shows how it has changed in interaction with Islam and Christianity, and also explores its religious meanings in everyday life (Bartels 1984; 1986). In terms of religious change, he also shows how the Oromo have a tendency to revert to their own conception of *Waaqa*, even when they adopt other religions, a propensity that Aguilar (this volume) has termed the paradigm of the “God of the Oromo” (also see Kassam, this volume).

Fr. Bartels’ approach is, thus, very different from other studies of African traditional religion, such as those of the British structural-functionalist school, with its emphasis on religious phenomena as a symbolic representation of social relations; the French structuralist one, with its focus on cosmologies and the symbolic-philosophical order; historical perspectives, such as those of Ranger and Kimambo (1972) on religious change; and those of indigenous African scholars with their attempts to build a “theology of continuity” (cf. Ray 1976; Westerlund 1985). His early anthropological work on religion shares some similarities, but also differs from, the phenomenological approach of Evans-Pritchard (1956) and of others belonging to the Oxford school, like Lienhardt (1961). Aguilar (this volume) also traces other influences on the work of Fr. Bartels, that of Wilhelm Schmidt and his theory of “primitive monotheism” on his early anthropological research, and of the documents of the Second Vatican Council on missionary activities, on his later, theological work.

## **Thematic Overview of Contributions to this Special Issue**

Many of the papers in this volume present new and original data, which throw fresh light both on Fr. Bartels' anthropological and theological work, as well on aspects of the religious system of the Oromo. All the contributors to the volume were invited to do so, but due to space restrictions, we were unable to call upon a number of other colleagues who have also worked on Oromo ritual and religion. We apologize for this omission and hope that all those who have not been included will not take umbrage, but will be motivated by the tantalizing issues raised by the contributions to further the study of Oromo ritual and religion by contributing papers to future volumes of the journal. Oromo scholars still have a great deal of work to do on this, as yet, comparatively little researched subject.

The first three papers in the volume, by Paul Baxter, Fr. Paul Tablino, and Mario Aguilar, all examine aspects of Fr. Bartels' work. Paul Baxter presents a personal account of his long-standing friendship with Fr. Bartels, and discusses Fr. Bartels' use of texts as a method of enquiry into Oromo culture and religion. It would be appropriate to note here that there exists a close working relationship and personal friendship between Catholic missionaries working with Oromo groups in southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya and anthropologists, unlike, perhaps, in some other parts of Africa, where a more ambiguous relationship prevails (cf. Van der Geest 1990). The enduring relationship that Paul Baxter describes with Fr. Bartels is one such example of mutual respect for one another's work, whatever one's religious background and convictions. Through his informal network, Baxter has fostered a number of links and exchanges not only between other Oromo scholars and missionaries, but also between the missionaries themselves, as acknowledged by Fr. Tablino.

Fr. Tablino's paper gives an excellent overview of Fr. Bartels' work, his approach and its influence on other Catholic

missionaries in the area, especially on those of northern Kenya. In particular, he describes Fr. Bartels' work on "mutual inculturation". Inculturation, as understood by the Catholic Church, is "the on-going dialogue between faith and culture or cultures. More fully, it is the creative relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures" (Shorter 1988: 11). Fr. Pedro Arrup SJ defines it as (cited in Shorter 1988: 11):

The incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation) but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to be [sic] bring about a 'new creation'.

Fr. Tablino shows how Fr. Bartels interpreted the directives of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) regarding the implementation of this concept, and how through his method of dialogue, he saw it as a two-way process, of *mutual* inculturation, rather than a unidirectional one.

Mario Aguilar's paper, which identifies a very important paradigm in Fr. Bartels' work on religion, that of the "God of the Oromo", resonates well with Fr. Tablino's paper. Aguilar shows that Fr. Bartels realized that whether they became Christians or Muslims, the Oromo remained true to their own conception of God, to their own *Waaqa*, even when they had to pragmatically adopt another religion, as in the case of the Waso Boorana of Isiolo District in Kenya. As Aguilar notes: "God, according to the Boorana, can be called by different names and He will respond. God continues to be one and He remains the God of the Boorana even when He acts in the world in response to different names". Aguilar also speculates, interestingly, on the influence of the theories of Wilhelm Schmidt on the origins of the idea of God on Fr. Bartels' study of Oromo religion and discusses the impact of

Vatican II on his missionary work, which he shows, like Tablino, was based on dialogue. Such dialogue constitutes a link between his anthropological and theological work.

The rest of the papers in the volume deal with the Oromo world-view, ritual and other aspects of the religious system. Gemetchu Megerssa collaborated closely with Fr. Bartels in his study of Oromo religion after 1980, when the latter was no longer allowed to return to the field, and was one of his favoured interlocutors. His paper builds on the joint work that he and Fr. Bartels carried out on three important concepts of a religious and philosophical nature in Oromo culture, *ayyaana*, *uumaa* and *saffuu*. Based on his "initiation" into the traditional system of knowledge of the Oromo by two Boorana elders, Gemetchu Megerssa attempts to show how these three concepts are interrelated and form part of the world-view. He does not go so far as to describe this world-view as an "ethno-philosophy", perhaps due to the criticism directed at the work of Tempels and at the postulate of an "African philosophy" (cf. Mudimbe 1988). The paper is drawn from his doctoral thesis, which attempts to reconstruct the knowledge system and to expound the underlying cosmology, in a manner similar to Griaule (1965). More than Fr. Bartels himself, Gemetchu Megerssa realized the import of the work that they were both doing in terms of the nationalist movement. Through his writing, teaching and impassioned speeches at home and abroad, he has contributed a great deal to raising consciousness about the traditional knowledge system. For him, this cultural knowledge constitutes a source of renewal for the future and of the expression of a truly authentic Oromo identity.

Thomas Zitelmann's paper explores the possible Sufi Islamic influences on Oromo religion, particularly in relation to the concept of *ayyaana*. He suggests that historically, this concept underwent a process of "nostrification". He explains that: "In Austro-German, "nostrification" denotes the formal and informal processes of making something that is "foreign" into something that is "ours"." This idea is very similar to, but also differs from that suggested by Aguilar in his paper on the paradigm of the "God



of the Oromo". The paper raises, therefore, very important questions about the origins of the Oromo religion, something that Fr. Bartels, perhaps due to his method, avoided investigating, although he would have been well aware of the issue through his reading of Haberland (1963). However, this view begs the question: if as Megerssa (this volume) suggests, the Oromo have historical traditions that date back almost three thousand years, what kind of religion did they practise before their encounter with Islam in about the thirteenth century? It is more likely that Oromo religion was fashioned from a stock of concepts common to many peoples in the ancient Near East, and that *ayyaana*, which is also connected to their astronomical knowledge, numerology, and ideas of time, predates Islam. Nevertheless, the paper raises some intriguing questions that certainly merit further research.

In her paper on religious syncretism in a Gabra Oromo ritual, which also examines Sufi Islamic influences on cultural practices, Aneesa Kassam takes the opposite view to Zitelmann. As Zitelmann suggests, there are currently two positions on the question of the religious origins of the Oromo: some authors believe that it derives from a common Cushitic past; others say that it originates from or was influenced by Islam. Kassam, and probably also Aguilar, adhere to the first position. In her paper, based on the hermeneutic reading of a ritual performance, Kassam suggests that the Gabra incorporated selective aspects of Sufi Islam in the transition from a cattle-keeping economy to a camel-keeping one. Again, more comparative research needs to be carried out on these questions.

In their paper on the *buttaa* ceremony of the western, Sayyoo Oromo, Alessandro Triulzi and Tamene Bitima use unpublished material from Fr. Bartels' collection deposited at the Istituto Universitario Orientale in Naples (see below) to reconstruct these series of interlinked rituals. Neither the Sayyoo, nor any other Oromo groups, like the Boorana, perform this ceremony any longer, but before their incorporation into the Ethiopian empire, it was a very important aspect of their politico-ritual system. The paper provides invaluable historical and

ethnographic data on this ceremony, which was once linked to traditional warfare, whether of a symbolic or real nature. We still know very little about this ritual system, even among groups like the Boorana, the most traditional of the Oromo groups.

Mohammed Hassen's paper examines another key aspect of this ritual system, the now defunct pilgrimage to the *Abba Mudaa*. The Abyssinian Emperor Menelik II banned this pan-Oromo pilgrimage in the 1900s, shortly after the incorporation of the Oromo into the Ethiopian empire, due to its potential function of unifying the different groups politically. In the traditional system, it was performed following the *buttaa* ceremony. The paper gives a good overview of the extant historical sources, but it also raises a number of unanswered questions regarding its meaning and function in the precolonial politico-religious system. Further research needs to be carried out to establish how and why the central *Qaalluu* institution of priesthood developed at a later stage of the socio-economic and political organization, how it related to the existing *Gada* institution, how it served as a repository of sacred knowledge, the role it played in unifying the different Oromo groups, and how it was transformed.

Jan Hultin's and Abdullahi Shongollo's paper examines the intricate issues relating to the succession of the *Qaalluu* of the Karrayyuu in the Sabbo moiety of the Boorana, the most important of the five ritual dignitaries. This is the first time, since Haberland's (1963) work, that this succession has been so closely and carefully documented, and the data provide a wealth of empirical detail on the subject. The paper reveals how the actors involved pragmatically interpreted "tradition" in the context of changing political circumstances. The institution of the *Qaalluu* remains one of the most under-studied aspects of the Boorana religious system and the data provided will help scholars to gain a fuller understanding into its nature and function.

Finally, but not least in importance, rather to the contrary, Marco Bassi's and Boku Tache's paper presents the texts of the prophecies of Areeroo Boosaroo, the last and most famous of the Boorana prophets (*raaga*) of the present age. This is the first time

that these prophecies, which are widely known in Boorana, have been compiled and made available to a larger audience. The data are extremely rich and will be invaluable for comparison both within Oromo society and regionally. As Grabbe (2000: 15) notes: “A significant problem in comparing ancient Near Eastern prophets with modern prophetic figures is in having the actual words of the prophetic messages. ...Anthropological reports [...] often do not quote the messages of the prophetic figures verbatim. Instead, they usually read a summary of what the prophet said and did, often with occasions and settings lumped together to describe the ongoing pattern rather than the exact words said on a specific occasion. This makes comparison of the messages ...problematic.” Fortunately, Bassi and Tache are an exception, and have provided very full texts of the prophecies, as narrated by two Boorana elders, one of whom is a renowned oral historian. Bassi and Tache indicate that in Boorana prophecy is of an “ecstatic” nature, rather than an institutionalized medium of predicting the future. Further research needs to be conducted into the practice, but it probably formed part of the system of knowledge, which was used by oral historians to interpret and predict social change based on the Boorana “cyclical” (*mara*) view of history (more correctly, “rounds” of time). For this reason, it is, perhaps, precocious to describe this prophetic tradition as an “eschatology”, as time in the Oromo conception does not “end” as such, in as much as endings mark new beginnings and hence do not relate necessarily to an afterlife. Nevertheless, like the Boorana, we, too, anxiously await the birth of the new prophet to lead them out of the systemic crises, social, political, economic and ecological, that they currently face, and which forms part of the wider moral crisis that is affecting the world as a whole in the present times.

### **Further Avenues for Research into Oromo Religion**

At the end of his book on *Oromo Religion*, Fr. Bartels expresses the wish that “in the near future Oromo scholars will be

found to continue the work initiated by this book.” It was, perhaps, with this desire in mind that he deposited copies of his research materials in both Manchester and Naples (see below). Fr. Tablino echoes this hope when he writes: “I hope that in the future, someone, preferably an Oromo scholar, studies these “treasures” and publishes them.” Triulzi and Bitima have taken a step in this direction: we hope that many more will follow this example by collaborating in the study of these valuable unpublished source materials.

Our discussion of the papers has identified a number of questions for further research into the Oromo religious system. Whilst we know a great deal about certain aspects of this system, other aspects still need to be researched in more depth, gaps in our knowledge need to be filled, and the different parts need to be related to the whole. In addition to questions relating to the origins of Oromo religion, how it underpinned the traditional socio-economic and political institutions, and was transformed dynamically at different historical periods to accommodate changes in the production system, there are a number of other avenues for further research. For instance, in much of the writing, *Waaqa* is said to be synonymous with, or confused with the sky. It is true that He may be conceived as a Celestial God, a source of life-giving rain, but, as Megerssa (1993) points out, the Oromo have two different words, *qoolloo*, literally “covering”, for sky, and *Waaqa* for God. We actually know very little about the God of the Oromo. What does He look like? What are His attributes? How does He differ from the Christian and Islamic God? Other questions that could be asked are: did the Oromo have an Earth Goddess? Is the Atete female “divinity” cult a later transformation linked to agricultural production or did it predate monotheism? What role did sacrifice and haruspication play? What exactly are the sacred stones, or objects, known as *ulfaa*, and what role did they play in the traditional religion? Is Oromo religion a unified set of beliefs?

Two of the papers (Aguilar and Zitelmann) touch upon the influence of *Oromo Religion* on the nationalist movement. What

impact did the publication of the book actually have on the Oromo national elite and educated readership? Did it play any role in the development of Oromo national consciousness and identity? These questions have not hitherto been reflected upon. Did the book contribute to the revival of traditional forms of worship through the *Waaqeefanna* or *Waaqeefattaa* movement at home and in the diaspora? These new forms of worship, and the revival of the traditional *irrechaa* ceremony, which is celebrated annually to mark the Oromo new year in September at Bishoftuu in Ethiopia, need to be further documented and analyzed by scholars.

We hope that this volume of essays and the intriguing issues that they raise will stimulate further research into Oromo religion, past and present. We hope, too, that Fr. Bartels in his new soul abode in *Olla Waaqaa*, or “God’s Village”, in the *Iddoo Dhugaa* or “Place of Truth”, will be pleased with the *soodduu* papers that we have written in his memory.

### **Father Bartels’ Major Published and Unpublished Works**

- 1969. “Birth customs and birth songs of the Macha Galla”.  
*Ethnology* 8(4):406-422.
- 1970. “Studies of the Galla in Wallaga”. *Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 8(1):135-160.
- 1975. “*Dabo*, a form of cooperation between farmers among the Macha Galla of Ethiopia”. *Anthropos* 70:883-925.
- 1977. “*Dado*, a form of cooperation on equal terms among the Macha Galla of Ethiopia”. *Anthropos* 72:497-513.
- 1981. “*Senna* Songs of the Western Matcha Oromo”, Paper submitted to the Working Seminar on Oromo Systems of Marriage and Affinity, University of Manchester.
- 1982-3. “The Western Oromo: Some Important Aspects of their Religion”, *Quaderni di Studi Etiopici* (Asmara) 3-4: 883-925.
- 1983. *Oromo Religio: Myths and Rites of the Western Oromo of Ethiopia-An Attempt to understand* Berlin: Dietrich

Reimer Verlag.

1984. (with Gemetchu Megerssa). "Some Notes regarding Previous and Current Research about the Oromo Concept of *Ayana*". Paper presented at the Eighth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa, 26-30, November.
1986. (with Qajeela Megerssa). "Some More Notes regarding Previous and Current Research about the Oromo Concept of *Ayana*". Paper presented at the Ninth International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Moscow.
1994. "On Pilgrimage to a Holy tree". In Brokensha, David (ed.). *A River of Blessings. Essays in Honor of Paul Baxter*. Syracuse, New York: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, 1-13.
- N. d. "Talks with Young Oromo Christians". Addis Ababa: Vincentian Fathers. Mimeographed.
- N. d. "Oromo Christian Liturgies". Addis Ababa : Vincentian Fathers. Mimeographed.

Copies of Father Bartels field notes and tape recordings of his research among the Macca Oromo of western Ethiopia have been deposited at the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, MANCHESTER M13 9PP, England, and at the Istituto Universitario Orientale, Seminario di Studi Africani, Piazza S. Giovanni Maggiore 30, 80134 NAPLES, Italy.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Sablatinna* derives from *sablaa* (*salphaa*). Here, it refers to a wish that the soil (*biyyeel/biyyoo*) be light to the dead. The authors thank Boku Tache, one of the contributors to this volume, for providing the explanation.

<sup>2</sup> We are very grateful to Boku Tache Dida, for suggesting, appropriately, that we see our collective homage to Fr. Bartels in terms of these Boorana funerary rites. We also thank Boku Tache, Dabassa Guyyo, a Boorana oral historian, and Fr. Ton Leus of the Catholic Mission in Dhadim, Boorana, whom we also consulted for information about this rite and its meaning. The description we provide here is based on Leus (1995; and on the entry of the forthcoming new edition of his dictionary, which he so graciously provided).

<sup>3</sup> All botanical identifications are based on Heine and Brenzinger (1988).

<sup>4</sup> According to Fr. Ton, this is not a “true” libation, but is called one.

<sup>5</sup> It is appropriate that this homage to Fr. Bartels should be published in the *Journal of Oromo Studies*. We would like to thank Prof. Bichaka Fayissa, the former editor, and Prof. Guluma Gameda, the current editor, for agreeing to do this special issue.

<sup>6</sup> In this section, we have drawn on a conversation that Aneesa Kassam had with Fr. Bartels in Addis Ababa on 8 July 1996 on how he became a priest, recorded in her “field” diary; the obituaries written by Baxter (2001; 2003), and on notes on Fr. Bartels provided to Baxter by the Provincial of the Lazarist Mission in 2000.

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**“INNOCENTLY DATELESS”:  
LAMBERT BARTELS AND THE MAKING OF *OROMO RELIGION***

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My aim in this paper is to suggest the ways in which Lambert Bartels’ personal experiences, his focus on the collection of texts as a method of enquiry and his reading of the literature may have influenced his study of Oromo religion. This is a very personal memoir of Lambert, which relies on recollections of conversations that we had and on letters that we exchanged.

I first met Lambert in 1969, when we were able to spend a couple of days together. At the time, he had recently completed two years of field study among the western Oromo and was acting as a locum for a priest who was on leave. The sponsors of his research had encouraged him to circulate copies of his draft reports to Roman Catholic missionaries across Ethiopia. One of these, a member of the Medical Missionaries of Mary, had kindly lent me her copies, which, in turn, had prompted me to write to Lambert. Our initial talk was mostly about the drafts of his papers on *Dabo* and *Dado*, forms of agricultural cooperation among the Macha, which were later published in the journal *Anthropos* (1975; 1977). However, his fascination with the study of Oromo religion, which would come to dominate the rest of his life, soon took over. Our discussion came to center on this topic, which interested me much more, and he played me some of his tapes and showed me some of his photographs.

Throughout his previous two years of research Lambert had made a point of recording and then transcribing the exact words used by the people he was observing. This, in itself, was not unusual: most anthropologists record ceremonies and interviews when they can, unless doing so causes too much distraction. Replaying a tape provides a memory check, a chance to go through what was said again and to ask questions about actions, words and phrases which one has not understood. Lambert used his tapes and texts for these purposes, but much more deliberately, continuously and systematically than any other anthropologist I have known. The recording, transcription and later analysis of texts had already become central to his method of research; but, as he focused his enquiries on religion, the collection of texts dominated his research method even more. Later, the presentation of selected texts became the core of his published and unpublished work.

He was convinced that the most important part of any religious activity lay in the words that the actors used, both in the ritual performances and prayers and in their later explanations of those actions and words. As an intellectual himself, he had been tremendously impressed by the thought and care with which his informants, even the younger ones, considered and selected the words they used; not only those words spoken during the rituals themselves, but also those they chose when they answered his questions about those rituals. He became more and more enthralled by the resources and poetic richness of *afaan Oromo*. His awareness of the power that words can carry is, I think, clear in his writing: he lets the words used by his informants reverberate and keeps his own low key. Like Onesimus Nesib (Abba Gammachisa), "who made the first bible translation in Oromo language", he was "an indefatigable searcher for the right word" in his translations and in his explanations (Bartels 1983:167).

Lambert recorded his religious texts in the same way as he had done earlier with those relating to farming groups and to birth customs and songs (Bartels 1969). First, he recorded the words of prayers and rituals during their performance and made notes of the contexts in which they had been spoken, chanted or sung. Next, and as soon afterwards as was possible, he

recorded the explanations and comments given to him by his informants about these texts. He then recorded the discussions he had with his informants and played the tape back to his research assistants or to local elders who might have further contributions to make. Finally, he carefully transcribed each recorded text and the comments on it and stored each in a meticulously catalogued archive. This method enabled him not only to return to the original recording and its text when he needed to, but also to compare the words used in similar texts that he had recorded on other occasions. The study and restudy of texts, he argued, helped him: firstly, to distinguish the core and/or most repeated elements of any prayer or ritual from those that were idiosyncratic; secondly, to formulate questions to discuss with his informants. His own life experience as a priest led him to believe that the more often one repeated and pondered a prayer or a ritual the more fully one came to understand it.

From early on, Lambert recognised that the study of Oromo religion would be his life’s work. His endeavour was always to transcribe the words and describe the actions of his informants so that, as far as possible, they spoke for themselves. He usually acknowledged his individual sources by name. Lambert came to see himself, more and more, as a conduit for data that best spoke for itself. He was well aware that, just by selecting for publication items from his treasure house of data, he was applying his own interpretation: but he strove to be unbiased in his selection and, like an ideal elder, to be ready to listen to his informants and not to impose his own will. At the end of *Oromo Religion*, he concluded that: “Their [his Oromo informants’] own account is more valuable than any number of learned speculations on a westerner’s part” (Bartels 1983: 361). However, he never presumed to argue that other researchers should concentrate on texts as exclusively as he did.

His aim was to arrive at the best understanding of Oromo religion and then to present his findings as clearly as he could in the English

language. I think that *Oromo Religion* does this very successfully. The readers he aimed at specifically were English speaking Oromo and fellow missionaries. He hoped that the information he had recorded about Oromo religion would, as it properly merited, become widely available: for this reason he avoided footnotes and references. He did not want any reader to be intimidated by the paraphernalia of scholarship or by disputation; his few footnotes and asides are acknowledgements of assistance or guidance. He would have liked his work to be appreciated by fellow researchers and specialists, but that was secondary.

When, under the *Derg*, he was forbidden to return to the field, the organizers of the conferences of Ethiopian Studies did not publish the papers he had submitted, and his book was not available in Ethiopia, he merely shrugged. During the worst years of the *Derg*, he did not leave Ethiopia for fear that he would not be allowed back in. As the *Derg* would not allow me into the country, I could not visit him, but we maintained regular correspondence. After the fall of the *Derg*, I was able to visit him in Addis Ababa on three occasions.

He was saddened when he was not allowed to return to Wallaga, but not deterred: just grateful to *Waaqa* that, though threatened and restricted from field studies, he had his texts and that he was not forcibly prevented from continuing his study of Oromo religion. He felt that, just in itself, this possibility was a fulfilment of his prayers. Several years later he told me, with a chuckle, that it must have been God's answer to his unconscious prayers when, already well into his fifties, he was first given such a great opportunity in 1967 to come to the Oromo in the first place. It was prayer, he felt, which enabled him to carry on until he had long passed the usual age of retirement.

Lambert liked nothing better than to discuss his Oromo texts, but he was a humble and private man who never said much about himself. As I write this article, I become increasingly aware how very little I know either about his life or about his intellectual formation before he went to Wollega in 1967. It came up several times in conversation that, when he was

younger, he had been active as a liberal, intellectual theologian within the Church in Holland. But he never enlarged on this remark. The little I know about his life before we met is summarized in the entry I wrote for the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* (Baxter, 2003). In a letter, dated 6 October 1999, which he sent from his retirement home in Holland, there is a suggestion that he may have been about to tell me more about his earlier life. He had been desolated when his declining health forced him to leave his Order's house in Addis Ababa, where the female domestics had unobtrusively and lovingly cared for him, because he knew that his last tie with the Oromo had been severed. He counted his blessings and rallied his spirits, as he always did, but nevertheless remained saddened because he had only been allowed to bring a very small part of his collection of Oromo texts with him: “But do not think that I am myself 100% in a very sad mood. There have been other things in my life I never told you. It is these things which are keeping me in a good mood. But that is for later on....”. There was to be no “later on”, so I never learned what it was in his past that sustained him at his end. In many ways, it is as if he had started a new life when he came among the Oromo and that the study of Oromo religion fulfilled his intellectual and his religious needs.

Lambert visited Manchester on his first leave in 1970 or 1971 after our meeting in Wallaga. He spent six weeks at the Roman Catholic Chaplaincy of the University of Manchester, which was just round the corner from the Department of Social Anthropology. He would come to my office once or twice every weekday to discuss the intensive course of reading on African religions that he was doing as part of his preparation for what was to become *Oromo Religion* (I will say more about his reading during that period below). At the time, I found the energy and application he required me to put into our discussions of what he had been reading exhausting; but through them, and our joint interest in Oromo culture, we developed a close friendship. He sent me drafts and redrafts of the chapters

of his book and reported on his correspondence with the publishers. Whenever he had home leave, Lambert came and stayed with my family for a couple of weeks.

Lambert had reservations about some of the political and theological positions of the Roman Catholic Church, but none whatsoever about the intensity of his own faith. When he stayed with us, he read his Bible and prayed at length several times every day with obvious dedication and devotion. Everything he did, he did with his whole being. To use an old cliché, "he lived his religion." When he stayed with us, he usually went up to his bedroom to pray, but often, if the weather was clement, he combined his prayers with a constitutional walk. His passionate belief in the power of words and the power of prayer were, he felt, convictions that he shared with Oromo elders. Because Oromo prayers were offered to God/*Waaqa* he had no doubts that they could be heard, just as his own prayers could be heard. He was not only persuaded that his posting to live among the Oromo had been an answer to his prayers, but that he had been blessed when among them by receiving personal visions of Christ, one of which he had even managed to photograph. (He was puzzled that neither my wife Pat nor I could detect the likeness in the print he gave us)

Dedicated prayer from the heart (or in Oromo, *gaara* "stomach") was important to him. For example, he found the responses at the services at our local Roman Catholic services flat and mechanical, so he mostly attended Sunday services at the local Church of England or Baptist churches. He even took a copy of the Baptist hymnbook back to Ethiopia with him, so that he could try out how some of them would translate and then see how Oromo congregations responded to them.

Wendy James, in a perceptive review of *Oromo Religion* (1987:181), summarized Lambert's approach to his work as "innocently dateless", a description that I have borrowed for the title to my paper. She argued that his observations were presented "modestly as a record of a world now passing" and "entirely without theoretical pretension", which could have dated them. Certainly Lambert perceived himself as an innocent and



eager learner who was seeking to present an account of a traditional Oromo religion that was indeed “dateless”<sup>1</sup>. “Dateless”, that is, as Christianity and Islam are essentially “dateless”, because though some words and actions may vary from place to place and alter over time, the core beliefs and practices of both religions endure through the prayers of the devout and sincere. He often commented that converts to Christianity and Islam seemed much more relaxed and restored when they used traditional prayers, rather than the new ones that they had been taught. The strength of traditional Oromo religion, he would argue, lay in its traditional worshippers and their prayers. Both had proven resilient through time and had a long life before them<sup>2</sup>. He would note that the Catholic Church itself had survived unfortunate periods in its history, both of dogmatism and of misbehaviour by its official leaders, because God had heard the prayers of ordinary believers.

Lambert studied cultural anthropology at the University of Nijmegen, when he was on leave from Brazil, where he had been working as a missionary before going to Ethiopia. He was never interested in anthropology as an intellectual discipline, though he recognised that it was one, but only in its practical uses to him as a means to the end of becoming a better missionary. His intention was to use anthropological knowledge and techniques in order to better understand and communicate with his Brazilian parishioners: thereby, he hoped, also to be able to help them more effectively in their struggles with loggers and the government. When he returned to Brazil to find that his parishioners had been destroyed, or forcibly scattered, he was immensely angry and emotionally devastated. His order withdrew him and, after a short break, sent him to make use of his anthropological knowledge in Ethiopia.

After some wandering, he started field research among the Macca Oromo. He began, as he had been taught, by concentrating on the material aspects of society, such as work groups and “customs”. His early papers

about farming were a demonstration to his colleagues of the practical usefulness of anthropological study. He tested the methodology that he was developing, of using the words of his informants to explain the world of daily work, by collecting recorded texts. He found the method suited him. He often told me that his method of taking and using texts as a primary research tool, and so giving due weight to the subtleties of oral discourse, was especially suitable for a priest researcher who could not participate directly in non-Christian rituals (Bartels 1983: 39). However, Lambert soon moved on from being a detached researcher into the material aspects of daily life. He was deeply moved by the poetic resources and depths of *afaan* Oromo, impressed by the Oromo democratic ethos and their general way of life and, especially by their monotheistic religion.

When he first came to Manchester, Lambert was not yet involved, as he later became, in being “a philosopher” and in creating a Socratic style of “research dialogue” with Oromo religion (see Tablino’s essay in this volume). I do not think that he started to write theologically oriented papers, such as “Talks with Young Oromo Christians” and “Oromo Christian Liturgies”, or attempt to design religious rituals that would be suitable for Christian/Oromo services, until after the publication of *Oromo Religion*. Certainly they were not mimeographed and circulated until after its publication. His aim to find conjunctions between Oromo religion and Christianity, and so to establish an “apostolate of mutual inculturation”, increasingly occupied him as time went by. He sent me copies of all he wrote during this later period and asked for my comments, but I only felt able to make suggestions about ethnographic points or to correct his English. Lambert recognised that my interests lay elsewhere and that I was a theological ignoramus. This essay only looks at what might have influenced the construction of *Oromo Religion*, and not at his later works.

Finally, I make some suggestions about the books that may have influenced Lambert’s intellectual formation. It must be brief because he seldom talked about what he was reading. Lambert always liked to talk about what he was doing in the present or hoped to do in the future rather

than to hark back to the past. He had a classical education that, combined with his training as priest and as a theologian, must obviously have dominated his reading before he went to the missions. From then, my impression is that he concentrated on the Bible and, later, on reading what was essential to his ethnographic studies.

When we first met, Lambert had already read and made careful notes on the existing sources published on the Oromo, as a glance through the bibliography of *Oromo Religion* shows. I learned, from occasional passing remarks, that he particularly valued the writings of H.S Lewis and of K.E Knutsson.

It is hard to discover which writers influenced him at the Catholic University of Nijmegen where he had been a part-time student from 1962 to 1967. As Mario Aguilar points out, in his essay in this volume, Lambert must have been influenced, directly or indirectly, by Wilhelm Schmidt's ideas on the origins of the idea of God and by his conclusion that the capacity to conceive of a Supreme Being is extremely widespread. But, as usual, Lambert does not enter into any discussion of general theory and simply lists Schmidt's 1937 article *Die Religion der Galla* in his bibliography. Lambert was proud and happy to have published articles in the journal *Anthropos* and that *Oromo Religion* was published in the *Anthropos* monograph series, both of which were founded and inspired by Schmidt.

One of the few authors mentioned in *Oromo Religion*, with whom Lambert compares himself, is the missionary priest Placide Tempels “who, after ten years of talking to the Bantu, finally decided to sit down with them and to ask them to talk first to him” (Bartels. 1983: 40). Lambert mentions the enthusiasm that he and Tempels shared for listening to their informants, but does not discuss Tempels' generalisations about Baluba beliefs; nor does he quote directly from Tempels famous book *Bantu Philosophy*. I suspect that Lambert relied on recollections of his impressions, received many years earlier, from his initial reading (as we older persons tend to do), rather than

checking his source again. He does not list Tempels in his bibliography. Tempels actually wrote “that one learns more by listening to their intercourse one with another than by pursuing systematic investigations” (Tempels 1959: 29). These words must have made a great impression on Lambert when he read them; “listening” and allowing “the people to speak for themselves” (Bartels 1983:40) were at the core of his own field methods. But Lambert did not only listen intently, he was always systematic in the way he followed up any leads that came up from listening; indeed, being orderly, persistent and systematic were ingrained in his nature. Sentences such as the following must have also influenced him: “Before we set about teaching these Africans our system of philosophical thought, let us try and master theirs” (Tempels 1959: 25).

*Bantu Philosophy* first appeared in 1952 and was republished in 1959 by the Collection Présence Africaine, which was then a leading publisher of progressive books and of the journal *Présence Africaine*, which published articles on the emerging independent Africa. The book itself was “enormously influential” (Westerlund 1985: 69) and was generally widely welcomed as a positive contribution to what were coming to be known as “African Studies”<sup>3</sup>. It was a period during which, as African states gained independence, there was a massive increase of interest in African religions and philosophies. A sign of this interest was the publication in 1954 of the influential collection of essays, edited by Daryll Forde and Germaine Dieterlen, *African Worlds: Studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples*: each of the ten contributors had already carried out research into African religions. The book was sponsored by UNESCO, an indication that the study of African religions had become an internationally recognized subject. Lambert had not come across the book during his studies and got great pleasure and comfort when I introduced it to him. Lambert may also have been influenced by *La Philosophie Bantu-Rwandaise de l'Etre* by Alexis Kagame who, like Tempels, was a priest; but I do not recollect Lambert ever mentioning him.

When Lambert first came to Manchester, he was eager to read the

works of British anthropologists who had written on African religions. He was surprised to find that there were so many and also that there were several French authors, such as Griaule and Dieterlien (who were also Catholics) who had contributed to this topic. He read the writings to which I introduced him enthusiastically and voraciously. He had felt very isolated in his studies of an African religion and was delighted to find out that, firstly, he was not alone in his concern with the actual words used by informants; and, secondly, that others recognized the universality of the idea of God and that God could have many subtle manifestations. But, because he was already well into his fifties when he started his Oromo studies, Lambert always felt pressed for time. He had found his way and was not looking for new paths, but just seeking for insights and guides that might help him better understand his own data. He had no intention of being diverted from the path he had chosen and which he saw as the answer to his prayers. But he was open to stimulation from those he thought were attempting similar journeys. For example, he had enjoyed and been stimulated by the ways in which Godfrey Lienhardt, in *Divinity and Experience. The Religion of the Dinka*, used and analyzed the words of his informants; in particular, the way in which Lienhardt had dealt with the difficulties, which he experienced himself, of finding the right words for “the invisible parts” of religious experience and the “countless particular manifestations” (Bartels, 1983: 89) of God/Divinity/Supreme Being. Lambert asked me to arrange a meeting. He spent one night in Oxford and had two sessions with Lienhardt, but they did not go well. Lambert wanted to talk one to one about the problems of translating texts. Lienhardt wanted to talk in a sociable small group in the pub about ideas and myths. When Lambert returned, he just said that it had been hard to keep Lienhardt to the issues that he had wanted to talk about. Later, Lienhardt told me that he had found Lambert too unremittingly serious. I should have anticipated, knowing them both as I did, that their meeting would not be a success.

In the bibliography to *Oromo Religion*, Lambert lists books, which he had found helpful, by Mary Douglas, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Godfrey Lienhardt, Victor Turner and Monica Wilson. Except for Monica Wilson, who was an Anglican, all were practising Catholics. He does not list any non-Catholic authors, such as Middleton, Fortes and Audrey Richards, some of whose work I know that he had read. Lambert was not aware of the religious affiliation of most of them and, I suggest, simply experienced a religious empathy with their work, similar to that which he experienced with his Oromo informants.

The extremely brief conclusion to *Oromo Religion* is not actually one, but consists of a restatement of Lambert's method and his aspirations. The book itself just stops. The form it takes, of thirty-eight unusually short and independent chapters, is a product of his research method, which depended on texts recorded at separate religious events, and his deliberate refusal to "impose" linkages between events. The result is an accurate and loving account of a traditional Oromo religion expressed through a series of individual responses to the diverse contingencies of daily life. Let us hope, with Lambert himself, that "in the near future Oromo scholars will be found to continue the work initiated by this book" (Bartels, 1983: 361).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lambert himself was, in some respects, a sort of unworldly, though not naive, innocent. On his first visit, he pressed on me several packets of the strong, small cheroots to which he was then addicted. I pointed out that the customs duties on cigars were very high in England, and that he should treasure those he had. He answered that he had known about the duty, and because tobacco kept his spirit (*lubbuu*) alive, he had brought more than enough to last him his entire visit. He felt that there had been no alternative for him than to just walk through the customs gate with a

suitcase nearly full of cheroots. After all, he pointed out, if he laundered his own clothes every evening, all he needed was one change of clothing and a toilet bag!

<sup>2</sup> See Aguilar (1998) and his essay in this volume for an account of the persistence of traditional forms of prayer among the Borana of Kenya. Gow (2002) and Yedes, Clammons and Osman (2004), both recount how forms of traditional prayers have survived conversion to Islam or Christianity and transference in space to Australia and the USA. A snag with “timeless” accounts, of course, is that they detach religion from the responses it must make if it is to survive to the constantly changing political and economic realities of daily life.

<sup>3</sup> Many contemporaries did have reservations about Tempels’ book. Okot p’Bitek (1964), for example, argued that it was “a blind alley. It admits of no proof or disproof, having been erected through intuition and not by methods of direct observation and comparative analysis of data.” The “apparent popularity” of the book probably lay, p’Bitek argued, “in the timing of its appearance and the sympathetic style in which it appears to be written.” The book has been an object of intense debate and critique ever since.

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# MUTUAL INCULTURATION: THE MISSIONARY APPROACH OF LAMBERT BARTELS AND ITS INFLUENCE ON CATHOLIC MISSIONARIES IN NORTHERN KENYA AND SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA

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## Introduction

In the letter that Paul Baxter wrote to announce the death of Lambert Bartels, he cited the last words that our friend had uttered after receiving the sacrament for the sick in full consciousness: “I have had a wonderful life, but now I am going to a much better life.” In one of Bartels’ last letters to me from Addis Ababa, dated 20 March 1998, he wrote something that illuminates these words, and explains why he considered his life to have been a “wonderful” one. These words reveal the profound aim of his scientific research and missionary dedication:

In spite of my age I went back to Ethiopia in order to finish the work I was engaged in—and for the sake of my Oromo partners in my apostolate of mutual inculturation: Oromo religion and world-view on the one hand, and our own Christian faith on the other. A work not of science at all, but one which lies beyond the horizon of positive science..... As far as the Oromo are concerned I feel ineffably thankful for their openness: Gammachu [Megerssa], his brother Qajela and their sister Aagitu. All three of them are Matcha Oromo of far away Wollega, quite the same as the Gabra, Guji and Borana, and you know better than me how all these people have visions and traditions all their own..... On the other hand, I do know that these treasures are in danger of being forgotten and they are in need of new religious leaders. May God bless you, *abba*, and may you be given the strength to stay alive in their midst for

some years more to come. . . I myself am 82 now – a “*gadamoji*” on his way back to *Waaqa*

The aim of this paper is to explain how the Catholic missionaries from the dioceses of Marsabit in northern Kenya and of Awasa in southern Ethiopia became acquainted with the work of Bartels and how we have been trying to follow this approach in our own missions. In the first part of the paper, I describe the work done by Bartels in Oromoland, in particular his efforts to formulate a set of Christian prayers in an artistic form in the Oromo language with his Wollega helpers. In the second part, I describe some of the activities of the missionaries undertaken in the Borana-speaking Catholic communities of Marsabit, North Horr and Maikona in northern Kenya, and also provide some information of the work done by the Holy Ghost missionaries in those of Dadim, Dhoqolle and Yavello, on the other side of the border.

## The Work of Lambert Bartels

Although Bartels was born some fifteen years before those of us who work in northern Kenya, and although we did not even know about him until the early seventies, we all began our work among the Oromo after Vatican II (1962-1965). The decrees of this Council, particularly the document *Ad Gentes*, and the declaration on inter-religious dialogue *Nostra Aetate*, were the foundation and the inspiration of his missionary approach among the Macca Oromo, and of ours among the Boorana and the Gabra. In addition, Bartels had his own personal manner of implementing the directives of the Council. He arrived in Ethiopia after more than twenty years of teaching in seminaries, and more importantly, after undergoing thorough anthropological training at the Catholic University of Nijmegen in Holland. Bartels had also prepared himself seriously for his research among the Oromo by reading the published works of scholars such as Azais, Cerulli, Haberland, Knutsson, Moreno and many others. As we shall see below, he also maintained a twenty-year long communication with one of the leading scholars of the Oromo culture, Paul Baxter, of the University of Manchester. From his early publications, it was evident that his research was particularly attentive to Oromo oral literature, especially to poetry and songs<sup>1</sup>. In one of his papers, almost half of the article is dedicated to songs, with Oromo texts and English translations (Bartels 1975). This early attention to artistic

expression explains why in later years Bartels spent so much time, with his young Oromo helpers, on the creation of Christian rituals and prayers that nearly always have an artistic form.

From Bartels' interest in Oromo songs and poetry, grew his desire to understand the basic concepts of the Oromo way of life, their philosophy, and their religion. Thus, from being a patient and careful collector and translator of Oromo poems, he became, always in cooperation with his Oromo partners, a philosopher, Socratic in style and approach. He sought, through respectful and patient discussion, to discover the Oromo vision of the universe, of God, of man, of life, and of things. In his books, Plato calls this method of philosophical research "dialogues". Those familiar with Plato's writings have read the famous dialogues between Socrates and his disciples that he describes in his major works.

Bartels (n.d.) called his own works simply "talks", entitling them "Talks with Young Oromo Christians". When I received some of these talks in Marsabit, I was, initially, disappointed. They consisted of poorly printed mimeographed papers. However, when I read them in more detail, I came to admire Bartels' ability to carry on a constructive dialogue. I realized that here we had a Socrates among the Oromo, a person who had set out to discover the truth through dialogue. Through Bartels' "Talks", the instructions of Vatican II now acquired a concrete new reality: they were no longer just a directive to be followed, but also a practical way of fulfilling the goals of the Council. As this document suggests:

Just as Christ penetrated into the hearts of men and by a truly human dialogue led them to the divine light, so too his disciples, profoundly pervaded by the Spirit of Christ, should know and converse with those among whom they live, that, through sincere and patient dialogue they might learn of the riches which the generous God has distributed among the nations<sup>2</sup>

To discover the riches, or the "treasures" (to use Bartels' own word), that God had distributed to the Oromo, was the purpose of Bartels' life, which he pursued patiently, and requested us to continue. Below, I describe how we, in the diocese of Marsabit, tried to implement the words of Vatican II, encouraged by the example of Bartels.

Through his work, Bartels came to realize that the concept of *ayyaana* was central to the Oromo vision of the world, and for some years he continued to think about, dialogue on and write about this concept. His major published work, *Oromo Religion* (1983), is the deepest understanding that we have so far on the concept of *ayyaana*. Even after having published this major work, Bartels continued to reflect upon this fundamental concept. He wrote two more papers on the subject (Bartels 1984; 1986). It is in these two conference papers that he offers the best clarifications and, in my opinion, conclusive information on this difficult topic, which many scholars had tried to investigate before him. It would be too lengthy to give here a full description of these two papers, which represent the thought of Bartels in his full maturity. I will limit myself to making a few comments.

In the first paper, which he co-authored with Gemetchu Megerssa, he uses the Socratic method of dialogue. Bartels and Megerssa express their points of view in an interesting discussion, so that the reader is able to follow the process of discovering the meanings of *ayyaana*. The second paper, co-authored with Qajeela Megerssa, is divided into two parts. Here we find the important distinction that Bartels elaborated and which gave scholars a way out from the preceding confusions on the subject. He writes that we must distinguish the basic or primal meaning of *ayyaana* from its secondary meanings. Bartels (1984:14) defines the primal meaning in the following terms: "We see *ayyaana* as an emanation of the Supreme Being, *Waaqa*, and at the same time as a constitutive and essential element in creation at large and in every creature". He also cites the definition given in Gaetano da Thiene's (1939) dictionary: "A mysterious power inherent in the beings and elements of creation." The secondary meanings are more or less connected with this primal meaning, and can be considered as indicative of the different ways by which the mysterious power of *Waaqa* is manifested in a variety of particular created beings. Based on his exhaustive literature review, Bartels makes a list of twelve secondary meanings and adds two additional ones. The latter, he notes, have no relevance for the traditional Western Oromo, but have entered into the ordinary manner of speaking of a number of other Oromo groups in more recent times<sup>3</sup>.

The "Talks with Young Oromo Christians", which are still in the form of a mimeographed booklet, represent one of the most original examples of mutual inculturation. They also contain two interesting coloured drawings portraying the traditional and Christian visions of *ayyaana*, so that the reader not only has a written description, but also a visual representation of their similarities and

differences. If space had permitted, it would have been interesting to compare the relation between the traditional Oromo concept of *ayyaana* and the vision of reality as conceived by an Oromo Christian believer.

In addition to the analysis of the concept of *ayyaana* in the traditional Oromo culture and the attempt to elaborate the principles of an Oromo Christian theology, Bartels prepared a number of inculturated prayers and rituals to be used by the Catholic communities. We have a large number of such Oromo liturgies. Fortunately, Bartels not only transcribed the original Oromo texts and gave their English translations, but also recorded them, together with the songs that accompany them. I hope that in the future, someone, preferably an Oromo scholar, studies these “treasures” and publishes them. They would make a wonderful complement to Bartels’ *Oromo Religion*. As an example, I will mention one of these liturgies, entitled the “Christian wedding: an experimental ritual for Catholic Oromo people, Dembidollo area, Ethiopia” After giving some background on traditional Oromo marriage, Bartels raises some of the pastoral problems that missionaries in Oromoland have to face with their married faithfuls. At the end of this introduction, Bartels states why he prepared this ritual (n.d. Introduction, p. B):

The Roman ritual’s wedding-rite falls short in giving the Oromo an impression of its importance by lack of symbols and songs and participation of the congregation. . . . The missionaries of Dembidollo area made a request to the author to compose a richer ritual for Christian weddings. On the one hand it seemed imperative to enrich it with rites and symbols of the Ethiopian liturgy, on the other hand the need was felt of Oromonization, including a greater participation of the community. Thanks to such a ritual it would be easier to induce all the newly married couples of the last year(s) to participate in a collective Christian wedding-ritual, to which they could be prepared by a course.

Bartels then presents the six parts of the ritual and gives some notes on each of them: the promises of the two partners (as he rightly notes, it is better to call this promise an oath, *khakha*); the blessings of the rings (*amarti*); the anointing of the spouses (*diba*); the crowns (*goof*), the coffee blessing ceremony (*buna qallani*), the blessing of the *minje* (the advisor and protector of the wife). The six parts of the wedding is each described, with its own readings, prayers,

rituals and songs. The whole ceremony is arranged within the celebration of the Holy Mass. This ritual, which Bartels patiently and carefully prepared with his Oromo helpers, was first performed in the parishes of Sakko and then Addo. The couples involved were deeply impressed. They blessed the priest who had given them this fine wedding ritual and one man commented, smiling: “What a pity that I cannot marry once more” (n.d. p. D).

In conclusion to the first part of this paper, I would like to add a few paragraphs about one of Bartels’ (1994) last writings, his essay “On Pilgrimage to a Holy Tree”. The paper is, firstly, remarkable for the original way of describing a ritual through dialogue, confirming what I have already said about the Socratic approach used by Bartels. The second noteworthy aspect is his reflection on his own research. Bartels (1994: 1) writes:

Up to the completion of my book *Oromo Religion* (1983), I had been involved nearly exclusively in my research among the most western Oromo tribe, the Matcha [Macca], with a special interest in the religious aspects of their way of life. Yet, the more I got to know about this tribe, the more I felt a need to compare my findings with parallel aspects among the most eastern [sic] Oromo tribe, the Borana, considered by all the Oromo tribes as their ‘fathers’<sup>4</sup>. To all of them, Boranaland is their country of origin, from where they spread over the greater part of the present south and central Ethiopia—an emigration that started at least four and half centuries ago. . . . Talks with Paul Baxter, interspersed with dear reminiscences of his own stay with the Borana, and his publication about the Borana, the Arsi, and the Oromo people at large, widened my horizon.

After having discussed the instrumental role played by Baxter in his work, Bartels adds:

To this came, very fortunately, a third factor: my getting into contact with three brilliant young Matcha people, two brothers and their youngest sister. The elder brother, Gammachu, was of invaluable help to me in the writing of my book about his people’s traditional religion. Later on, his brother Qajella took

his place at my side, and their sister Aagitu, at that time a university student, represented perceptively the female view of her people's ancient traditions and religious conceptions<sup>5</sup>. Their grandfather had been the last ritual leader of the dying *gada*-system in my area of research, and they traced the line of their ancestors to far away Boranaland. Gammachu had been in contact with the Borana for some time, and his younger brother's most fervent wish was that once he would be given an opportunity to make a pilgrimage to his people's homeland—a wish that grew stronger the longer he was working with me. In addition to this idea of a pilgrimage, he felt also more and more urged to compare his own world view as a Matcha Oromo with the still largely untouched ancient way of life and thought of the Borana. We agreed that, whenever his dream would materialise, he would carry out his research in the very heart of Boranaland, unhampered by my presence, while I myself would try to find another area of research elsewhere.

The original manuscript of this essay contains a third remarkable aspect: Bartels' personal testimony of the work that the missionaries were doing in the diocese of Awasa on the Ethiopian side of the border. In a note about his visit to Boranaland, Bartels writes (p. 17):

In retrospect, this 'elsewhere' proved to be the area around the small town of Yavello. Here I was a guest of two fellow-missionaries, Iede de Lange and Ton Leus, both of them members of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. Without their hospitality, their knowledge of Borana language and culture, their brotherly cooperation and, last but not least, their good relation with the Borana, I never would have been able to contact the people with any hope of success. Father Leus' Borana-English dictionary has been of immense value to me in writing this essay. The dictionary is printed only, not published<sup>6</sup>

Bartels continued his work of mutual inculturation up to almost the end of his life, as he himself wrote in a letter to me from Addis Ababa in 1996, when he was 81. He said, "I myself am working on prayers which reflect mutual

inculturation between Oromo religion and Christianity, including of course the ways of praying, prayers that appeal to both Orthodox and Protestant Oromo as well. Most of them are in poetic style. However it is not an easy undertaking and we are still at the very beginning of it, and of course they are in the new Oromo alphabet”.

## **Catholic missionary work among the Boorana-speaking communities in the northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia borderlands**

The link between Bartels and the missionaries working in Marsabit was established through Paul Baxter, early in the seventies, when Bartels invited me to write to him. At that time, Bartels was in western Ethiopia, where he had arrived in 1967 to work as a missionary.

In Kenya, Catholic missionaries were only allowed to work in the Northern Frontier Province, as it was then known, in 1963, shortly before independence. This was a vast territory, consisting of about 250,000 square kilometres, which had its headquarters at Isiolo. The Consolata Missionaries and the Fidei Donum priests of the diocese of Alba, in Italy, began the work in the area east of Lake Turkana<sup>7</sup>. Here, I will limit the discussion to the work undertaken along the Kenya-Ethiopia border from Lake Turkana to Moyale and to that on the Ethiopian side, where the Holy Ghost Missionaries have been working since 1972.

In the Marsabit diocese, the missionary work was begun under the leadership of Bishop Charles M. Cavallera, who instructed his confreres to first build the schools and dispensaries required in the area and the churches and mission houses necessary for carrying out the pastoral work. After five or six years of such construction work, the Bishop took the second step and encouraged his missionaries to become familiar with the culture and the languages of the people and to begin the process of evangelizing the nomads, following the directives provided by Vatican II. Some of the Consolata missionaries worked among the Samburu, Rendille and Turkana; others, such as Fr. Bartholomeo Venturino and myself, from the diocese of Alba (Italy), and the two brothers by birth, Frs. Francis and Richard Tyroller, from the diocese of Augsburg (Germany), worked among the Gabra<sup>8</sup>. Although we came from different countries, our missionary approach to the Gabra was essentially the



same: it consisted of a serious study of the Boorana dialect spoken by the Gabra; the use of this vernacular language in liturgy and in prayer; a respect for, and careful preservation of, the positive aspects of the culture, including the sincere wish for the traditional nomadic life to be kept alive; the gradual involvement of the laity in assuming responsibility for the outreach work; in short, the incarnation of the Gospel in the culture. It was we missionaries, working among the Gabra, who after having begun our work independently of Bartels, found further inspiration in his work. It would be too long to describe all the aspects of the catechetical, liturgical and pastoral work done in the area. This work was actively continued and developed by the successor of Bishop Cavallera, Bishop Ambrose Ravasi, such that the number of parishes has notably increased, and important diocesan institutions have been established. I shall just mention the written production, which, with the help of some local members of the communities, resulted from the work of these missionaries in these last three decades.

The most important achievement was the translation of the entire Bible, including the so-called Deutero-canonical books, into Boorana. This was the work of an Anglican missionary, Rev. Stephen Houghton, of the Bible Church Missionary Society. However, the Marsabit Catholic missionaries encouraged and supported him throughout and cooperated actively in the translation of seven of the books of the Bible, with the help of some of our Gabra and Boorana Catholic converts<sup>9</sup>.

Prior to the publication of the Boorana Bible, we had started to translate, with the cooperation of our Boorana and Gabra catechists in the missions and in out-stations, the readings used during Mass every Sunday. Eventually, the Diocesan Pastoral Office of Marsabit (1993-1995) published a series of eighteen booklets, six every year, containing all the readings for the Sunday Masses and for the most important feasts of the Liturgical Year. A complete volume of these readings was later published by the Diocese of Marsabit (2001). This book, now used widely on both sides of the border, is one of the major achievements for the inculturation of the Gospel in the Boorana-speaking communities.

In respect to the study of the Boorana language, the missionaries were helped by the local catechists and made use of the *Dizionario della Lingua Galla* by Fr. Gaetano da Thiene and the *Grammatica della lingua Galla*, by Fr. Mario Borello<sup>10</sup>. In 1973, Fr. Venturino published the *Dizionario Borana-Italiano* on which we had both worked, and in 1976, the *Dizionario Italiano-Borana*. At the

suggestion of Andrzejewski, I also cooperated with Hans-Jürgen Sasse in editing Mario Borello's *Dizionario Oromo-Italiano*, published in 1995. On the Gabra culture, I had prepared in 1974 a mimeographed booklet, which was later enlarged and published in Italian with the title *I Gabbra del Kenya* (1980). Cynthia Salvadori translated a revised version of the book into English and provided excellent illustrations, maps, and indexes (Tablino 1999)<sup>11</sup>.

The similarities that we shared with the missionary approach of Fr. Bartels are particularly evident in two fields: in the preparation of prayers, hymns and liturgical services in the Oromo language; and in the constant effort to present the Gospel in an inculturated way, so that people could understand it better and, hence, be more inclined to accept it. The preparation of the books for prayer and for the liturgical services was done by Frs. Francis and Richard Tyroller in North Horr, with the help of their catechists. Together, they translated many parts of the Roman Missal into Boorana. I also translated the liturgical texts for the Sacraments with the help of my catechists at the parish in Maikona. In this way, little by little, a number of liturgical books became available for our Boorana-speaking communities. The majority of these texts were published by the Diocesan Pastoral Office of Marsabit (1993 to 1998)<sup>12</sup>. Other catechetical and liturgical texts in Boorana dialect were also prepared at the Diocesan Catechist Training Centre of Maralal and at the Catholic Mission of Sololo.

Among the various books prepared by the North Horr and Maikona parishes, probably the best known, most appreciated and most used by our communities is the Hymnal (*Sirba Eebaa*), compiled by various authors and containing nearly all the Christian religious and liturgical songs that have been produced in the area in the last twenty-five years. It is a collection of 274 hymns, all in Boorana, made available to the Catholic communities to sing during Mass or in other liturgical and non-liturgical services. These hymns were composed by various persons, some by Christians, others by anonymous authors, who nearly always give new Christian words to traditional songs. One well-known local composer is Maria Goretti, a Gabra Christian of North Horr, who produces both the music and the words. She is illiterate, but moved by her deep faith, zeal and spirit of prayer, she goes around the towns, hamlets and nomadic villages in the desert, simply singing her songs and inviting people to pray and to believe in the message of Christ. Another is Hilary Halkano Bokunno, a young Gabra graduate of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa in Nairobi. His songs are an example of the Christian Oromo religious

spirituality that both Bartels in Ethiopia and we in Kenya have been discovering and encouraging in these last decades. A large variety of topics are found in these hymns: from the Eucharist to the Holy Spirit; from the Nativity to Easter and Pentecost; from the Good Shepherd to the Passion; from the Virgin Mary to the vocation, and so forth.

There are two major differences between the books prepared by Bartels and those prepared by the Marsabit missionaries. Firstly, Bartels and his helpers produced something original, coming out of their religious feeling as Oromo and as Christians, while we mainly prepared translations of texts of the Roman liturgy with, of course, the necessary adaptations. Secondly, Bartels aimed at the elaboration of poetic texts, to be used by educated Christian Oromo, while we aimed at producing books to be used by the ordinary Boorana-speaking communities.

The second series of books prepared by the missionaries operating among the Boorana and the Gabra are those used for evangelization and catechesis. They were the work of the same missionaries. After spending many years teaching among the Gabra nomads, Fr. Venturino made a record of these discussions in a booklet entitled "First Steps in Evangelization". In these twenty-one talks, the methodology has an impressive similarity with the Socratic manner of dialogue used by Bartels, despite the evident differences in terminology<sup>13</sup>. In these talks Venturino always spoke through an interpreter, usually one of our two catechists of Maikona, Musa Mamo Ache Bidu and James Roba (Qalla) Wollena, who for about ten years accompanied us in our visits to the Gabra nomadic villages<sup>14</sup>. This original work by Venturino was complemented by that of the priests at North Horr, who prepared a complete exposition of the Christian Doctrine for those Gabra who wanted to be baptised or, having already been baptised, needed a more complete and accurate instruction. As far as I know, these lessons have not been published or used elsewhere<sup>15</sup>.

Another major catechetical achievement in a very original form realized by the two Tyroller brothers together with Frs. Hubert Moessner and Antony Mahl, the two priests from Augsburg who came to continue their work, is the *History of Salvation* (Diocese of Marsabit 1998). In these two volumes the main events of the Old and the New Testament are presented through sixty-five photographs taken of the paintings executed by the Ethiopian artist, Alemayehu Bizuneh, who had been invited to paint the walls of the church dedicated to

“Christ, the Spring of Life” in Kallacha about sixty kilometres east of North Horr. This beautiful church was built by a German architect<sup>16</sup>.

## Conclusion

At this point the reader could ask to what extent the approach described in these pages has produced practical results. Apart from the fact that in missionary work it is not easy to calculate results, one answer would be that a quarter of the total Gabra population is now Catholic. Another, better response, would be that the Gabra feel at home in the Catholic Church and take part actively in the Liturgy. A recent example of such dedication is an event that took place in Maikona in December 2000, when all the Catholics of the area, mainly Gabra and Boorana, but also Turkana, Samburu, Rendille and Dassanech, attended a large gathering to celebrate the Great Jubilee of the Holy Year 2000, and to mark the official inauguration of some of the extensions to their church, built in 1966 by Fr. Venturino and enlarged by Fr Angelo Olgiati in 1999 and 2000. It was attended by a crowd of at least one thousand faithfuls. It was a remarkable day, which could be considered the result of nearly forty years of missionary work. All the songs and the dances were unmistakably Gabra and were performed with the beauty, dignity and nobility that all those present could clearly observe, and which had moved Bartels, and ourselves, to work in order to keep these “treasures” alive, while introducing our converts into the great patrimony, itself beautiful, dignified and noble, of the universal Church of Christ.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, his paper on “Birth Customs and Birth Songs of the Macha Galla” (1969). Bartels (1969: 419; 422) suggests that these birth songs, songs on animal and plants, as well as those on eating and drinking should be added to Cerulli’s (1922) classification.

<sup>2</sup> Document on the missions, No. 11, translated by Austin Flannery (1981).

<sup>3</sup> According to Bartels, the secondary meanings of the word *ayyaana* are the following: personal character or personality; luck or good fortune; day; a good supernatural being; a genius; spirit; spirit of the forest, wind, etc.; tutelary deity; guardian spirit; guardian angel; favour; privilege; prosperity; a person's fate; feast; festival; holiness or grace (as used by Onesimus in his translation of the Bible). The two additional meanings that he notes are: "possession spirit, good or at least not harmful"; and "any invisible superhuman power, good or evil" (Bartels 1984: 16). He adds that in Western Oromoland, these cults, which are popularly known as *ayyaana* in a number of Oromo groups, are referred to as "setana", a remark that is also pertinent to Marsabit District in Kenya.

<sup>4</sup> This should, of course, be "southernmost", and not "easternmost".

<sup>5</sup> In a letter written to me in 1995, Bartels says of Qajeela, "At the moment, my best partner, Qajeela, who happens to be a great poet as well, is working on several booklets, kinds of meditations for each day of the week and a series of shorter practical prayers, most of them in poem...all of them the fruit of mutual inculturation...Our work is more a work of "visionaries", certainly more difficult and time consuming, but it has its own rewards." Among these poetic works by Qajeela, I was able to see the *Song of the Cross*, a collection of nine poems on the Passion of Christ, which Bartels translated into English and published as a mimeographed booklet in 1993.

<sup>6</sup> This dictionary was eventually published in 1995. It originated in the Boorana-Italian one which Fr. Venturino (1973) had prepared in Kenya. This was translated into English and enlarged by Frs. Iede de Lange and Ton Leus. Fr. Leus is currently preparing an updated edition, with the editorial assistance of Ms. Cynthia Salvadori.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on this missionary work, see my book (Tablino 2004).

<sup>8</sup> The work of evangelization was not only the responsibility of those priests who went to live in the remote nomadic villages, but of all those, from various congregations, who were attached to the diocese in whatever capacity, including its lay members.

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<sup>9</sup> Rev. Houghton brought to completion the work of publishing the Bible in Boorana, which the Anglican missionaries of the Bible Church Missionary Society had begun in the 1940s. Canon Eric Webster initiated this work, by translating and publishing some of the books of the New Testament (see Andrzejewski 1957). In 1978, Houghton published the whole of the New Testament. On this translation, see my book (Tablino 1999: 394-400).

<sup>10</sup> In the 1960s, the Catholic missionaries of Marsabit received great encouragement and help in studying the Boorana language from B.W. Andrzejewski, who visited the area at that time. Later, they also found and mimeographed the Boorana Grammar written by Eric Webster in the 1940s.

<sup>11</sup> Other contributions to the Boorana and Gabra culture include the calendars and diaries that I prepared with the cooperation of some educated Boorana and Gabra in Marsabit, which have been published annually by the Diocesan Pastoral Office of Marsabit from 1996 onwards. See also Tablino (2004).

<sup>12</sup> The most important liturgical books translated and published in Boorana are the following: The Ordinary of the Mass (*Eeba Misa Katoliki*); the Order of the Christian Funerals (*Eeba Awaalaa ta worra Kristianaa*); the Rite of the Christian Initiation of Adults (*Eeba nama gugurd'a Kristiana tau fed'u kurfessani*); the Rite of the Sunday Service when the priest is absent (*Eeba Guyyaa Waaqaa*). This last book is particularly important, considering that the area is more than 100, 000 square kilometres in size and nearly all the outstations normally hold a Sunday Service led by a lay catechist.

<sup>13</sup> This idea of holding communal instruction and prayer over a number of weeks with nomads who intended to be baptised was given to us by Sr. Felicina Cremona. She explained that the Comboni missionaries in the Sudan had used this method as a way of instructing people who lived very far from the mission centres.

<sup>14</sup> The AMECEA Office at Nairobi has published, for many years, a monthly newsletter on the missionary work among the nomads in various countries of

Eastern Africa. Some of these papers have reported on our work among the Gabra (see Tablino 1999: 388).

<sup>15</sup> A series of catechetical books in Boorana for school pupils have been prepared by the missionaries who work on the Ethiopian side of the border. Eight volumes have been printed and are available at Dadim, Yavello. They are the work of Fr Ton Leus with the cooperation of some of his confreres and of Boorana catechists and teachers at Dadim and Dhoqolle. On the work of these Holy Ghost missionaries in the extreme South of the diocese of Awasa and of their confreres in the most southern part of the diocese of Soddo-Hosanna, both situated on the Ethiopian side of the border see the booklet, *Spiritans*, published by their congregation on the occasion of the silver jubilee of their missionary commitment in Ethiopia (1972-1997).

<sup>16</sup> This publication was possible through the active cooperation of a Comboni missionary, Fr Nazareno Contran, a German Benedictine missionary in Tanzania. It is a book on the lives of the Patriarchs of the Old Testament, in which the biblical text is illustrated with photographs of Gabra people taken at North Horr

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# THE “GOD OF THE OROMO”: A RELIGIOUS PARADIGM IN THE WORK OF LAMBERT BARTELS

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## Introduction

In his seminal work on Oromo religion and its ritual forms, Lambert Bartels established a challenging paradigm for the study of religious change and continuity among the diverse Oromo-speaking peoples of Ethiopia (and without realizing it, also for those of Kenya) when he wrote: “However, whether they became Christians or Muslims, the Oromo’s traditional modes of experiencing the divine have continued almost unaffected, in spite of the fact that several rituals and social institutions in which it was expressed, have been very diminished or apparently submerged in new ritual cloaks” (Bartels 1983:15).

This paper explores this important paradigm of religious continuity. It suggests that Bartels, who was influenced by his anthropological training at the Catholic University of Nijmegen and by his own experiences as a missionary priest, asked key epistemological questions about religion as an all encompassing, unifying factor for social and political life. The paper is divided into three parts: the first defines the historical context of Bartels’ anthropological research on the Oromo; the second examines the paradigm of “the God of the Oromo” as a unifying factor within situations of colonial and post-colonial change; and the third applies Bartels’ paradigm to the case of the Waso Boorana of northern Kenya. The paper concludes that in choosing religion as a central paradigm, Bartels was providing a comparative

methodology for the study of all other groups of Oromo-speaking peoples in Ethiopia and Kenya.

## **The Historical Context**

Bartels' interest in the religion of the Macca Oromo arose out of his own missionary work among them as a member of the Vincentian Fathers. It was as part of this work that he was led to ask questions about the relation between Christianity and other religious systems, and between African religious systems in general, in relation to the rich and complex social and religious organization of the Oromo. Thus, in order to understand Bartels' anthropological research on religion, one has to enquire into his own search for answers in a particular historical period within missionary work. Bartels was not an exception in this historical period, that of the Second Vatican Council, but belonged to an elite of trained social scientists within the Catholic Church.

The missionary context of the twentieth century was somewhat different from that of the nineteenth century. The initial missionary attempts at conversion in Africa had produced a clear choice to African peoples between keeping their traditional religions or of converting to the European one. Subsequent attempts arose through more settled missionary communities, which asked questions not only about African religious systems, but also about themselves. Anthropology became a tool for understanding these different worlds. At the beginning of colonial rule in Africa anthropologists may have resembled what Edmund Leach has called "butterfly-collectors", but later they investigated problems of cultural and religious difference similar to those raised by missionaries.

In order to understand his methodology, it is important to situate Bartels' decision to study anthropology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. Catholic missionary congregations had a long history of involvement in the study of societies and cultures from within, as evidenced by the Jesuits' efforts at enculturation in

China, Japan, India, and South America. Other congregations such as the Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers) had stressed the learning of languages and religion, and they wore a habit that resembled local ways of dressing in Muslim societies in northern Africa and the Sudan.

Bartels came under the anthropological guidance of teachers within the Dutch-German world who had been influenced by the ethnological ideas and work conducted by the missionaries of the Society of the Divine Word (SVD). They would have been known to him as the missionaries from Steyl. This small village in the Netherlands had hosted the first group of exiled German missionaries at the time of religious persecution (*Kulturkampf*) in 1875<sup>1</sup>. One of the most famous members of the Steyler missionaries was a certain Wilhelm Schmidt, born in Hörde, Germany, on 16 February 1868 (Brandewie 1990). After his priestly ordination on 22 May 1892, Schmidt studied Hamitic and Semitic languages in Berlin. In 1895, he moved to Mödling, near Vienna, where he spent the next forty-three years of his life. During this time, as part of his study of Australasian languages, he was preoccupied by a single question: the origin of the idea of God. Later, this question became the focus of a major work entitled *Ursprung der Gottesidee*, comprising of several volumes of comparative material, which included a paper on the God of the Oromo (Schmidt 1926 [1912]; 1929; 1931a; 1931b; 1933, 1934; 1935; 1937; 1940; 1949a; 1949b; 1952; 1954; 1955; cf. Bornemann 1954; Brandewie 1982; 1983).

Schmidt's work fostered an interest in non-Western religions and languages among missionaries. He developed the so-called *Anthropos* alphabet that was sent to thousands of missionaries in order to assist them in investigating local phonetic and linguistic patterns in the areas where they were working (Brandewie 1990: 48). With the foundation of the Anthropos Institute in Vienna, Schmidt established a base for those missionaries who wanted to study languages and cultures outside Europe. However, Schmidt's main work was the journal

*Anthropos*, which he founded in 1906. The journal not only provided a scholarly outlet for those studying ethnology and anthropology, but was also sent to missions all over the world in order to encourage their resident communities to explore and to understand local religious systems. Missionaries regularly contributed papers on the anthropology of religion for the journal. Bartels (1975; 1977) followed this pattern. Schmidt's influence on missionary congregations was enormous and on its fiftieth anniversary *Anthropos* was termed "a vast library of ethnography" (Rahmann 1956, my translation).

Bartels would not necessarily have read any of those scholarly volumes. Nevertheless, it is clear that any missionary priest studying anthropology in a Catholic University of the Dutch or German world would have come under the influence of Schmidt's theoretical paradigm. As a result, these students would have had an interest in non-Western ideas of God, particularly among peoples that had a single name for that deity, whose creative and sustaining acts resembled the attributes of the Christian God, as a creator of human life and of the cosmos. In fact, it was thought that the understanding of an African religion or the religious system of a particular group began with the understanding of its concept of God.

By the time that Bartels arrived in Ethiopia in 1967, even further changes in missionary work had taken place. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) had taken place in Rome, and the Catholic bishops represented at the sessions had discussed issues such as the nature of the Church and the nature of other world religions, including African ones. The nineteenth century saying *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("outside the Church there is no salvation") had been modified by an acknowledgement of God's presence among many other peoples in the world. Among those who elaborated the document on missionary work were leaders of religious missionary congregations, including the Superior General of the missionaries from Steyl, Fr. J. Schütte SVD (Grootaers 1997:456-457).

The final document on missionary work that preceded Fr. Bartels' arrival in Africa became known as *Ad Gentes Divinitus* (AG) and the Council Fathers made it public on 7 December 1965<sup>2</sup>. The document upset some traditional clergy who still maintained that indigenous religions were blatant idolatry. Nevertheless, it raised serious questions about missionary work and about the conversion of souls that would otherwise go to the Christian hell. The document argued for tolerance and openness to religious diversity, as well as for serious scientific study of other people's societies and religious systems. *Ad Gentes* stated (AG 26, 41 in Flannery 1992):

So all missionaries – priests, brothers, sisters and lay people – should be trained and formed, each according to their state, lest they be found unequal to the demands of their future tasks. From the very beginning their doctrinal training should be such that they understand both the universality of the Church and the diversity of peoples. This holds for all the studies which prepare them for their future ministry, and indeed for other sciences in which they might usefully be instructed so that they might have a general knowledge of peoples, cultures and religions, not only with regard to the past but also with respect to the present time. Whoever is to go among another people must hold their inheritance, language and way of life in great esteem.

Those lay people who promote the knowledge of peoples and religions, by their historical or scientific-religious investigations in universities and scientific institutes, and so help the preachers of the Gospel and prepare for dialogue with non-Christians, are worthy of special praise.

Bartels would almost certainly have been aware of such discussions before he arrived in Oromoland. In the post-Vatican II

and post-colonial era, he would have opted for a more dialogic manner of missionary work, with a clear openness to the richness of God’s presence in an African religious system. Furthermore, following his own home intellectual tradition, he would have devoted his dialogue to learning more about the God of the Macca Oromo.

## The God of the Oromo

If during colonial times, either Abyssinian or British, social and political scientists thought that modernity could bring an end to traditional ideas, cosmologies, and rituals associated with the past, they were to be proven wrong. Indeed, while diverse in many ways, the Oromo continued to share a common language and, therefore, common forms of social communication, which included proverbs, fables, stories, and joking relationships (Kidane 2002).

It could be said that Bartels’ methodological paradigm only began to be taken seriously many years after the publication of *Oromo Religion*, in the context of the nationalist movement in which treasured cultural traits such as the *Gada* system and the philosophical conception of a distinct cosmological order became important. Some non-Oromo scholars, like Baxter (1978), centred their studies of the *Gada* as a system of social organization, whilst emphasizing its ritual and religious connotations. Other scholars, like Legesse (1973) and Bassi (1994), dwelt primarily on its political aspects. For Bartels, however, these forms of social, religious, and political organisation ultimately reflected a belief in a supreme creator, *Waaqa*, who was the prime mover of all these social systems.

As Bartels (1983: 89) indicates, *Waaqa* lives in the sky and the words for sky and God are the same. Thus, when man sins, *Waaqa* goes away, but the earth remains. The earth is described as being a Mother. Bartels (1983:110) reports sayings such as: “*Waaqa* is like a father who goes away. Earth is like a mother: she is always with us”. He shows that for the Oromo, *Waaqa*’s creative

act has ordered everything in heaven and on earth. However, they see Him as a divinity that uses creative spirits (*ayyaana*), in order to act in the world. These numerous spirits “may be personalised, feared and, at times, invoked, but, in spite of this appearance of multiplicity, each one is also seen ultimately as a manifestation of the one divinity” (Bartels 1983:14). In Bartels’ (1983: 14) work, *ayyaana* stands, hence, for God’s creative activity in the world. For Bartels, personal sin was an attempt to disrupt this Oromo cosmic and social order (of which the God of the Oromo is the guardian).

Oromo rituals recreate, enact, and maintain the social order. This social order symbolically expresses the cosmological order. Prayers link the earthly part of the cosmological order with the divine one. They generally call for *Waaqa*’s intervention in the cosmos, which He has created and sustains. For example, prayers for rain emphasize this cosmic order, for it is *Waaqa* who controls rainfall, and sends it from His abode in the heavens. Bartels (1983: 46-47) narrates how on one occasion one of his interlocutors, Shegerdi Bukko, was asked by the people to pray for rain:

So I took my place on a high piece of ground and began speaking to the people. “I am going to pray with you for rain,” I said. “But what I am going to do is only asking Waqa (God/sky), I will not order him”. Then I started to pray:

O Waqa, give us rain.  
Gives us rain, people said.

Have pity on us. Give us rain.  
Give us rain.

Give us the good things from the sky. Give us rain.  
Give us rain.

Give us the good things from the earth. Give us rain.



Give us rain.

You are great, we are small. Give us rain.  
Give us rain.

You are almighty. Give us rain.  
Give us rain.

You who know all things, give us rain.  
Give us rain.

Refresh the earth by your rain. Give us rain.  
Give us rain.

Don't look at our sins. Give us rain.  
Give us rain.

Don't refuse us what we eat and drink. Give us rain.  
Give us rain.

And so we prayed for a long time. In the end, I said: “O Waqa, if you give us rain within five days, we will say thanks to you.”

This example illustrates well the Oromo sense of connection with the Sky Divinity, and Bartels' own ethnographic work on religion as a social practice that has a link with the effective functioning of society. *Waaqa's* presence on earth is manifested through rain, fog, and water. Therefore, a father spits on his son, and elders spit on others as a sign of divine presence and blessing. A man who has broken the law by committing incest must bathe in a mineral water spring in order to be cleansed and be socially reborn (Bartels 1983: 64).

For the Macca Oromo studied by Bartels, land has a close association with *Waaqa* because He is the giver of land to the Oromo. One story narrates how the Macca arrived in their lands: they followed their bulls, as their cows followed their bulls, and they assumed that the land where their bulls stopped were the lands given to them by *Waaqa*. The bulls played such an important role because they were the head of cattle herds, like men are the heads of clans and families. Indeed, among the Macca the world of cattle replicates the order of their own human social world (Bartels 1983:71).

Other manifestations of *Waaqa* include the dark clouds of a stormy sky, pregnant with rain to come, when God is addressed as the “dark one” (*Waaqa Gurraachaa*): “May the dark one with white hail in his belly give you [good things]” (Bartels 1983:90). The rainbow is called *Waaqa*’s girdle and the Oromo sacrifice on top of hills in order to be nearer to their divinity. Bartels’ narrates how he did not understand the full importance of rain. On one occasion when it was raining heavily, he proposed to his parishioners that they should pray for the rain to stop. They answered: “How can we do that, Father? It would be like praying that *Waaqa* may withdraw from us!” (Bartels 1983:90).

For the Oromo, it is only *Waaqa* who can give life, send rain and create human beings. Hence, the moment of conception is perceived as a creative act of the Oromo divinity. As Waquma Tollera told Bartels (1983: 91):

Children are born from the blood of the father and the mother. If *Waaqa* wishes, he causes a child to sprout in the mother’s womb. Man does not know how *Waaqa* does this; he can only ask *Waaqa* for a child. No man on earth has any idea of it; it is a mystery. We do not see when *Waaqa* creates a child, but we know that it is he who creates the child, he alone. All men are his creatures. *Waaqa* alone creates.

## The Case of the Waso Boorana

Bartels’ paradigm of the idea of God of the Oromo can be applied to the study of the religious practices of a group of Boorana-speaking peoples in northern Kenya, in particular those who live along the Waso Nyiro River of Isiolo District, known as the Waso Boorana (Aguilar 1998). Due to colonial pressure on their water and territorial resources, and after continuous strife against the Somali during the 1920s, the Waso Boorana were moved by the British colonial authorities to the area of Garba Tulla in 1932. Thirty years later they had massively converted to Islam, through a process that Baxter (1966: 249) has termed “somalization” rather than “islamization”.

At the time of Kenya’s independence from Britain, the Waso Boorana sided with the Somali in a guerrilla war of secession, following a bid made by the latter to integrate eastern Kenya into a greater Somaliland. The Waso Boorana paid a heavy price for helping the Somali during the so-called *Shifta* war (1963-1967). They were forced to live in special camps. As a result, they lost most of their animals, which either died of sickness or thirst because restrictions imposed on their movements deprived them of access to grazing and water, or were slaughtered by the army in retaliation for the help they had given to the Somali guerrillas during the war.

It was during this period of internment, known as “the time of stop” (*gaf daaba*), that some Waso Boorana began returning to their own religious traditions. When it ended, the older generation continued to practice Somali Islam, but the younger generations were exposed to Christianity. They attended modern schools all over the country, and went to university. This younger generation living in a time of modernity and post-modernity longed to know more about their own Boorana traditions and, in many ways, were more interested in these customs than the older generations that had either lost them due to their acceptance of Islam or had taken them for granted.

Two concepts/actions became important in the revival of Boorana tradition: (i) discussions about the person, nature, and actions of *Waaqa* in the world; and, (ii) their own communication with *Waaqa* and ritual interaction with other Boorana, through Boorana prayer. Amongst the Waso Boorana, while rituals of naming, marriage, and burial remain central to communal life, Muslim canons of ritual practice frame their performance; thus it is only in peripheral ways that they retain some of the rich traditions (see marriage songs and dances in Aguilar 1998:71-113).

For the Waso Boorana, *Waaqa* is the Creator, He lives in the sky, and He sustains the life of the Boorana, their animals, and their natural world. *Waaqa* acts for them by sending rain to the earth, where grass grows that sustains the life of their herds that in turn nourish and sustain the life of all Boorana. This cycle is symbolically completed when the elders utter blessings on all, when the Waso Boorana offer communal prayers, and perform the coffee blessing ceremony (*buna qallaa*), through which the myth of the *Qaalluu*, the first ritual leader of the Borana is re-enacted. In this myth, when the *Qaalluu*, came down from Heaven, they offered him coffee beans taken from the trees that abounded in the Booranalands in present day Ethiopia.

However, for the Waso Boorana, the idea of *Waaqa* does not presuppose a monotheistic exclusion or a contradiction, as the same God can have many names, a thought that would have thrilled Wilhelm Schmidt in his time. God, according to the Boorana, can be called by different names and He will respond. God continues to be one and He remains the God of the Boorana even when He acts in the world in response to different names. For example, according to Aki Boji:

*Waaqa* is the God of the Boorana. Allah is the God of the Muslims. There is only one God. He speaks different languages. He wants to communicate with people. He gives life to the Borana, and He keeps the animals. He loves animals. The names of God

have been given by people. Therefore, they do not matter. It is written in the book that God is called Allah. It is known by us that God is called *Waaqa/sky*. The Somali have the same God. He speaks to them in the Somali language<sup>3</sup>.

Throughout their theological discussions with the author, the Waso Boorana did not reject Allah and their own practice of Islam, but once again managed to accommodate the different names for the same God, and to raise their children in a climate of religious pluralism that allowed them to be Muslims, but also allowed them to uphold their daily Boorana prayer, and even to be exposed to Christianity through attendance of the Catholic primary school and of Christian Church services and liturgical celebrations through a process that can be termed “religious diversification” (Aguilar 1998:233, 235-236, 248).

Within their daily religious practices, the Waso Boorana offer their prayers to *Waaqa* and to Allah in order to maintain their social order. They pray for the *nagaa Boorana*, or the “peace of the Boorana”, not only in terms of absence of war, but also in those of a meaningful social order in which the fertility of humans and animals depend on rain and green pastures given by *Waaqa*.

## **Conclusions: Studying Oromo Religion**

Bartels made a substantial contribution to the study of Oromo religion not only by carrying out a full study of Macca Oromo religious practices, but also by making scholars aware of their religious diversity. For Bartels, the different Oromo groups are united by a common language and by a common concept of God, despite the many symbolic forms and practices that the idea of the God of the Oromo may evoke.

This paper has explored some of the possible influences on the thought of Bartels and has identified two: the influence of

Wilhelm Schmidt on Catholic missionary congregations and the questions posed by and to missionaries in a post-Vatican II era, where it was not taken for granted any longer that religious practices outside Christianity could be deemed pagan or not taken seriously

It is clear that the work of Bartels needs to be taken further, not only in the context of the study of Oromo religion, but also in the comparative one of African religions. In doing so, scholars should return to a similar masterpiece on the God of the Boorana by Baxter (1954) that investigates non-symbolic means of social organization and which, as a result of the preoccupation with the symbolic, has been virtually unexplored in the literature on the religion of the Oromo speaking peoples.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> During this period of “struggle for the [German] culture”, the Catholic Church was perceived as a threat to the unity of Prussia and the German Reich. As early as May 1873, the Kaiser imposed strict controls on Catholic education and on the Catholic Church as a whole (known as the May Laws). The Jesuits were expelled from the Reich in 1872

<sup>2</sup> Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity. For the history of the document’s preparation see Alberigo 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Interviewed in Garba Tulla, 12 June 1992.

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# THE OROMO WORLD-VIEW

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## Introduction

Although Father Bartels was not the first scholar to study the family and clan, generation-set and age-grade systems of the Oromo, he was the first to explore the religion of the Oromo as it was practised in daily life in Western Oromia. He was the first who closely observed traditional Oromo law and custom and other institutions as perceived by the culture bearers themselves. He argued that all these institutions were formed by or built around the central issues of the Oromo people, what they believe, what life is all about, their social philosophy, or in other words, their world-view<sup>1</sup> (cf. P' Bitek 1983).

A Catholic father, Abba Demirew Suraphel, first introduced me to Father Bartels in 1981. I met Abba Demirew in Jimma where we were in prison serving a sentence without having been issued with a warrant of arrest. Abba Demirew is now the head of the Catholic Church in Ethiopia and is known by the name of Abba Berhane-Yessus. It was he who recommended me to Father Bartels when he came out of prison. Between 1981 and 1983, after I was released, I became Fr. Bartels' first full-time assistant in his study of the Oromo religion.

Shortly before the publication of *Oromo Religion*, with Father Bartels' help and encouragement, I went to Kenya to continue the studies that I had begun at the Addis Ababa University. In my doctoral thesis, I have described how, by chance, I came to meet two experts of the Boorana oral traditions, Bulee Guyyoo and Dabassa Guyyoo, in one of the populous suburbs of Nairobi frequented by members of the Oromo and Somali communities (Megerssa 1993). Both of these elders were originally from the homelands of the Boorana in southern Ethiopia, but for different reasons, they had taken refuge in Kenya. Members of their families held positions of authority in the *Gada* leadership and both were

rigorously trained in the oral traditions. Both men were in their early forties at the time. These two distinguished elders accepted and initiated me into the Boorana knowledge system.

In *Oromo Religion* (Bartels 1983) and in two unpublished conference papers (Bartels 1984; 1986), Father Bartels discussed the most important elements that constitute the Oromo world-view: *ayyaana*, *uumaa* and *saffuu*. In this paper, I draw upon the concepts established by Bartels and elaborate on them, sing the teachings of the two Boorana elders. Furthering Bartels ideas, I will try to show how these concepts are interrelated in the Oromo world-view. These data were initially presented in a chapter of my thesis (Megerssa 1993).

## Elements of the Oromo World-View

The world-view of the Oromo could be treated under three headings: *ayyaana*, *uumaa* and *saffuu*. It is however impossible to translate these terms into English without distorting their full meanings. For in Oromo, as in many other languages, words have both a core meaning and peripheral meanings. This is especially true of those philosophical and religious terms such as *ayyaana*, *uumaa* and *saffuu*. As Father Bartels (1984; 1986) shows, to unravel the complexity of a word, it is necessary, therefore, to distinguish between its core and its peripheral meanings.

### Ayyaana

The core meaning of *ayyaana* refers to that by and through which God (*Waaqa*) creates anything and everything. *Ayyaana* is in fact both that which causes something to come into being and becomes that which it has caused. *Ayyaana* is, therefore, that which exists before and after, that which it causes to come into existence. There are also several peripheral meanings of *ayyaana*. Most of these peripheral attributes of *ayyaana* have been acquired through interaction with Christianity, Islam and other belief systems with which the Oromo world has interacted.

## Uumaa

*Uumaa* refers to the entire physical world and the living things and divine beings contained within it, animal, vegetable, mineral and spiritual. In this sense, *uumaa* even embraces *ayyaana* itself, just as *ayyaana*, which is the cause of *uumaa*, also encompasses it. The term *uumaa* is derived from the verb *uumu* meaning literally “to create”. The nominal form of *uumaa* therefore refers to everything that is created, in short, to *Waaqa’s* (God’s) creation.

## Saffuu

*Saffuu* is a moral category, based on Oromo notions of distance and respect for all things. The concept of *saffuu* is not merely an abstract category: it constitutes the ethical basis upon which all human action should be founded; it is that which directs one on the right path; it shows the way in which life can be best lived within the context of Oromo world.

Together, these three concepts constitute the basis of the Oromo world-view. Although presented separately here for methodological reasons, they should be seen as interlinked and interconnected aspects of a whole. Together they constitute three different but related points of view about the rational universe as seen through Oromo eyes.

For the Oromo, the knowledge of the world is an organic experience. As my teacher Dabassa Guyyoo put it:

“knowledge has flesh; knowledge has bone and knowledge has blood. The knowledge of the world as sensed through the flesh is physical knowledge: it is the knowledge of *uumaa*, of the created world. The knowledge that is felt through the bone is knowledge of the inner qualities of things; it is the knowledge of *ayyaana* or the cause of creation. The knowledge that comes through the blood knows the moral values attached to things; it is the knowledge of *saffuu*, of the right and just path. This is sometimes referred to as *qalbii*, ‘thought.’ A wise man is not a person who merely knows; it is rather a man who lives his knowledge.”

In order to live wisely, according to Bulee Guyyoo, *ayyaana* and *uumaa* must in fact be subordinated to *saffuu*. For, he argues, "The use of knowledge is to lead us to the right life." *Saffuu* therefore penetrates all actions, as it sets the measure of what constitutes an appropriate act. Nevertheless, Bulee admits that to know *saffuu*, the wise man should also know *ayyaana* and *uumaa*.

These are, therefore, the three fundamental principles of the Oromo system of thought. The subject matter of what constitutes knowledge is of course open to a number of interpretations. The wise men, or experts, in particular, the elite in every society, have a greater command of the subject, since it is they who act as the moral guides to the whole community. For the Oromo, *ayyaana* and *saffuu* also have cosmic dimensions, and it is believed that there also exists a link between them and the occurrences of natural events. With this general overview, let us now consider each of the component parts of the Oromo world-view and its system of knowledge in more detail.

### ***Ayyaana* as a Concept**

In discussing this topic, there are two methodological problems that should be noted at the outset. The first problem arises out of the fact that the Oromo system of knowledge forms a unified whole. The dilemma that faces anyone who wants to understand Oromo culture is therefore how to present the parts whilst retaining a picture of the whole. By treating one particular aspect in detail, we do not want to run the risk of confusing the issue and misrepresenting the essential unity of the system. In describing the whole without analyzing the parts also leads to a similar distortion. This has been the case of many scholars who have tried to understand Oromo culture.

Another problem which arises in comprehending this concept, in particular for the non-Oromo and those Oromo who have been through the western system of education, is the fact that *ayyaana* operates at many different levels of reality and applies to different kinds of phenomena, many of which are religious and/or philosophical in nature. At the highest level of abstraction, *ayyaana* is that by which and/or through which

*Waaqa* creates everything in the universe. In this sense, *ayyaana* causes the coming into being of everything. This idea of causality is simple enough to grasp. What complicates the matter, however, is that according to my teachers and informants, *ayyaana* also becomes what it has caused to come into being. Thus, even this cause and effect dichotomy does not really help to explain the essential nature of this concept. Nevertheless, the fact that this problem exists, tells us something about one of the fundamental characteristics of the Oromo system of thought. *Ayyaana*, for the Oromo, is just as much the creative act of thinking in which a thought becomes that it mentally represents. In other words, it constitutes the recognition that there exists a dialectical relationship between thought and the object of thought. This explains why the Oromo employ the word *yaada*, for both thought and the logical reasoning process leading to its formulation, thinking and reasoning. In this sense, *ayyaana* represents knowledge. This knowledge is not only externalized, it is not only knowledge about the object, but is also internalized, in that it also generates reflective thought about the object. It is this power of thought that distinguishes a wise-man or sage from the common man. For the sage does not possess knowledge alone; he also possesses knowledge about his knowledge. This knowledge about knowledge is in fact what *saffuu* represents in the Oromo view of the world.

Although this view of the world traces its origins back to *Waaqa* as the ultimate source and Creator, an approach which is partly religious and partly philosophical, at another level, the world, as represented by the Oromo, can be seen as constituted from these three elements, *ayyaana*, *uumaa* and *saffuu*. Being the words, things and the relations between, they hold the created universe together.

### ***Uumaa* as a Concept**

Tilahun Gamta in his *Oromo-English Dictionary* (1989) defines *uumaa* in the following manner:

**uma**/-u:'mu:;/ (used of life) create, i.e., cause sth to exist or bring into being... 1 creation, creature, or a living being *uumaa rabbi* God's

creation/creature...2 (of deformity, disease, etc.) congenital, i.e., existing at birth.

This definition provides a good entry point for the discussion of *uumaa*. In its nominal form, as Gamta indicates, the term *uumaa* refers to a quality, attribute or characteristic acquired at birth. To qualify this statement, it could be added that if a person is born lame, then this lameness is part of his/her *uumaa*. The same could be said of someone who is bad tempered, or patient, generous, greedy, etc. In other words, these are traits which he/she possesses in germ at birth, and which will develop as part of his/her nature or character. For the Oromo, all things have intrinsic characters or natures that are contained in them at their origin. In this sense, the idea of birth is not only literal, but also metaphorical.

The problem then arises as to how to distinguish between the thing and its character. For the Oromo, there exists nothing (*uumaa*) that does not have a character (*ayyaana*). The problem of distinguishing between a thing and its character is therefore one of distinguishing between *uumaa* and *ayyaana*. This is why the Oromo do not make a distinction between a thing and its character. In the Oromo view nothing that exists is devoid of a character. Thus, the very nature of a thing is described in terms of its character. The two can not be dissociated and it is impossible to discuss a thing without at the same time discussing its characteristics. As in the case of *ayyaana*, the force which causes and is the cause of a thing, so distinguishing between a thing and its character is another philosophical problem raised by the Oromo system of thought regarding the origin and the nature of the created universe.

Although *ayyaana* and *uumaa* are inseparably linked in the Oromo world-view, this does not mean that they have exactly the same meaning. The Oromo view of *Waaqa* or God is also directly linked to the existence of these governing principles. They are all-pervasive phenomena that operate in the universe as something of the Creator. As Bartels (1984) correctly observes, at one level, *ayyaana* is believed to be God's creative power manifesting itself through His creatures. As a result, there is some times a tendency to view *ayyaana* as a kind of independent divinity. This is because *Waaqa* exists at the same time through His creation and

independently of it. He is both the Creator and his Creation. For the Oromo, the existence of *Waaqa* is confirmed by the very existence of Heaven and Earth, and by the orderly movement that takes place within them. As Dabassa Guyyo puts it, “*Waaqa* creates because creating is His job; it is because He creates that He is recognized as *Waaqa*.” This orderly movement can evidently be attributed to the governing principles of *uumaa* and *ayyaana* at work within the universe. In the Oromo world-view, therefore, God, through His creative power, is placed within the world. By seeing *Waaqa* as part of the world as well as external to it, the Oromo cosmology has united under a principle of single function that are otherwise considered opposites.

The concept of nature or *uumaa* that has been dealt with thus far can be described as a kind of body, in the broadest sense of the term. This body is not only a physical and material one, but also one that contains visible moral qualities. Such qualities are *arjooma* “generosity”, *gara-laafina* “kindness”, *hammenya* “evil”, etc. and many others. For the Oromo, these attributes actually exist; but we can only see them “with the eyes of our heart” to borrow an expression from Dabassa Guyyoo.

### **Saffuu as a Concept**

The concept of *saffuu* is well documented in the work of Father Bartels. As with the other concepts presented in this paper, Father Bartels approached the study of the concept of *saffuu* from the perspective of the people themselves. He, first, gives the daily contexts in which the ordinary people themselves use the word. Secondly, he asks his informants to comment on these usages. Thirdly, he depicts the relationship between the repetition of the term *saffuu* and the making of the traditional Oromo law. Fourthly, he briefly describes the concept as representing an ancient value relating to the equally ancient socio-political institution of the Gada. Finally, he concludes his discussion by linking the concept to the Oromo view of right and wrong. These different approaches to the study of the concept of *saffuu* can be obtained by referring to Bartels (1983:330-341). Here, for the purpose of illustration, we will only cite the commentaries made by his informants.

*Saffuu*, one of his informants’ states, “Stands for everything we do not understand, including a person’s evil deeds.” Another claims that



“having *saffu* means that you know how to behave according to the laws of our ancestors.” For another, it means, for example, that “a younger boy may not sit on a higher stool than an older men. If he does this, people say, ‘he does not know *saffu*’.” Finally, another informant summarizes *saffuu* in this way: “people say *saffu* when they hear of things they do not want to hear. They also say *saffu* of things they do not understand. It is as if they are saying, “We do not understand these things. Only *Waaqa* knows them.” These informants, who are not experts of the oral traditions, obviously have no specialized knowledge of the subject, and each presents an aspect of the full meaning. The second commentator, however, gives the gist of the meaning when he states that “having *saffu* means that you know how to behave according to the laws of our ancestors.”

As has already been demonstrated, it is impossible to understand the Oromo concept of *saffuu* in isolation from the concepts of *ayyaana* and *uumaa*. *Ayyaana*, as we have already said, is that by which and through which *Waaqa* creates the world, whilst *uumaa* refers to the entire physical world, both individually and collectively. In the Oromo world-view, *saffuu* provides the moral and ethical code according to which events, whether at a personal, social or cosmic level take place. It is by living in harmony with these laws, following the path of *Waaqa* that a full and happy life can be achieved. *Waaqa* in this case represents the highest form of abstraction unifying the whole of nature and more. More so, because *Waaqa* is believed to be greater than the sum of His creation.

The laws of the ancestors are divided into two categories. The first consists of the laws given by *Waaqa*. These laws are the laws of nature. The second comprises of the laws made by man. *Saffuu* thus refers to the knowledge of these natural laws as recognized by the ancestors. In other words, one knows how to relate to these laws and to act according to them. But in what way is one affected by either respecting or failing to respect these eternal laws? This is an important question in understanding the Oromo view of the world generally and of comprehending the concept of *saffuu* in particular. In order to answer this question there is a need to qualify what we mean by nature. This can best be illustrated by taking a number of examples.

The Oromo know that their domestic animals will only thrive and multiply if they are given the right conditions. They believe the same to be

true for everything in the natural universe. For everything relates to nature outside itself. For the Oromo, this totality of nature can be defined as that which is appropriate to the living being in question. Given the diversity of nature, what is appropriate for one living being or creature may not necessarily be for others. Eating grass is appropriate and natural to a cow; but it is not so for a human being. Walking on two legs or speaking an articulate language are appropriate and natural to human; it is not so for an animal. Should a man eat grass or an animal speak like a human being, then the Oromo would say, *saffudha* "it is *saffu*" (cf. the examples given by Bartels 1983). For it is believed that it is the totality of Nature that provides the norm: it defines the nature of plants, animals and human beings. It is thus only by conforming to this norm that they can attain their individual destinies.

Thus far, I have been discussing the particular nature of all created things. Let us now deal with the Oromo view of the whole. In this case, Nature accommodates all particular natures. In the event of natural catastrophes such as drought, famine, disease, etc., some of the particular natures may be more affected than others. The Oromo, like many other traditional peoples, tend to see such natural calamities as being the work of the Totality of Nature itself. In this sense, the Totality of Nature is, *Waaqa* Himself. For the Oromo, these natural disasters therefore represent the manner in which He has chosen to keep the whole together. Consequently, they accept the conditions imposed on them by *Waaqa* and see the disasters as a necessary event that occurs for the good of the whole. Guided by their sages, who understand the patterns and the meanings of such occurrences, the Oromo perform the appropriate rituals and sacrifices and repeat the necessary prayers to survive the disasters. The Oromo believe that nothing can stand in the way of the Will of the Totality of Nature, since it holds together and maintains all Nature. Hence, everything that happens accords with the Universal Nature, or *Waaqa*, and is therefore "right". Such a conclusion obviously emanates from the belief that there is a single guiding Principle behind all Nature, which is *Waaqa*. This in turn derives from the notion that the harmony of the whole transcends the parts.

Such a view may be taken to imply that the Oromo do not see any conflict in the universe. On the contrary, the Oromo distinguish between

good (*danssalgaarii*) and evil (*hama*). So how then do they account for such contradictions? This takes us back to the idea of *saffuu* and to the nature of man. In the Oromo view, man is both a logical abstraction in the sense of *ayyaana* and a concretely existing being in the sense of *uuma*. In the cosmos, man constitutes one of the many elements. But as a group of beings in the diversity of the cosmos, man occupies a very important place, for unlike all other natural beings; man alone is endowed with the intelligence to comprehend his *ayyaana* and *uumaa* through which he is able to understand cosmic events. According to both of my teachers Dabassa Guyyoo and Bulee Guyyoo, this gift places man at an advantageous position with respect to all the other natural beings in the universe. But in their view, *Waaqa* does not give such an advantage without responsibilities. Therefore, He expects man to act in harmony with the cosmic whole. This is why, according to Dabassa Guyyoo, the Oromo social law is derived from cosmic laws.

Traditional Oromo law is based on the same world-view and possesses the same organizing principles discussed thus far. It consists of three elements, *seera*; "law", *aadaa* "custom" and *c'eera-fokko* "distance and respect". The society is thus a reflection of the macro-cosmos: *seera* (law) corresponds to *ayyaana*, *aadaa* (custom) to *uumaa* and *saffuu* to *c'eera-fokko* (distance and respect). The very fact that man possesses such laws also makes him different from all the other natural beings. According to Dabassa Guyyoo, these laws were devised to keep the action of man in harmony with the cosmic whole. Their existence can be seen, as part of the will of *Waaqa*, for it is only man who fails to act in accordance with the natural laws set down by *Waaqa*. For unlike any other creature, man has the choice between good and evil, and he is endowed with the natural impulse of differentiating between them. In short, *Waaqa* as Universal Nature has established the conditions and given man the status of a moral agent by making him a conscious participant in the natural process of the Universe. The laws made by man thus act as a social control, preventing evil deeds from overwhelming the harmony of the cosmic whole.

The accumulated effect of such evil is seen as having serious repercussions for the universe, as it releases the anger of the Totality of Nature. This anger is referred to as the return of *saglii*<sup>2</sup>. When this happens, the process of the life cycle of the cosmic universe comes to an

end and gives rise to a new cycle of time. There is no clear idea in Oromo specifying the length of this cycle of the natural universe. However, through experience, they have established the duration of the cycle of their social institutions as lasting for a period of three hundred and sixty years. This period corresponds to the rule of a dominant group, when the power it has wielded comes to an end and passes to another dominant group. The Oromo refer to this period of dominance of three hundred and sixty years by the term *jaatama*, and recognize that eight such *jaatama* have occurred. Thus, according to the oral historians, the present *jaatama* is the ninth one in the era of dominance of the Boorana. If we were to take this oral history at face value and multiply each of the *jaatama* of three hundred and sixty years by nine, we would have a historical tradition that can be dated back 2,880 years.

The Oromo concept of the after-life describes death as a transitional stage after which human beings rejoin all their dead forefathers and mothers in a place called *Iddo-Dhuggaa*, the “Place of Truth”. Here, he or she lives in a community very similar to the one on Earth. We are yet to discover the physical description of this Place of Truth.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Seymour-Smith (1986: 291) defines a world-view as “The system of values, attitudes and beliefs held by a specified group.”

<sup>2</sup> *Saglii* is a difficult term to translate, but generally denotes a cyclical crisis. On this and other concepts like that of *jaatama* discussed here, refer to Megerssa and Kassam (2004).

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## OROMO RELIGION, AYYAANA AND THE POSSIBILITY OF A SUFII LEGACY

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When scholars developed the occidental image of the Oromo, roughly between 1838 and 1848 (Pankhurst 1976), religion played a prominent part. For the Tutschek brothers in Munich the self-identification “Oromo” was a religious one, by which the “Galla” distinguished themselves from neighboring nations (Tutschek 1844: 24). Antoine d'Abbadie (1890:136) analyzed “Oromo” as a term by which people distinguished themselves from Christians and Muslims. Religious distinction, and the ethno-genesis of the Oromo were seen as two sides of one coin.

My interest in the issue of Oromo religion began in the early 1980s. In spring 1984, I took a copy of Lambert Bartels' newly published book *Oromo Religion* to the Sudan, where it found a place on the bookshelves of the office of the Oromo Liberation Front's central committee in Khartoum. The “big shots” who looked at it were interested, but it did not really seem that “Oromo religion” had much to offer in the way of the direction to the movement. Generating divisions between Protestant support in the West and increasing trends of political Islam in the Sudan, and espousing the pagan past and Oromo religion were not particularly attractive to political alliances and imaginations. At that time, the traditional religion had not yet become a visible part of the political-cultural movement among the Oromo.

Things have changed. *Waqeefanna* (“the way of *Waaqa*”), the Oromo way of praying to God, is a small, but visible movement, both within Ethiopia and in the diaspora. Followers of *Waqeefanna* produce

popular and scholarly articles and stage religious events and rituals. Its adherents reconstruct the past and present of Oromo religion as a belief system in its own right. Elsewhere, I have pointed to a linkage between Oromo religion and Islamic Sufism (Zitelmann 1994: 72). This paper will look into the issue with more detail and indicate how elements of Sufi thinking received a distinctive Oromized shape through the process of “nostrification”, a term I borrow from Georg Elwert (1997: 81). In Austro-German, “nostrification” denotes the formal and informal processes of making something that is “foreign” into something that is “ours”.

## Features of Traditional Oromo Religion

Like any religion, Oromo religion combines an institutional framework with an abstract belief system. Nineteenth century ethnographers, travelers and missionaries contributed much to the description of an institutional structure that has now virtually vanished. A particular strength of Lambert Bartels’ work in *Oromo Religion* was his localization and contextualization of data on the abstract belief system.

At the center of the oral monotheism of the Oromo stands the adoration of *Waaqa* (God/Heaven). *Waaqa* has refractions, known variously as *atete*, *awuliya* (*ogliya*, *ugliya*) and *borantica*. The multitude of *Waaqa*’s refractions are captured in the concept of *ayyaana*. With respect to the abstract belief system, Bartels (1983: 371) discusses the specific uses of *ayyaana* among the western Oromo of Wallagga and offers an interpretation of the local religious meaning of *ayyaana* as:

Waaqa’s creative activity in any creature or group of creatures making them the way they are, assigning to them their place in this world and their relationship to others. ‘Something of Waaqa’ or ‘Waaqa in a particular way’. The invisible part of man, his personality, good luck.

Concerning the institutional frame within which the society operated, the Catholic missionary and cardinal Massaia (1868: 286)

believed that the “true people” or believers had to understand the rules, known under the term *sagada* (“prayer”). For the Oromo, known as *borana* and *baretuma* (*barentu*), the highest representative of religious authority, the *abba mudaa* (father of anointment), was situated in the mythical homeland of Bale, which was a place of pilgrimage from all over the Oromo territories (see Mohammed Hassen, this volume). Nineteenth century descriptions by travelers and missionaries support the impression that the *abba mudaa* in Bale preached the persistence of the values of a pastoralist way of life, associated with the military history of the sixteenth century, when the “Galla” warriors appeared in written history, and subsisted on their livestock during their expeditions:

The *abba muda* instructs his visitors to stick to the demands of their religion. The good Oromo is not allowed to shear his sheep and to do agriculture. He should live with his herds and should only eat meat from animals he has killed himself (Borelli 1890: 162, my translation)

The act of “anointment” during the pilgrimage confirmed the distinguished status of “pure” *borana* and *baretuma* (d’Abbadie 1890: 308f; Mizzi 1935: 42ff; Mohammed Hassen 1990: 9). As part of the way that the political structure functioned in Oromo society under the age- and generation-grading system known as *Gada*, was that the “pure” had easier access to political offices. They also attempted to monopolize the spiritual mediation between men and God. On the other side of the line were the commoners (*gabaro*), and specialists such as metalworkers (*tumtuu*) and hunters (*Waata*). Apart from the *abba mudaa*, local religious specialists (*qaalluu*, *irreessa*, *malima*, *raaga*) existed, but the most important ceremonies were communal gatherings and prayers (*wadaja*) led by the elders, whose aim was to renew symbolically the strength and unity of the people and to attach them to the fecundity of nature.

Some authors (for example, Lewis 1984; Kassam this volume) consider that Oromo religion derives from the prehistoric past of a “Cushitic” religion. By examining the concept of *ayyaana*, I argue that Oromo religion can be seen as a repository for processes of socio-



cultural memory, amnesia and nostrification. The amnesia concerned a distant heterodox Islamic past and nostrification through the creative modeling and appropriation of elements from Sufi mysticism.

### **Arabic-Islamic Roots of *Ayyaana***

Current secular and technical language among the Oromo gives several meanings for *ayyaana*: 1) fortune, luck; 2) celebration, ceremony, festival; 3) a day free of work; 4) divinity, spirit; 5) grace; 6) angel (Tamene Bitima 2000: 41). The term *ayyaana* is part of a living tradition that implies several meanings. However, it carries also a specific legacy that links it to a class of terms that are Arabic-Islamic loans within the Oromo language. The Arabic-Islamic equivalent of *ayyaana* has several meanings. In a secular sense, the Arabic *a'iyān* (sing. *'iyān*) can mean anything that is clear, visible or public. In a religious sense, it can mean a "personal revelation" (of God). Together with other core concepts among Oromo, *ayyaana* is placed at the interface of culture and religion: *aadaa* (custom, culture, derived from *'āda* = customary law), *sagada* (worship, prayer, derived from *sajāda* = to bow down, bow in worship), *awuliya* or *ogliya* (protective spirit, derived from *auliya'* = a person close to God, a saint).

The Islamic *a'iyān*, in its deepest religious use, a highly mystical and gnostic concept within the Sufi legacy of Islam. It is strongly linked to the metaphysical philosophy of Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1242). For Ibn 'Arabi, the whole universe expressed the "paradigmatic creative possibilities, which are eternally fixed in God's knowledge" (Knysh 1999: 13). These "creative possibilities" were called the *a'yan thabita* (*thabita* = fixed, permanent). The *a'yan thabita* were part of a wider speculation that linked God and the universe under the pantheistic heading of *ittihad* ("unity"). All is one.

My own speculative attempt to link the written tradition of Ibn 'Arabi with the oral tradition among the western Oromo, should be read as a contribution to the search for creative intellectual possibilities in historical, trans-cultural contacts with open-ended results. For comparative

reasons, I include a perspective on Kazak religion (Privratsky 2001), a popular form of Islam in Central Asia, which is centered around two concepts that are also familiar to students of Oromo religion: the *äüliye-ayan* complex. From the methodological point of view I follow a structural reading of historical and ethnographic data.

### **Ibn ‘Arabi and the A’yanThabita**

The Oromo idea of *ayyaana* discussed here is surprisingly close to Ibn ‘Arabi’s notion of the *a’yan thabita*. Cerulli (1957: 97) notes that Ibn ‘Arabi was acquainted with the Cushitic word for God, *Waaqa*, which he saw as the *habasha* colloquial for the notion of Allah. The context in the *Futuhāt Makkiyya* (“Revelations of Mecca”) in which (Ibn ‘Arabi 1874: 475, 903) mentions *Waaqa*, is devoted to the unity of God, regardless of the names with which He is praised (he also gives Persian, Latin, Greek, Armenian and Turkish examples). In discussing the basic unity of God, Ibn ‘Arabi calls the specific manifestations of God the *a’iyan*. In his *Fusus al-Hikam* (“Wisdom of the Prophets”) it appears as the “plurality of the names of the essences” (Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi 1986:160). The veneration of the *a’iyan* is associated with the Prophecy of Nuh (Noah). The idea was that the people of Noah took the several manifestations of God to be bodies, and, having made idols in the image of them, they became veiled from the unity of God.

Veiling the unity of God is a mark, in standard Islamic theology, of the unbeliever and idolatrist, the *kuffur* (sing. *kafir*). For Ibn ‘Arabi, however, it was another expression of the unity of God (*ittihad*). Within the Islamic tradition, Ibn ‘Arabi’s position provoked a polemical debate. Ibn ‘Arabi’s main opponent was Taqi al-Din Ahmed Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) (Knysh 1999: 87ff). The lasting influence of Ibn Taymiyya’s thought on current fundamentalist streams within Northeast African Islam indicates that the controversy is far from over (Abdel Salam and de Waal 2004: 35f).

My argument here is in favour of a historical and comparative approach towards the study of the Oromo idea of *ayyaana*. What raises particular questions with regard to the Oromo is not so much the closeness to the Sufi terminology. It is rather the conceptual view that Lambert Bartels has described for the uses of *ayyaana* in western Oromia. According to Bartels, it is regarded as “Waq’a’s creative capacity”. This is very close to Ibn ‘Arabi’s “creative possibilities”. Indeed, in what is considered to be Oromo monotheism, the notion of *Waaqa Tokkicha* (“God is One”), regardless of the different venerated objects and names (*abdari*, *awuliya* [oglya, uliya], *atete*, *boranticha*, etc ), is very close to Ibn ‘Arabi’s idea of *ittihad*. However, Ibn ‘Arabi stands for a legacy based on written texts and books, while religious concepts among the Oromo are based on an oral legacy. There are few empirical clues for a direct linkage between the written and the oral discourses. The assumed linkage remains a creative speculation.

### **The *Äūliye-Ayan* Complex in Kazak Religion**

The Kazak are a Muslim people of linguistic Turkic and historical nomadic background who live in Central Asia. During the nineteenth century they were incorporated into the Tsarist Russian empire. In 1936, the Kazak Socialist Soviet Republic was formed within the Soviet Empire. Kazakstan has been an independent republic since 1991. The Kazak example raises some questions on how to deal with linkages between a literate Sufi Islam and its oral transmission far from centers of literate knowledge, under conditions of weak historical evidence.

Islam among the nomadic Kazak, in contrast to that practised by the urban populations, has for a long time been considered as “popular”, heterodox, informal and non-literate. The popular combination of “Islamic elements” with household and clan cults of ancestors and shamanism gave rise to the specific notion of “Kazak religion” as part of a wider cluster of Central Asian religions (Krader 1966: 130-133) which embraced the whole Turko-Mongolic legacy of the region. It is only recently that some more formal Islamic elements within Kazak religion have been brought into systematic relation to local religious practices. Pilgrimages (*ziyarat*) to the

shrines of Islamic saints (*äüliye*), and personal revelations (*ayan*), that usually involve the appearance of ancestor-spirits in dreams, are central elements of this linkage. The *äüliye-ayan* complex in Kazak religion is marked by a symbiosis of ancestors and Islamic saints (Privratsky 2001: 186). Revelatory dreams are the central expression of *ayan*, and the link between local ancestral cults, shamanism and the shrines. Dreams, as bridges to God, function in a domestic setting, and they are even more powerful when experienced at a shrine, with the support of the *äüliye*. The *äüliye-ayan* complex forms a unified “semantic and affective field” of religious experience (Privratsky 2001: 181).

The shrines have guardians (*qojas*; Arab. *khawaja*), whose families often claim descent from Ali. But the devotees remember neither the Shia nor the wider Sufi background of the shrines. The *äüliye-ayan* complex embraces a Muslim funerary cycle, which is also central to the remembrance of the ancestors, the social honor of the *qojas*, and the theology of one God (Privratsky 200: 251). Although Privratsky does not mention the literate legacy of the *ayan* as developed in the thought of Ibn ‘Arabi, he argues that the formal esoteric and institutional expressions (for instance, the organization Sufi brotherhoods or *tariqa*) of Sufi spirituality had been lost (Privratsky 2001: 187). Revelation by dreams (*ayan*), which were understood in the same way by both Sufis and Kazaks, came to represent the core of religious experience. The relationship between formal Islam and Kazak religion is one of collective memory. Some elements were remembered, others not. A focused reading of Privratsky makes the Kazaks contact with powerful enemies, notably with Russian colonialism and with Stalinism, central to understanding why Islam became reduced to a nutshell of heterodox local practices (Privratsky 2001: 237ff).

## The Legacy of “Cushitic Religion”?

The most comprehensive attempt to develop and analyze Oromo religion as a contemporary religious system was made by Lambert Bartels (1982/83; 1983). The Sky God, *Waaqa*, has a number of names, such as *Aabaa* (the Most High), *Ulfin* (the Respected One), *Umo* (the Creator). He is *Waaqa Tokkicha* “the Unique One”

(1982/83: 132f). According to Bartels (1983: 14) *Waaqa* (sky/ God) is “both one and, at the same time, also many.” As the Supreme Being, *Waaqa* is the source of life and the creator of all things. For every natural phenomenon, every plant, every animal and every social entity, *Waaqa* has appointed a place in his cosmic order. *Waaqa*’s creative capacities are embodied in the specific characteristics of every single species. In the specific forms this creative capacity is called *ayyaana*. The *ayyaana* can be personalized, feared and invoked as a manifestation of the Supreme *Waaqa*. Rituals create an active link to the cosmic order. Father Bartels’ contextual approach towards religious concepts among the Oromo is an outstanding achievement.

Other perspectives on religion among the Oromo have brought stronger cultural-historical and diffusionist elements into the discussion. The study of “Cushitic religion” and its legacy is one perspective. The notion of “Cushitic religion” was used by I.M. Lewis (1984: 148ff) to provide a background against which Sufi Islam has developed among the Somali. According to Lewis, it was among the Oromo that the Cushitic religious legacy was retained. Essential to the Cushitic religion is a Sky God as a Supreme Being and Father of the Universe. The name is *Waaq/Waaqa* among the Somali or Oromo, whereas the central Cushitic Agaw used the name *Zar*. As an expression for “evil spirit-possession”, *zar/saar* has entered the vocabulary of religious expressions in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Some authors link this to the export of Cushitic (Lewis 1984: 151) or Oromo slaves (Natvig 1987) during the nineteenth century. Attached to the Sky God is a vague hierarchy of refractions, which comprise the natural phenomena in the far and near surroundings (the sun, moon, stars, winds, rainbow, rains, the hills, trees and waters) (Lewis 1984: 152)<sup>1</sup>.

Another author who has dealt with the Cushitic religious legacy is Tadesse Tamrat. He saw the general features of “kushitic pagan worship” as being a sky god, associated with a number of good and bad spirits, who populate the natural environment (mountains, trees, rivers, lakes, animals). The sycamore and the serpent, in particular, were objects of veneration (Tadesse Tamrat 1972: 234). Hereditary priestly families administrated local cults. Following Tamrat, Kaplan

(1984: 119) holds that the strength of such priests was their intermediary function between the spirits and the sky god to prevent bad influences on people's daily life.

Trimingham took a *different perspective*. For the "pre-Islamic sediment", he stressed the importance of communal prayers and ceremonies, which the Oromo call *wadaja*. It was through such rituals that the unity of corporate groups among the Oromo (households, extended families, lineages) found a *symbolic renewal* (Trimingham 1965: 256ff). An important aspect of the *wadaja* was the ceremonial offering of roasted grains and coffee beans, of honey wine and beer (Trimingham 1965: 262). Not only nature but also social collectives are associated with protective spirits that are called *ayana* (Trimingham 1965: 261).

The Viennese anthropologist Father Wilhelm Schmidt summarized all the known ethnographic material on traditional religious behavior among the Oromo in 1937. For Schmidt, the belief in *Waaqa* was an example of "early monotheism", of the original unspoiled attitude of people to God, which Schmidt was also seeking and identifying elsewhere. He denied any Islamic influence on the belief system (Schmidt 1937: 136). The issue of early contacts with Christianity was kept open (Schmidt 1937: 123). Schmidt's interest was to preserve traditional forms as a support for Catholic missionary activities (Schmidt 1937: 152).

An outspoken critic of the idea of "early monotheism" with regard to the Oromo was Haberland. For him, Oromo monotheism developed under the influence of the mythological complex of the Middle East. Haberland strongly favored the idea of an early Islamic influence on Oromo religious and social belief. Legal terms like *seralhera* (given law), *aadaa* (traditional law), *lubbulnafsi* as terms for "soul", *oglia* for "saint", were seen as Islamic loans (Haberland 1963: 567f). But Haberland also speculated about an older religious past. He assumed a belief in an original male/female duality, *wakaf lafa*, the pair of heaven and earth (Haberland 1963: 561). The east, as the land of the rising sun, had a high symbolic meaning (Haberland 1963: 592). Mohammed Hassen (1983: 71) has argued, that the names of the

dominant status groups *borana* and *barentu* (*baretuma*) derived from *bor/bar* can be seen as synonyms of sunrise/sunset, with the addition of the suffixes *-ana/-antu*, which mark the male and a female relation of proximity to the “sunrise”, as the original act of creation<sup>2</sup>. This gives us a clue that the dominant social class among the Oromo once used a gendered religious distinction as a symbolic marker and considered itself as being closer to God than others. This does not, however, solve the riddle of cultural diffusion and nostrification of ideas. *Al-bāri*, the Creator, is one of the hundred names of Allah (Cowan 1976: 49), and Goldziher (1876: 385) had already mentioned *bôrê*, the Creator, as a term used by Jewish thinkers in Babylonian exile. Dealing with Oromo religion means being caught up in a mytho-poetical past that is shared with the Peoples of the Book.

### Conflict within Islam

For the earlier historical geography of medieval Islam in what is now southern Ethiopia we have a number of reliable data (Braukämper 2002). We have some data for the intellectual and social history of early Islamization. Braukämper (2002: 2-105) locates a first layer of Islamization from the thirteenth century onwards. He mentions briefly the Sufi tradition for Harar (2002: 109), and for the shrines of Nur Husayn and Sof ‘Umar in Bale (Braukämper 2002: 156). Traces of this early coming of Islam were remembered in genealogies. *Fandano* religion among the Hadiyya appears as another survival of this past (Braukämper 2002: 174-176). The belief in *ayyaana* is present in *Fandano*. Based on the description of *Fandano* by Peter (1998), the Hadiyya *ayyaana* is strongly related to protective spirits of human beings and collectivities. The *ayyaana* appears as a necessary precondition for having a social *persona* within the realm of Hadiyya tradition (Peter 1998: 109f). Shamanistic elements among the Hadiyya relate to the memory of institutional Sufism (Peter 1998: 206f).

A particular contribution of Islamic thought and practice to conflict studies is *takfir*, the declaration and making of unbelievers (*kafir*) within the Islamic community, who then become a legitimate target for violent

intellectual and physical assault. The late medieval controversy between the followers of Ibn 'Arabi and of Ibn Taymiyya was strongly associated with the practice of *takfir*. The following arguments about a relationship between the practice of *takfir* and the emergence of (proto-) Oromo religion should be read as a proposal for further multi-disciplinary and multilingual inquiries. One argument concerns a structural type of conflict within Islam. A second argument is Islamic frontier policy with regard to stateless societies.

In the context of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Ibn Taymiyya's polemic against the *ittihadiyya* was part of the struggle against "pagan Mongol (*tatar*) beliefs" (Knysh 1999: 97). Within Islamic history, a critical date is 1258, the year of the occupation of Baghdad by the Mongols. At the religious-legal level, the medieval polemics linked to the *a'yan thabita* and *ittihad* concerned different views on what could still be considered as proper Islam and what as pagan belief (*kufir*). On the political level of the thirteenth century, it concerned the acceptance of Central Asian Turk-Mongolic religious practices (ancestor cults, shamanism) into the Islamic commonwealth. Where Turco-Mongolic mercenaries and slave-soldiers, like the *mameluk* of Egypt, dominated Islamic states, the thought of Ibn 'Arabi found a stronger acceptance (Knysh 1999: 51). For the Horn of Africa, the Yemen provided a linkage with the followers of Ibn 'Arabi. Their repository was the Rasulid kingdom of medieval Yemen. Here Turkoman mercenaries were linked with *Habashi* slave-soldiers (Knysh 1999: 230). Shaykh Isma'il al-Jabarti of Zabid could have been a link between Ibn 'Arabi's legacy in Yemen and the legendary coming of the Islamic saints to Harar (Knysh 1999: 241; Wagner 1978: 36).

According to Knysh (2001: 252ff), the Sufi followers of Ibn 'Arabi in the Rasulid kingdom of Yemen had two main institutional opponents, the scholars (*'alim*, pl. *'ulama*) and the Muslim jurists (*faqih*, pl. *fuqaha*), who were the strongholds of Sunni orthodoxy. In the long run, the opponents were successful. But both types of collective agency entered the Islamic setting of the interior of the Horn of Africa in the early sixteenth century (Pouwels 1987: 40ff). They gained an initial prominence under Imam Ahmed Granj (1529-1543) and the introduction of the *shari'a*, the



formal Islamic law. On a structural level, this contributed to a competition between heterodox and orthodox Islamic institutions and practices.

### ***Awama and Hamaj at the Frontiers of Islam***

Braukämper (2002: 154) describes the ethnogenesis of the Arsi-Oromo since the sixteenth century as a process of stratification and socio-religious diffusion:

From the very beginning of their ethnogenesis, a dualism existed among the population: the majority were descendants of the autochthonous Muslims and the leading minority were representatives of a Cushitic folk religion inseparably connected with the *gada* order, an age-grade system, as their central socio-religious institution. Oral reports state that the ‘pagans’ were called *Awāma*, a term still common among the Guḡḡi- and Borāna-Oromo, whereas those who preserved the Islamic tradition were labelled either *Islāma* or *Sagidda*.”

For Braukämper (2002: 160), the *awāma* appear as the “partisans of traditional folk religion” The Oromo dictionary of the *Language Academia of the Peoples of Ethiopia* gives for *awaama*: “*nama amantiin isaa Kiristaana yookin Islama hinta’in* [people whose religious belief is not Christianity or Islam]” (Akkaadaamii 1996: 28). This definition, however, is not the use of the term as described for the vicinity of Harar. Here the *awama* were described as the illiterate country-folk within the Islamic sphere. Compared with literate Islam inside the city of Harar, they stuck to the local ‘*ada* (tradition) and saintly cults. Variations of this perspective can be gathered from ethnographic data of the 1950s and the 1960s (Brooks 1956: 72ff; Waldron 1974: 265-294). In fact, this use of the term *awama* comes close to the standard Arabic-Islamic use of *al-‘awamm* (sing. ‘*amm*) as a term for a common or uneducated person (Messick 1993: 259 and passim). People who are *al-‘awamm* are not pagans out of childish ignorance (*jahil*) or out of deliberate disinterest (*kufar*), who could know better. The term is part of an Islamic knowledge matrix that divides

the literate from the illiterate.

Having the right to live according to one's own '*ada* (Oromo *aadaa*) denotes a status, deriving from Islamic jurisprudence, under legitimate "customary law". A precondition for the use of the *aadaa*, and not the written laws of the Islamic *shari'a*, is the absence of the knowledge of written texts. The well-known story, that the Oromo once had a "holy book", until the cow swallowed it, thus receives functional value here. It appears as the oral version of the written precondition. The story, as it was narrated by the missionary Martial de Salviac (1901: 133), contain a number of elements which show a structure of translation between the written and the oral transmission:

The Whites have a book: God gave it to them. The Arabs have a book, the Abyssinians have a book: God gave it to them. But the Oromo have no book. Our fathers told us that Waqa, in the beginning, gave also a book to us. A cow swallowed it. Waqa got angry and did not want to give us a second book. Now we are compelled to look for the lost book in the intestines of the cows, what we do to see the future. That's why the Oromo, don't do anything bad but out of ignorance. If an Oromo dies, his soul goes up to Waqa, who will ask then: 'Who is there?'. The Aoulia answers 'It's an Oromo'. 'An Oromo', God replies, 'he is an ignorant. He only knows to read in the cows. Give him a place in paradise' (my translation).

The "aoulia", the saint, stands as a mediator between the Oromo and *Waaqa*. This is popular Sufi theology. Being "ignorant" is often used in Arabic texts in the Horn of Africa and the Sudan to describe people who live at the margins of a more formal Islamic society. Oromo religion, as a system of "ignorance", reveals much about a central conflict with Islamic orthodoxy. By turning the knowledge matrix upside down, not knowing how to read the book and being ignorant are a means of finding a place in paradise.

In an Islamic frontier situation such circumstantial ignorance had a practical value in its own right. It did not only offer a way to paradise. It also protected from war and slavery and structured peace with a mighty neighbor. In the *Futuh al-Habasha*, the sixteenth century Arabic chronicle of the Granj wars, we learn:

The Imam (i.e. Ahmed Granj) entered a country called Suf Gama or Bahr Gama. A wide place where the King of Habasha (i.e. Ahmed Granj) did not go to unless (in a state of) peace [bi-l--sulh]. They are ignorants [hamaj] without religion, and without a revealed book. They submitted to peace [sulh] according to which they paid head tax (for free non-Muslims) [al-jiziya]. (Chihab ed-din Ahmed 1896: 301)

The *hamaj* fulfill all criteria for enslavement, but yet, they are treated as free non-Muslims. Apart from the geographical names (Suf Gama, Bahr Gama; for a very brief discussion of their historical geography, see Braukämper 2002: 50) the text does not give any hint of who the “ignorants” (*hamaj*) may be. *Hamaj* is a disqualifying term also used to classify the population of other Islamic frontiers, the borderlands between the *dar al-Islam* (“land of Islam”) and the *dar al-harb* (“land of war”). Nevertheless, it described a protected status. Jedrej (2003) has recently taken up the issue in respect to the southern Funj in the Sudan, where the *hamaj* also appear. The core interest that allowed a flexible inclusion of “pagans” into the *dar al-Islam* was trade. Goods from southern Funj were exported up to North Africa. To get a legal title for protection of the goods, traders had to be sure that the goods had originated within the *dar al-Islam*:

(...) handling merchandise from pagan territories was outside the protection of Islamic law. One solution to this problem was to establish a Muslim jurisdiction and to enter a treaty (*‘ahd* or *sulh*) with such non-Muslim communities as necessary. Trading in products under *dar al-sulh* was acceptable” (Jedrej 2003: 713)

## “Driving People into Otherness” and Nostrification

From the early sixteenth century onwards, the general terms of trade that had linked parts of southern Ethiopia since the thirteenth century to the Islamic commonwealth had changed. With the *'ulama* and the *fuqaha*, the more formal aspects of Islamic knowledge came into play. While belief in the *ayyaana* of *Waq* could have expressed some kind of Islam for a disciple of Ibn 'Arabi, it certainly became *kufar* in the eyes of the *fuqaha* and the *'ulama*. What possibly happened then was a case of “driving people into otherness” (Elwert 1997: 76).

Obviously, I am not much concerned with the issue of a “Galla migration” in examining the events of the sixteenth century. There was conflict and war and people are still migrating for similar reasons. By looking at the possible roots of the concept of *ayyaana* in Oromo religion another structural process appears. The Sufi concept of *ayyaana* helped to link local cults into a wider setting. In a functional sense Sufi thought also helped to shape a *dar al-sulh* at the frontier of Islam with protected trade and the recognized right to live according to one's own *aadaa*. With the coming of another type of Islam during the sixteenth century, this *status quo* changed radically. What used to be *awama* or *hamaj* within the Islamic commonwealth became *kufar* outside of it. In a related sense, the “Galla” became in various folk-models synonymous with “strangers” and “unbelievers” (Zitelmann 1996: 110-111). A systemic break with Islam developed into Oromo religion. It is not so much that the belief system changed, but that the institutional form of the religion changed. Other people, those “close to God”, the *borana* and the *barentu*, organized the restructuring of society. The Oromo nostrification of the Sufi *ayyaana* went hand in hand with an amnesia of heterodox Islamic past.

Today it is difficult to imagine that Oromo religion might have at one time been derived from an Islamic heterodoxy. A symbolic part of the religious boundary might have been that one prays upright to God. Prostration, as in Islamic prayer, is for blowing wheat (Paulitschke 1896: 206, my translation):

Gur'atschi wala ntolu	The black cow skin does not fit so well
Gur'atschi Waq' sif'a na'u	May God of the black sky have mercy upon you
Sambata 'abon dubisa	I am speaking to the God of the Sabbath
Atete ayon dubita	I am speaking to mother Atete
Ga jeden midan bubisa	Bended down I am blowing the wheat
Ol jeden Waqin dubisu	Upright I am talking to God

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lewis (1984) draws mainly on Haberland's (1955) literary review of religious beliefs and practices.

<sup>2</sup> I cite from Mohammed Hassen's (1983) doctoral dissertation, where he refers to Angelo Mizzi's (1935: 70ff) view that *ana* and *antu* were the names of a divine brother and sister couple. This argument does not appear in the published version of his thesis (Hassen 1990).

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# RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM IN A GABRA RITUAL

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## Introduction

In his study of syncretism in an East African ritual, Parkin (1970: 218) observes that anthropologists have frequently noted the existence of cultural borrowing from outside a society in spheres like religion, but that people themselves rarely make such assertions<sup>1</sup>. He suggests that when the members of a society state emphatically that certain features have been taken from another culture in the past, this claim constitutes an ethnographic datum and has analytical value.

Such statements may also be significant in historical terms, as indicators of social and religious change, especially in cases where evidence for such synthesis is not immediately apparent to the outside observer. For, as Bartels (1983: 16) notes in the case of the Oromo, where forms of borrowing occurred as a result of regional culture contact, these items were “grafted and absorbed” into their way of life. On religious change, Bartels (1983: 15) comments that despite conversion to Islam and Christianity, “the traditional modes of experiencing the divine continued almost unaffected.”

This paper examines a claim of religious syncretism made in respect to a Gabra ritual and indicates its significance for understanding some of the processes of socio-economic and religious change that have taken place. It shows how such forms of borrowing are overlaid with local meanings, following the pattern of indigenization or Oromoization noted by Bartels, and continue, hence, to express the dominant values of the community. This study provides, therefore, a further instance of what Aguilar (this

volume) has termed the “paradigm of the God of the Oromo”, or the tendency of the Oromo to reinterpret universal conceptions of God according to their own cultural framework.

## The Gabra

The Gabra are made up of five sections, or phratries, the Algaanaa, Gaara, Galboo, Odhoola and Sharbana, which are each composed of a number of clans whose members have both Oromo and Somali origins (cf. Kassam in press)<sup>2</sup>. These phratries probably coalesced historically as a result of long-term processes of environmental and economic change to form a unified group under the political jurisdiction of the territorially adjacent Boorana, to whom they were militarily allied until the beginning of the twentieth century. The relationship of mutual dependence that pertained at different levels between the two groups was expressed in the kinship idiom of first-born son and last-born son (cf. Megerssa 1993). The Gabra speak the Boorana dialect of Oromo and share a number of cultural features, including forms of social organization, strategies of natural resource management and core values. In the past, the Gabra had a mixed herding economy of cattle, camel and small stock, but as a result of the ecological disasters of the late nineteenth century, they became increasingly reliant on their camels (Robinson 1985). The predominantly camel economy of the Gabra is the main distinguishing feature between themselves and the Boorana, who are mainly cattle pastoralists<sup>3</sup>. This specialization brought the Gabra into contact with other camel-keeping peoples in the lowlands of southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya, like the Garre, Rendille and Somali, leading to movements of individuals and families back and forth between the groups. This affinity based on camels is expressed symbolically in terms of the nomadic house-styles of these groups. Thus, in opposition to the Boorana, who live in semi-permanent grass huts, the Gabra see themselves as belonging to the mobile “peoples of the mat” (*warra dassee*). Although more research needs to be

carried out on this subject, the camel may also have acted as a carrier of religious values linked to Islam. As a result of these contacts, the Gabra have adopted selective aspects of Islam. These religious influences are mainly evident in the ritual sphere.

## The Gabra Ritual System

The Gabra ritual system is made up of a series of rites that form part of their solar and lunar calendars and of their eight-year social and historical cycles. They perform rituals annually for peace and plenty based on both these calendars, as well as cyclically, to mark the social transitions from one status to another (cf. Tablino 1999: 45-59; 65-89). The annual rites demarcate the passage of time through the cycle, each year of which is named according to the days of the week. Thus, 2005 is a Wednesday (*arba*) year and like the day, is generally unpropitious. This system of naming years is used in recording history (Tablino 1999:175-212). The octennial rites of passage of the generation-sets, which may be delayed for two or more cycles, also involve making a pilgrimage to the sacred sites of each phratry. This paper focuses on the ritual of *iliyaada*, which is performed annually as part of the lunar calendar. Like most Gabra rituals, it is based on a blood sacrifice (*sooriyoo*).

### *Ritual of the Sacrifice of the Sacred Ewe (Sooriyoo Iliyaada)*

Unlike other Gabra rituals, which are performed collectively by the communities and their leaders, the *sooriyoo iliyaada* is held solely by each of the politico-ritual assemblies (*yaa*) of the five phratries. It is, therefore, known as a *sooriyoo karso yaa'a*, or the sacrifice of an ewe that has not lambed. The ritual is celebrated in the inauspicious month of *raggara qaraa* by all five phratries, with minor variations.

Cynthia Salvadori, a cultural historian, and I attended the ritual performed by the assembly of the Odhoola phratry at the invitation of Alex Guyyo Sake, a catechist based at the Catholic diocese of Marsabit on Tuesday 2 June 1998<sup>4</sup>. The assembly, which makes an annual ritual circuit through the Odhoola territory, was encamped at Tulluu Warabeessaa, near the township of Bubissa on the Marsabit-Moyale road. At this time, it was composed of fifty-one households, in which the houses, unlike normal semi-circular Gabra nomadic villages, formed a straight line.

## **Structure of the Ritual**

The ritual was composed of the following sequences some of which figure in other rituals. It contained symbols and actions common to other rituals and employed a number of media: words (prayers, blessings and invocations), song, dance and ritual objects.

### **Preparation of the ritual objects**

The wives of the religious elders (*d'abbeela*) smoked the ritual sticks (*ullee mat't'aarii*) of their husbands over the hearth in which incense was burnt and perfumed their clothing. They also rubbed butter onto their chaplets (*malmala*), faces and hair to make them shine. Women belonging to the "original" camel clans wear this type of headdress as an indication of their married status. Incense and butter are used to purify and beautify people and things.

### **Assembling in the ritual enclosure**

The elders began to gather at the ritual thorn-bush enclosure (*naabo*), carrying their sticks and wooden stools. They placed their sticks horizontally into the wall of the enclosure, set

down their stools, and began singing the cycle of ritual songs (*dikira*) and dancing, imitating their camels.

### **Ceremony of blessing the “sheep of the times” (*hoola baraa*)**

In the meantime, the wives of the elders ritually blessed an ewe at the thresholds of their houses by pouring milk over its head and running their marriage sticks along its back. This action is known as (*h*)*arriiradda*, the blessing of the animal with a mixture of milk and water and by stroking its back. The ewe chosen is a progeny of that which was given to the women by their families on their wedding day. This libation ceremony is normally performed three times a week, on Fridays (the day associated with the religious elders), Sundays (the day associated with camels) and on the day associated with the current year. Milk is also poured on both sides of the entrance to the house to ward off ill fortune, while the following prayer is uttered, “May God help us to cope with the difficulties of the year/times” (*Waaqa baara nuu baasa*).

### **Lighting of the ritual fire**

The elder who was the keeper of the sacred fire sticks rekindled a small fire that is kept constantly smouldering in the ritual enclosure. The assembled elders prayed.

### **Sharing of milk and tobacco**

The women arrived holding their ritual sticks (*ullee holaa*), each carrying an infant child on her back. They brought with them a branch of *shiisha* (*Baleria acanthoides*) (a browsing plant associated with camels), a container of camel milk (*gorfa*), and a horn of tobacco. This ritual is the only time of the year that the women are allowed to enter the enclosure. They handed the milk to their husbands and stood outside, whilst the men drank from the containers and then placed them behind the line of stools. The

elders prayed again, facing eastwards. They then shared some chewing tobacco. These acts of commensality created a ritual bond between the participants. The men then invited the women back into the enclosure for the dancing.

### **Dance performance**

The men and women danced together joyously in the enclosure, to the accompaniment of the *dikira* songs. Exceptionally, any Gabra visitors present were also invited to join in. After the dancing, the women withdrew and stood outside the enclosure.

### **Sacrifice of the sheep**

A pair of sheep, representing the right hand and left hand sub-sections of the phratry, which had been tied to each end of the enclosure, were led in and held on each side of the fire by two of the elders, seated on their stools. All the elders and their male children poured milk from the lids of the containers over the sheep. The elders, carrying their ritual sticks, circumambulated the sheep. They then stood facing the sheep, sang more *dikira* songs, and prayed. The two sheep and the two men were blessed with water and the invocation “sustain us” (*soorii*) was uttered. The men and boys blessed the sheep in the manner of *arriiraada* described above. The two men who had donated the sheep slaughtered them. Young boys dipped handfuls of grass into the blood and raced off to smear it onto the throats and humps of certain male camels. The celebrants drank some milk from the containers, first the men and boys, then the women and girls. The elders then prayed again.

### **Reading of the entrails**

The entrails of the two animals were “read” by the elders in the enclosure. The carcasses were skinned and the meat cut up and

distributed to each family, according to certain rules. This marked the end of the first part of the ritual. The camels were now taken out to graze. The elders retired to the shade of a nearby tree to resume their discussion of phratry affairs.

### **Preparation and tying of the thongs**

In the late afternoon, the elders reassembled in the ritual enclosure. They placed their sticks back into the fence, aligned the milk containers along the inner wall and sat down on their stools, facing eastwards. Each elder was given some of the hide from the carcasses and the group received two containers of the cooked meat to share between them. They blessed the food. They then retired to the shade of the houses and began to cut strips from the pieces of hide and to stretch and twirl some of them, making them into narrow thongs (*meeddicha*), which are emblems of the sacrifice performed. When the thongs were ready, the elders went back into the enclosure and distributed them between themselves. They prayed together for the last time. The elders tied one thong to their ritual sticks, which were already laden with those from past sacrifices, and took the rest home. The remaining thongs would be tied to some of the objects related to marriage and the necks of certain camels, including the one that had provided milk for the ritual. Shorter strips were given to their wives, who tied them to their dresses. This concluded the ritual and the elders returned to their houses, carrying their sticks and stools.

The ritual contains both traditional and syncretistic features that form different sedimented layers and degrees of embedment. The ritual can, therefore, be “read” as a text, which has different hermeneutical levels of meaning, two of which are proposed here<sup>5</sup>.

### **A “Traditional” Interpretation of the *Iliyaada* Ritual**

The “traditional” elements in the ritual derive from the Eastern-Cushitic stratum of religious beliefs and practices that



were once common to both the Oromo and Somali speaking groups from whom the Gabra mainly originated. These elements, which are the most stable and persistent ones, can be said to represent the “dominant” level of meaning of the ritual.

This traditional belief system can be described as a two-tier one, composed of a monotheistic High God (*Waaqa*) and of the multiple emanations (*ayyaana*) of the Deity. The *ayyaana* are an embodiment of the divine power that is manifested in all living creatures and determines their earthly destiny. Philosophically, the concept represents the idea of causality (cf. Megerssa, this volume). This religious system operates on the principle of the balanced opposition of all things, which gives rise to the separation of secular (based on the *Gada* institution) and religious power (based on the *Qaalluu* institution). Secular officials oversee the rule of law (*seera*), whilst religious elders are charged with maintaining the ideal of peace (*nagaa*) in society. Religious practice is based on a cycle of rituals performed at sacred sites. Prayer and ritual sacrifice represent the most important means through which the adherents communicate with *Waaqa*. Fertility is a major theme in these rituals. There is an important prophetic tradition (cf. Bassi and Tache, this volume). Traditionally, the religion permeated all aspects of life and regulated the social relations of production. It served, hence, as a tool for the “explanation, prediction and control of space-time events” (Horton 1971: 94; 96-101)<sup>6</sup>.

All traditional rituals relate to the concept of *ayyaana*, hence choosing the “right” day for their performance is of paramount concern, as it is thought to affect their outcome mystically. The *iliyaada* ritual is performed by all the Gabra assemblies on the sixth day following the sighting of the new moon, or in its waxing phase during the first of the two inauspicious months of *raggara*. In Oromo numerology, the number six is linked to *Waaqa*, or to the invisible presence of the Supreme Deity in people’s lives (Megerssa 1993: 118). The new moon is linked to rebirth, renewal, and regeneration. Rituals

performed in this waxing phase contribute to the state of prosperity, fertility and well being (collectively termed *finna*) of the celebrants. The two months of *raggara* are considered to be highly unpropitious ones for most activities, when people should not undertake journeys and in the past, hunt for cultural purposes, participate in raids, or wage war. It is thought that if any misfortune were to occur during this time, it would repeat itself (a concept known as *daccii*). Gabra should not make any stock transactions until the ritual is performed, as it is thought that the sale or exchange of the animals would have a negative impact on the herd. The performance of the ritual is said to “clear the way”; it deflects or turns away some of the dangers associated with the two months, it “makes things cool” and “makes things smooth” by re-establishing a state of normality<sup>7</sup>.

In terms of the classification established by Durkheim (1995: 392), the *iliyaada* can, therefore, be categorised as a “piacular” rite, or one that is performed to ward off misfortune. This involves making an animal sacrifice. Sacrifices constitute the most dramatic feature of Gabra and Boorana rituals. For the latter, the institution originates in the myth of Wayyuu Banoo, which has been described in detail elsewhere (Kassam 2000). Briefly, according to this myth, Wayyuu Banoo, the ancestor of the Waata Oromo hunter-gatherers, lost his entire herd, save one ram, in a contest of wealth with a stranger. Unbeknown to him, the visitor was none other than *Waaqa*. When Wayyuu Banoo realized his mistake, he asked *Waaqa* to help him out of his predicament. *Waaqa* instructed him to sacrifice the last remaining ram. Wayyuu Banoo did so and through the gift of hunting was accorded the means with which to provide for his family. This event established the covenant between man and *Waaqa* and serves as the prototype of all ritual sacrifices.

In Gabra and Boorana, different types of livestock are sacrificed, the choice of which depends on the ultimate aim of the ritual. As the ritual is performed to bring about peace (*nagaa*) in the community, a female sheep is sacrificed. In fact, in the ritual

language of the religious elders, the term *iliyaada* designates the sheep (*karso*) itself<sup>8</sup>. Such sacrifices follow what Evans-Pritchard (1956: 208) has called a “canonical” form.

In Gabra, as evidenced by the *iliyaada*, this pattern consisted of the collective *dedication* of the victims, in which all the male participants participated through blessings and libations of milk. Two chosen men made the *formal presentation* of the animals at the fire altar. The religious elders uttered the *invocation* by praying (*eebaa*) and singing (*dikira*). All the male participants *consecrated* (*arriraada*) the animals, by rubbing milk and water onto their backs. This can be seen as the equivalent of the “laying of hands” in Old Testament sacrifices through which celebrants make the animal holy, identify with it, and offer the victim as a gift to the Deity. The two men who had donated the animals *immolated* (*qalma*) them. The *blood* of the animals, representing their life force, was *smear*ed (*dhiiga dhabanii*) on certain livestock to enhance the fertility of the herds. The sacrifice proper was followed by the *reading of the entrails* (*uusa lalaani*) for signs of the future, an important preoccupation of Gabra herdowners. The elders ate the cooked meat in an act of ritual *communion* (*wal nyaataanii*). Finally, the hide thongs (*meedicha hidhaani*) were tied to the wrist, sticks and stools of the elders, as a mark of their collective participation in the ritual and of their identification with the animals sacrificed.

According to a Gabra expert of the oral traditions, the five phratries perform this sacrificial ritual for the good of all, so that the blessings will radiate from the assemblies to the entire community<sup>9</sup>. More specifically, they perform this ceremony for good pasture and plentiful water (*marra bisaanii*), the fertility of male and female stock (*daala dalchuu*) and for the health and well being of the loading camels (*horo fayyille*). The ritual protects the religious elders (who are conceptualized as “female”), the women and children and keeps them from harm<sup>10</sup>. It therefore stresses female values. For this reason, the hide thongs from the sacrifices are given exceptionally to women, and tied on the sticks of the

elders, the stool of marriage (*barchuma fuudaa*), the milk container of crossing the threshold in marriage (*gorfa takarrii*) and the necks of the two most important camels in the herd linked to the wedding ritual. The placing of the thongs on all these individuals, animals and objects is a sign of the honor and of the high esteem in which they are held in society. It brings about the prosperity (*finna*) of all the Gabra.

All these material culture items (sticks, stools, milk pots) and substances (tobacco, incense, butter, blood and milk) used in the ritual, as well the lighting of the fire and the performance of a sacrifice, form part of a complex of symbols and actions that express the traditional values and way of life. At its most fundamental level, the ritual and all its elements reflect, therefore, the traditional ethos and world view of the Gabra. Yet deeply embedded in this ritual is another level of meaning, which was revealed by Alex Guyyo Sake through a dialogue following the performance of the ritual. This dialogue, which is reproduced below, serves as a means of exegesis, following the method innovated by Fr. Bartels.

### **An Islamic Interpretation of the *Iliyaada* Ritual**

After the ritual, on our walk back to Bubissa, the following exchange, at which Cynthia Salvadori was present, ensued between Alex Guyyo and myself<sup>11</sup>:

**AG:** So what do you scholars think this ritual means?

**AK:** I would have to think more carefully about it, but it seems to me to be a ritual that was performed for peace (*nagaa*) and fertility (*finna*), and for the unity and well being of all Gabra, as indicated by many participants.

**AG:** That is true; but it also has another meaning.

**AK:** So what do *you* think it means?

**AG:** Did you notice how the two men who sacrificed the sheep had tied their shawls in a knot around the back of their necks? This is the way that Islamic preachers wear them<sup>12</sup>. This ritual is different from other Gabra ones, when all the camels have to come back from *forra*

[satellite camps] This was not the case here. I have been told that the proper word for the ritual is *miliyada*; it is performed to celebrate the Prophet's birthday.

CS: So the *iliyaada* is the Gabra equivalent of *mawlid*?

AG: Yes. And as you know, the *dikira* make reference to the origins of the Gabra in Mecca and Medina.

AK: But there was no connection to an Islamic ritual.

AG: If you doubt my word, I will bring a Gabra elder to you when we get back to Marsabit and you can ask him.

True to his promise, on our return to Marsabit, Alex Guyyo introduced me to the Gabra elder, Gufu Ibrahe Guro, from the Galbo phratry, who confirmed his interpretation. He stated that another name of the ritual is *lahaada* and that it is celebrated in remembrance of both the birth and the death of the Prophet. Gufu Ibrahe explained that the Gabra came from Mecca and had been forced to renounce Islam, but that they still performed this ceremony in honor of the Prophet. He added that it was celebrated in the assemblies, because only they have ritual enclosures (*naaboo*), which are like mosques (*mashashid*).

Gufu Ibrahe cited the following esoteric poem, given here with literal translations, through which the oral historians remember these events<sup>13</sup>:

<i>Jaahaan yaasin isaa</i>	The sixth prayer for his death
<i>Jalata Rabiin isaa</i>	God's love for him
<i>Mooluud dalata naftiin isaa</i>	A place of prayer for the birth of his soul
<i>Furra jana harka isaa</i>	Heaven opens its hands
<i>Yaa Rab, nu fur fula isaa</i>	Oh God, open his place for us.

Gufu Ibrahe stated that nowadays, however, the ritual is held for peace, plenty and prosperity, as noted above. The second interpretation suggests that the *iliyaada* is also a commemorative ritual, celebrating two important events that are often interlinked in Islam, which has become syncretized with a traditional Gabra ritual.

## Camel Pastoralism and Islamic Elements in Gabra Culture

It is not known precisely when Gabra came into contact with Islam, but coastal, camel keeping, Somali agents probably played a key role in the diffusion of the religion to the southern Ethiopian/northern Kenya hinterland. It is thought that Islam reached the sea ports of Somalia between the ninth and tenth centuries AD as a result of trading links with Arabia and became syncretized with the Cushitic belief system of the local populace (Lewis 1984: 135). According to Lewis (1984: 132) the Sufi branch of Islam came to play an important role in the religion, due to the close parallels between the Somali social structure, based on the lineage principle, and the genealogies of the Sufi Orders, which claim direct descent from the Prophet<sup>14</sup>. The people known as the Somali today were also one of the first groups in the Horn of Africa to engage in camel pastoralism, which had a southern Arabian origin, dated to between 2500-1500 BC (Bulliet 1990). The spread of camel pastoralism to the interior at a much later date, probably as a result of increasing environmental desiccation in the region, went hand in hand with Islam<sup>15</sup>. Trading caravans and itinerant preachers also played a role in the propagation of the religion.

According to the myth of origin of the senior clan of the Algaana phratry, the founder was expelled from the Boorana for adopting camel pastoralism and violating the food taboos against the products of this animal (Kassam in press). It is possible, therefore, that this individual or group of individuals joined other Somali-speaking camel herding peoples in the lowlands, like the Garre and Rendille, and assimilated aspects of Sufi Islam, particularly those relating to the breeding and raising of camels. These religious elements form part of what Schlee (1989) has called the "camel complex", or cultural traits that are shared by all the Cushitic-speaking camel peoples. This bundle of traits also includes a similar calendrical system, cycle of rituals and forms of material culture. The processes of fission and fusion that

contributed to the formation of the Gabra may have continued well into the nineteenth century. Before this time, these loosely aggregated groups came to be reorganized territorially under the Boorana as the five phratries of the Gabra and to live according to the Boorana custom (*aadaa*) and law (*seera*). However, the group assumed a new identity based on camel values, in opposition to the Boorana one, based on cattle values. During the colonial period, those groups, like the Waso Boorana and Gabra of Isiolo District, who were isolated from their brethren to the north in Marsabit District due to grazing restrictions, gradually became more Somalized (Baxter 1966).

In Gabra, evidence of this Sufi Islamic influence can be seen in the attire of the religious elders and in the performance of the *dikira* cycle of songs. The elders wear a white turban (*duubo*) as an insignia of their status, which is made up of several layers of cloth, the folds of which contain gum resin and other ritual substances. A mixture of water and kaolin is used to stiffen the cloth. Gabra men prepare and don this turban in a rite (*jila galaanii*) marking the passage to religious elder hood performed at the pilgrimage sites (Tablino 1999). According to Odoola clan traditions, long ago, they received the visit of a Garre preacher from Somalia when they were encamped close to Torbii in northern Kenya, who introduced them to Islam (Kassam in press). He brought with him a copy of the Koran but said that, since they could not read, he would show them how to make a turban that was wrapped like the pages of a book, which contained holy substances, and which they could carry on their person instead. This is how Gabra religious elders came to wear the turban. Like the special leather sandals worn by the elders, this turban could be seen as forming part of the special attire (*khirqaa*) worn by Sufi initiates. Although different in shape and smaller in size, it can be compared to that worn by Sufi whirling dervishes.

The visiting preacher also built a nomadic “mosque” where the elders could pray, which is at the origin of the ritual enclosure (*naabo*). Every Friday, the elders gather in the enclosure to

perform *dikira*. The word derives from the Arabic term *dhikr* meaning remembrance of God through the invocation of the Divine name. In Sufism, these litanies form part of the contemplative practices through which the devotees enter into a mystical state (*samac*) through chanting and rhythmical movement (Netton 2000). In Gabra, *dikira* are both sung and danced to the same effect. There is a song dedicated to each day of the week and to particular animals or groups of people. They contain many archaic terms, which are said to belong to the ritual jargon of the religious elders. They are usually sung in a set order. Tablino (1999: 154-161) provides excellent examples. The *dikira Nuro*, which makes reference to Mecca and Medina is the one cited by some Gabra clans as an indication of their “Islamic” origins.

The Gabra state they were forced to give up Islam by the Boorana during the *Gada* period of Abbayyii Baabboo (c1667-74) and to revert to the traditional practices. However, it is unlikely that Islam was ever deeply rooted in the culture. Gabra adapted the ritual calendar as part of their strategies of camel management. Camels were the channels through which the new beliefs were selectively acquired and legitimized the new mode of production. They were vested in the religious elders, who, like their Boorana counterparts, are charged with maintaining the sacred order upon which the economic one is predicated.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to give two interpretations of the Gabra ritual of the *sooriyo iliyaada*, the sacrifice of the sacred ewe. The first interpretation suggests that the ritual follows a pattern common to other Gabra rites and employs actions and symbols that derive from the traditional Oromo religion. The ritual can be seen as having both instrumental and expressive functions. At the instrumental level, it is performed to avert ill fortune associated with two inauspicious months of the Gabra lunar calendar. Following Durkheim (1995: 406ff [1912]), it can, thus, be



characterized as a piacular rite through which the community re-establishes the cosmic order by performing a sacrifice for peace. At the expressive level, the ritual symbolically reaffirms the social order by emphasizing the ritual authority of the assembly and of the religious elders. In their capacity as intermediaries, the elders play a privileged role in mediating between the community and the supernatural world through the communicative act of sacrifice. In particular, it is a ritual that celebrates marriage and emphasizes the socio-cultural values associated with it. The ritual thus serves to perpetuate and reproduce the social order.

The second interpretation, according to which the ritual was originally performed to mark the birth and death of the Prophet Mohammed, was proposed by our Gabra host and was confirmed by an elder of another phratry. It is purported to be the Gabra version of the Islamic celebration of *mwalid*. In this sense, it would represent a commemorative ritual, which is celebrated to remember an authoritative traditional figure and by so doing to “keep faith with the past” (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 375). According to Schlee (1989: 134), such claims provide an Islamic veneer to traditional rituals and serve to remove the stigma of “paganism” attached to the origins of the group and hence to accord it the prestige associated with a “higher” world religion. This paper has suggested that such forms of religious syncretism may also contain an historical dimension, which can serve as indicators of socio-economic and religious change, in this case, in relation to the adoption of camel pastoralism. Finally, in terms of religious practice, the paper has illustrated how a Gabra ritual has reverted to the prototypical paradigm, identified in the work of Lambert Bartels, of the “God of the Oromo”.

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> In the study of comparative religion and in anthropology, the term “syncretism” generally refers to “the combination or blending of elements from different religious (or cultural) traditions” (Seymour-Smith 1986: 274). In this paper, it is seen as part of the dynamics of culture and does not imply any negative value judgement.

<sup>2</sup> The Gabra are divided into two territorial groups, Malbe and Miigo. Since the colonial period, the majority of the Gabra Malbe live on the Kenyan side of the border with Ethiopia. Together, they number some 50,000 (Tablino 1999:19).

<sup>3</sup> More recently, however, as a result of increasing environmental degradation and pauperization, the Boorana of southern Ethiopia have also begun to keep camels.

<sup>4</sup> Alex Guyyo Sake is the younger brother of Dooti Sake, who was then the keeper of the sacred firesticks. Cynthia Salvadori’s and my attendance had previously been arranged by Father Tablino of the Catholic Mission at Marsabit, in northern Kenya, in the context of the revision and translation of his book. I would like to express my deepest appreciation to both individuals and to the Odholaa elders for enabling me to attend this ritual. The description of the ritual made by Cynthia Salvadori on behalf of Fr. Tablino is based on our individual field notes and is contained in his book (Tablino 1999: 51-54).

<sup>5</sup> This manner of interpreting ritual as a “text” is borrowed from Geertz (1973), but also seeks to situate the levels in time.

<sup>6</sup> The idea of a two-tier system of belief in traditional African religions, the levels of which correspond to the macrocosmic and

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microcosmic forces, is one that has been proposed by Horton (1987).

<sup>7</sup> This interpretation of the *iliyaada* was given to me by Konchoro Mamo Elema, of the Galbo Massa priestly (*qaalluu*) clan. On the timing of the ritual, I consulted a Boorana elder, Dabassa Guyyoo, of the Hawaattuu clan, an expert in oral traditions (through the kind help of Feyisso Badassa). It is also he who linked the origin of sacrifice to the myth of Wayyuu Banoo. These meanings are given here provisionally and would need to be cross-checked with Gabra elders.

<sup>8</sup> According to Konchoro Mamo Elema.

<sup>9</sup> Gufu Ibrahe Guro, of the Galbo Odholale (Man Barille) clan, the same elder who provided the Islamic interpretation of the ritual (below).

<sup>10</sup> See Wood (1999).

<sup>11</sup> This dialogue is reconstructed from memory.

<sup>12</sup> Boorana also wear their clothes in a special way when performing some ritual sacrifices (Dabassa Guyyoo, personal communication). See also Triulzi and Bitima (this volume).

<sup>13</sup> I provide this poem without any attempt to interpret it, as an ethnographic datum, which may be of use to a future researcher. The number six may be significant for the choice of the day of the ritual.

<sup>14</sup> The most important Sufi Orders in Somalia are the Qadiriya, Ahmediya and Saalihiya (Lewis 1984).

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<sup>15</sup> Another factor is the “predatory” tendency of the Somali system of production to encroach historically on Boorana pasturelands left vacant seasonally for purposes of regeneration, which ultimately removes marginal land from cattle pastoralism (cf. Oba 1998).

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# **BUTTAA RITUALS OF THE SAYYOO OROMO**

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## **Introduction**

In the summer of 1972, Lambert Bartels collected a considerable amount of information and a variety of songs relating to the *buttaa* ceremony of the Sayyo Oromo living around the Sakko Lazarist Mission, near Dambii Dollo, in western Oromia. The term *buttaa* probably comes from the verb *buta* meaning “to seize, snatch, take by force, kidnap” (Gragg 1982: 72). The ceremony differs widely from area to area, and its terminology and component rites have puzzled more than one researcher<sup>1</sup>. In Sayyo country, it was considered to be the most important ritual of the *gada* set in power and marked the transition from one set to another. The ceremony consists of a series of interconnected rituals, which include the preliminary rites, the actual *buttaa* sacrifice, the *gooda garamaamsii* (“riding around the field) or meeting at the ceremonial grounds, the hand-over of power (*kalalaa guutu* “throwing away the garland”), and the reiteration of the ancient law of Makoo Bili ( *seera tummaa*).

What follows is an attempt to give a sample of the rich information gathered by Father Bartels on this old ritual, which, hopefully, will encourage more qualified ethnographers to investigate the rich field of Oromo beliefs and customs to which he so greatly contributed. The materials selected here derive from Bartels’ field notes, a massive source of typed records mostly in English, which include several hundred interviews with Oromo informants, compiled between 1972 and 1987. Using diplomatic channels, Bartels sent his tapes and notes for safekeeping to Italy and England in the early 1980s, after the Derg had forbidden him

to continue his field research and the “priest-anthropologist” – as he defined himself – was confined to his Gullelle mission house in Addis Ababa, where he continued his more theological work<sup>2</sup>.

The information on the *buttaa* rituals appears in Bartels field notes (pages 335-454), under the general title of ‘butta-day’ (cassettes number 121-128, August 1972-January 1973). His main informants were a group of Sakko elders, Ensermu Waquma, of half *boorana*, half *gabaro* descent, Shagerdi Bukko, whom Bartels describes as “a *gabaro* man of the Abbichu clan”, and Asafa Disasa, whose parents were both *borana*<sup>3</sup>. Although Christian converts, these informants were quite knowledgeable about Oromo traditions and provided Bartels with detailed descriptions of this ritual<sup>4</sup>. As the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik had prohibited the performance of this and other *Gada* rituals, the ceremony probably went underground together with other open manifestations of Oromo culture for a long period, but had still been carried on during the lifetime of the informants. As with all Bartels’ field notes, the typed materials are the author’s own transcription of his interviews, mostly in English and Oromiffa, with a splattering of Dutch and Italian. In this paper, we attempt to preserve the author’s style and faithful rendering of his interviews using his informants’ own words, with minimal analysis.

The *buttaa* rituals are described at length in Bartels’ field notes. The information is, however, dispersed over several interviews on different topics. Bartels’ informants give different and, at times, changing accounts of the rituals. It is not easy, therefore, to reconstruct the different phases of the ritual itself. The following is a tentative reconstruction based on different accounts and their presumed sequence as given by Bartels’ informants.

### **Approaching Buttaa Day: Preliminary Rituals**

According to Ensermu and his father Wakuma, when the time for *buttaa* approaches, “at the beginning of *sene* (June)”, “people who have to slaughter go to the house of the *Abba Bokkuu*... from there they go to the market. There they turn around [four times]” (FN 335)<sup>5</sup>. They sing the following invocation:

*Hoo guulee, abbaan seeraa dhufee*      Oh *guulaa*, the (new) law maker has  
come<sup>6</sup>

*Yaa habaaboo, waddeessa daraaree*      Oh flowers, the *waddeessa*  
has flowered<sup>7</sup>

*Haa daraaru yeroodhaa yeroodhaa!*      Let it flower, it is time, it is  
time!

The first bull to be sacrificed must be “of one colour”: it is referred to as *booqaa kallattii* (an animal with a blaze on its face)<sup>8</sup>. “After turning around the market, they return to the *Abba Bokkuu*’s house to eat the [meat of the] bull. They are many and everyone will get only a small piece of meat. They may be three to four hundred. Even young babies go there, since, otherwise, it would take too long a time for them before they are allowed to slaughter the *butta*. They have to be brought there, since it is their turn... After eating, each of them takes a small piece of the bull’s skin with him. They call it *lookoo*, and they put it in the *boroo* (back room) until the *butta*-day, the day of *goodaa garmaamsii* (literally, “riding around the field”)” (FN 335-36)

According to Bartels’ informants, the actual *buttaa* sacrifice was preceded by a series of other propitiatory sacrifices, which were intended to prepare the ground for the main ceremony. About a month before the *buttaa*, the participants, known as *miseensa*, contributed the money needed to buy the animals at the market. They first sacrificed a billy-goat (*korbeessa reettii*), which was blinded and slaughtered near a spring (*hora*) (FN 336)<sup>9</sup>. According to Shagerdi Buko, like all the animals for the *buttaa*, before it was immolated, the goat was first consecrated (*harriraada*) and participants dedicated it to *Waaqa* and to their forefathers through invocation and prayer. The animal “has to be killed by a man with a good name”... [The participants] do not eat the meat, but the man who killed it will start roasting the meat and then all of them will run away, and the killer has to creep between another man’s legs or the



legs of a cow to get rid [of] the *haluu* (evil-eye)” (FN 387). As they retreated, the men uttered the word *labbilalabu*<sup>10</sup>.

The second sacrifice was that of the *korma leencati*, the sacrifice of “a bull for the lion”. According to Ruda Kura, the grandfather of Gemetchu Megerssa, who was another of Bartels’ key informants, a bull was tied to a tree in the forest (*cakkaa*) and was left there. During the night, the bellowing of the bull would attract the lion. “If the lion doesn’t eat it, the *buttaa* will be good because the lion will not eat our cattle.... And if he eats it, they anoint the lion”<sup>11</sup>. According to Ensermu, however, the participants sacrificed the bull near a river in the forest. The *Abba Bokuu* accompanied the *miseensa* and the men burnt the flesh, then retreated quickly, uttering *labbilalabu* again. Early in the morning, of this or another day, the participants chased (or in another version, killed) the *ketala*, the long-tailed bird that sits on the backs of cows and eats from freshly plowed fields, so that “during the next eight years that bird will not destroy the *boqqollo* (maize)” (FN 348-49).

Shortly before the *buttaa* day, food and drink were prepared and the sacrificial assistants (*jaala*) were chosen. “On *buttaa*-day every killer has a *jaala*. He chooses him. And the *guulaa* chooses himself a *waa’ela* (bestman). Both of them must be *guula*. The killer has to give them some money and he has to tie a *sabbata* (cotton scarf) around their heads.” These two men have to bring with them milk (*anaan*), home made beer (*farsoo*), mead (*daadhii*) and barley grains (*qorii*) fried in butter. The celebrant had to ask these assistants “some three weeks before his *buttaa* so that they are able to prepare all these things, which are put in the back room to allow people to eat from them.” The participants “must enter their houses as houses of *guutummaa* (plenty): all containers should be *guutuu* (filled to the brim).”

The assistants came to the house of the celebrant the night before the *buttaa*-day, and helped him to construct a new fence in front of the house. They put cow dung into the fence<sup>12</sup>. “That evening his *miinjee*’s sister, his *waarsaa*, his real sister, and his *adada* will come and, before entering the house, they put their gifts (*anaan*, *qorii*, *buna qalaa*) on top of the cow dung<sup>13</sup>. They put them there when they arrived at the house. After this, the *buttaa*-man brings a female calf, a *goromsa*. They put... their gifts

on its back, one after the other, but first the *buna qalaa* [fried coffee beans]. This is called *fe'umsa*, its load." After that, they put the gifts back onto the cow dung. It is only after this that they were allowed into the house. Then the calf was led back to the cattle precinct again (FN 360).

Before the *buttaa* day, the *guula* "himself, or his mother, will put butter on his hair." After this, "he will not enter his house anymore. If somebody meets him, this person must not cross the road in front of him, nor pass by, but he has to take grass and, going straight to him, he must put the grass on his knees, saying *hoofkali!* (be blessed!)." If somebody crosses his path, "the *buttaa*-man will curse him, *Muu!* he will say, *kallattiin kee haa jallatu* ('May God turn you away'). Even children should not do so... even *jaarsolii* (elders) will say so to him, since he has butter and blood and peace..." (FN 336)

### ***Buttaa* Day**

On *buttaa* day, according to Asafa Disasa, the bull's sacrificer sat on a stool together with his two assistants, the *mata qaboo* (the one who held the head of the animal during sacrifice) and the *dhiga kocoo* (the one who collected the sacrificial blood). The sacrificer sat between them, the *mata qaboo* at his right. He had to obtain a new ceremonial wand (*dhaabbata*) before sacrificing because "the turn of his father has come. He blesses with his new *dhaabbata*." (FN 341). The bull was anointed from mouth to tail while the following prayer was recited (FN 382):

<i>Ijaan waan gaari na agarsiisi</i>	Let my eyes see good things
<i>Gurraan wan nagaa na dhageessi</i>	Let my ears hear good things
<i>Gaafa dhiira na baasisi</i>	Let me have the horn of the brave
<i>Nyaata ofaan naa ga'i</i>	Bring food to my mouth
<i>Irree hamaa nattii qabi</i>	Keep away the enemy from me
<i>Hamaa na eeggatu, nattii qabi</i>	Protect me from harm
<i>Dhiigni morma ba'u, nuuf haa tolu</i>	Let the blood from the throat bring good things to us
<i>Moorri garaa ba'u, nuuf haa tolu</i>	Let the peritoneum bring good tidings to us

<i>Lubbu saba keetii dheeressi</i>	Give long life to your people
<i>Qalee horii, yaa Waaq naa toli</i>	I have slaughtered cattle, oh God be kind to me
<i>Gaama dhiiraa na baasisi</i>	Let the back of my neck be strong
<i>Waan Waaqayyoo kennanii</i>	What one gives to <i>Waaqa</i> one anoints
<i>ariirrachuu qalu</i>	before killing
<i>Wan qoonqof qalanii hin arirratani</i>	What one kills for eating one does not anoint
<i>Waan Waaqayyoof dhaaban</i>	What one gives to <i>Waaqa</i> as a promised gift
<i>Waan waggaa abbaa ofiitiif dhaban</i>	What one offers to the years of one's
<i>hin ariirratu!</i>	Father is to be anointed!
<i>Yaa ayyaana abbaa kootii hoolaan</i>	Oh spirit of my father I am offering
<i>sii dhaaba!</i>	you a gift!

The bull was then immolated. The man who sacrificed “has to wear his *shamma* on the left shoulder (so that) it doesn't cover his whole body. And he has to put *coqorsa* (tall grass) around his waist. His *harka mirgaa* (the right arm) must be naked.” (FN 343) After that, “they can throw down the bull. The *mata qaboo* will keep [hold] it's head and the *diga kochi* will collect the blood. When the killer is with his brothers, they will keep [hold] his arm while he is killing, or may keep [hold] the *eeboo*. He kills with the *eeboo*, not with a knife. The wood of the *eeboo* should be new and wet [i.e., not anointed]. It must be from the *ulaagaa* or *ulmaaya* tree”<sup>14</sup> (FN 361). The celebrant's forehead was smeared with the bull's blood, while the assistants blessed him in the following manner (FN 378)<sup>15</sup>:

<i>Waggaan abbaa keetii si haa baatu</i>	May the years of your father keep you in peace
<i>Adda sii haakennu</i>	May he give you strength
<i>Kallacha goddhu</i>	Be powerful
<i>Kan hin dhalin siif haa dhalu</i>	Let the barren cow give birth
<i>Kan dhale siif haa bulu</i>	Let the cows that gave birth live longer

<i>Kormi hari' ee siif haa dhalchu</i>	May your bull cover the cows
<i>Kan dide siif haa kajeelu</i>	May what is wrong be made good for you
<i>Kan maseene siif haa dhalu!</i>	May the sterile one give birth for you!

After the sacrifice, all participants put a small strip of the bull's skin (*meedhicca*) on their right hands and another on their heads "like a hat"<sup>16</sup>. All the participants were given these wristlets, "without difference between *boorana* and *gabaro*." After this, they prayed (FN 341):

<i>Ya Waaq, nagaadhan na bulchee</i>	Oh God, you helped us pass the night peacefully
<i>Nagaadhan nu oolchee</i>	You helped us pass the day peacefully
<i>Gitimaa warraan ga' ee</i>	He (God) brought the cattle to the kraal
<i>mata boraatiin ga' ee</i>	and the heads to the pillows (to sleep in peace)
<i>Hoqubaa fudhaddhaa!</i>	Praise be to the Lord!

After feasting, the celebrants returned home taking with them some of the bull's meat. The right foreleg (*harka mirgaa*) of the bull was taken by the sacrificer, the second brother took the left foreleg (*harka bitaa*). The father's sister received the meat to the left side of the spinal cord (*dirra*). The celebrant's sister and the sister of his marriage advisor were also given meat from the left side. The sacrificer put on the longest possible *meedhicca*, which was cut from the back foot right up to the neck. The two assistants (*jaala*) spent another night with him, but the women went home. The men sat in the *boroo*, eating and drinking. All food containers had to be kept full (*guutuu*). "They eat meat without pepper. They do not eat the *garaacha* (stomach), otherwise the country will be full of *buuqataa* (caterpillar) which causes itching... They also do not eat the meat from the bones, because people will become all skin and bones" (FN 361). On their return, the two *jaala* took home containers

filled to the brim. They went home with their people, dancing, and in their homes, all containers also had to be full. Before leaving, the *jaala* blessed the sacrificer with the following words<sup>17</sup> (FN 362):

<i>Hori! Hori!</i>	Multiply! Multiply!
<i>Kan horte haa guutu</i>	What you have in abundance
<i>kan horte kesa tai</i>	Let it live long in abundance
<i>Waggaa abbaa keetii siif haa kennu</i>	Let the Lord give you the years of your father
<i>Afurtama abbaa keetii siif haa kennu</i>	Let the Lord give you the forty (years) of your fathers
<i>Alaa mana guuti</i>	Let your house and its inhabitants be plenty
<i>gutuu keessa oolii buli!</i>	Live long in abundance!

### **The Ceremony at the *Caffee* Assembly Grounds (*Goodaa Garmaamssi*)**

After slaughtering the bull, the new *miseensa* went to the Gara Mao Mountain, the traditional place of worship and assembly of the Sayyoo, to perform the ceremony of “riding around the field”. As Ensermu explains, “all have to be mounted...[the *buttaa* celebrant] should not go on foot. If he has no horse, he has to borrow one. [The celebrants] should also have their whips (*alangaa*) and spears (*eeboo*) in their hands” and “... every *buttaa*-man is wearing the bull’s skin on his head and has blood on his forehead” (FN 358)<sup>18</sup>. When the men arrived at the meeting ground, barren women, who had hidden themselves in the *caffee*, approached the men before they dismounted, saying: *hoofkali*, “Be blessed!”. “The women have milk, *buna qalaa* and *qorii*. They give these things to the *buttaa*-man. After having drunk from the milk the man spits the milk on the woman. All women are naked.” The celebrant blessed the women, saying:

<i>Yaa waggaa abbaa keenya</i>	Oh years of our fathers
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*Waan iseen barbaaddee*  
*Dhala garaas kenniif*  
*Waggaan abbaa keenya*  
*Afurtamni abbaa keenya*  
*Siif haa kennu!*

Give her what she wishes  
 Let her womb give a child  
 Let the years of our fathers  
 The forty (years) of our fathers  
 Give you!

He then dipped the tip of his ceremonial wand (*dhaabbata*) into the woman's milk pot and smeared the milk on the inside of her thighs, saying (FN 358-59):

*Hori! Hori!*  
*Da'i da'i*  
*Garaan kee haa jiidhu*  
*Harmi kee haa jiidhu*  
*Aannannaasi*  
*Gudeenni kee ha jiidhu!*

Multiply! Multiply!  
 Give birth  
 Let your belly be wet (fertile)  
 Let your breast be wet (with milk)  
 Have plenty of milk  
 Let your thighs be wet (with your  
 child's urine)!

After eating the *buna qalaa* and the *qorii*, and drinking the milk, he put the containers back onto her lap, saying:

*Ilma itti baaddhu*  
*Intala itti baaddhu*  
*Garaan bade siif haa deebi' u!*

Carry a son on it  
 Carry a girl on it  
 May the womb (the child) you have  
 lost come back to you!

It was believed that the woman would be able to give birth after this blessing. The women went home singing and dancing. "When we dance after the *buttaa*-killing there is *arrabsuu*, 'insulting each other'" (FN 341). Whist the *miseensa* were turning around the *caffee*, the elders uttered the following type of ritual curses:

*Namni weedduu buttaa qaanofte*  
*Kormi kee haa qaana' u*

A man who is afraid to sing songs  
 May your bull be ashamed to cover  
 the cows

<i>Sanyiin ati facaafte</i>	What you have sown (the seed you scatter)
<i>Biqila haa qaana' u</i>	let it be afraid (ashamed) to grow (to sprout)
<i>Ilmi kee ija nama</i>	May your son be ashamed
<i>haa qaana' u!</i>	to look in other people's eyes!
<i>Ro' on ati raafte</i>	The gourd full of milk which you shake
<i>Dhadhaa ba' uu haa qaana' u</i>	May it be ashamed to produce milk
<i>Ari' ee saani kee dhaluu</i>	After being covered may your cow
<i>haa qaana' u!</i>	be ashamed to give birth!

“Although there is shame in these words, they will say so. Even young children are allowed to say bad words to their parents during *buttaa*”<sup>19</sup>.

In the meantime, all the *miseensa*, who had dismounted from their horses, formed four or five rows, one beside the other, and went around the *caffee* nine times. Some of them sang warriors' songs (*fokkoruu*). Only the *buttaa*-men went around the *caffee*. The other participants, including women and children, remained behind. After this, the *miseensa* “go home without looking back until the moment they enter their sleeping place (*diinqa*).” There they are welcomed and say: *Hofkaleera* (“I am blessed”), and the members of the household respond, *Hoofkali* (“may you be blessed”). After this, “eating and drinking follows. It is finished.” (FN 338).

### The Hand-Over Ceremony (*Kalalaa Guutu*)

The gada hand-over ceremony was also known as *kalalaa guutu* (literally “throwing away the *kalalaa* garland”<sup>20</sup>). According to Shagerdi Bokku, who relates the actual hand-over ceremony of the bokkuu or the sceptre of power and authority between the outgoing Melbaa (Horata) set and the incoming one of the Michille, the members of the first were sitting under the *odaa* tree when the second arrived<sup>21</sup>. The new Abbaa Bokkuu said to the retiring one: *na jalaa ka'i, kan kee dhumeera* (“rise up, make place for me”) and the old one responded:

maal yoon si jalaa gale, niitii deessettan galaa (“it doesn’t matter; I have a wife at home who has given birth”). Then the retiring *Abbaa Bokkuu* said:

<i>Ilma angafattan galaa</i>	I will go home to my eldest son
<i>Niitii guddaattan galaa</i>	I will go home to my first wife
<i>Sa’a dhalettan galaa</i>	I will go home to the cow that gave birth
<i>Nagaadhan oofkaleen galaa</i>	I will go home in peace
<i>Raawwachiisee galata Waaqa!</i>	Let [ <i>Waaqa</i> ] be praised for this!

He put the *bokkuu* on top of some *odaa* leaves and departed; then the new *abbaa bokkuu* took the place of the old one. He picked up the *bokkuu* with his bare hands, saying (FN 363):

<i>Mucha hin muru</i>	He will not cut udders
<i>Lafa hin qotu</i>	He will not dig (farm) the land
<i>Balballisaa hin cufamu</i>	The doors of his house will never be closed
<i>Ibiddisaa hin dhaamu</i>	The fire in his house will never be extinguished
<i>Afaansaa guyyaa hundumaa aannan cuuba!</i>	He will drink milk daily!

As he departs, the retiring *Abbaa Bokkuu* said:

<i>Dagisee daga baasee hin gala</i>	Up and down the hill, I go home
<i>Uluboo dababoo</i>	Oh victorious <i>luba</i>

The new one replied:

<i>Gadaan kootii. Maal na gooti?</i>	<i>Gadaa</i> is mine. What did [sic] he do to me?
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*Mataa hin qabdu. Gadaa hin qabdu.* You have no hair. You have no  
*gadaa.*  
*Maal farfatta? Waraabettii* What will you praise? You hyena  
*Gadaa gadii! Asii badii!* Out of *gadaa*! Go away from here!

As the members of the Melbaa set departed, they were allowed to look back, since they had already undergone the ceremony. They sang:

*Afurtamni abbaa keenyaa* Through the forty years of our  
 fathers  
*Nu hulluuqsisi* God made us pass  
*Waggaa abbaa keenyaa* The time of our fathers  
*Nu Hulluuqnee* We passed through  
*Hoqubaa jenna!* May the Lord be praised!

The Michillee now prayed on the spot where they had received the *bokkuu*:  
 (FN 365):

*Afurtama abbaa keenyaa fudhanne* We received the forty (years) of our  
 fathers  
*eeyyee fudhanne!* Yes, we have received!  
*Waggaa abbaa keenya nu gargaaraka?* Will the years of our fathers help  
 us?  
*eeyyee nu gargaaraka!* Yes, they will help!  
*Nu offkalchaa?* Will they help us to pass through?  
*Eeyyee nu ofkallchaa!* Yes, they will help us!  
*Seera kan guute hin guutamaka?* Will the man who fulfils this  
 law be complete?  
*Eeyyee hin guutamaka!* Yes he will be complete!  
*Kan hir'ise hin ciratakaa?* Will he not be like dead grass, he  
 who doesn't?  
*Eeyyee hin ciratakaa!* Yes he will be!

## The “Beating” of the Law (*Seeraa Tumaa*)

As each new *gada* set took power, the law of the Oromo had to be proclaimed anew, and any revisions made as deemed necessary. It was declared that: *Tumaan tumaa Makkoo Bili. Tumaan kun hin ciraamu, hin caalchisu malee, hin hir' isani'* (“The law is the law of Makkoo Bili. It cannot be changed, it can only be reiterated and strengthened by adjusting it”). After the new set had spent the night under the *odaa* tree, in the morning they prayed:

<i>Yaa Waaq nagaan nu bulchite</i>	Oh God, we have spent the night in peace
<i>Seerri kun hin jigu</i>	This law will not fall down
<i>Seerri kun hin dhangala'u</i>	This law will not be emptied
<i>Waaqayyo nu bulchite</i>	Oh God, may we pass the night
<i>Nagaan nu galchite</i>	May we come home in peace
<i>Galata argattakaa!</i>	Thanks and praise be to you!

As they gathered under the *odaa*, the *miseensa* are not allowed to carry their spears with them, but only their ceremonial staffs (*dhaabbata*), which had been dipped in milk (FN 368)<sup>22</sup>:

<i>Warri bokkuu waan biyya tolu [hojjettuu]</i>	People who carry the <i>bokkuu</i> [do ]what is good for the country.
<i>Kan qotu akka barakatu</i>	So that those who farm will harvest plenty (in abundance).
<i>Namni waan yeelloti(in) wal arrabsuun saa [hafuu].</i>	It is shameful for people to insult each other (Let insulting each other be abolished.
<i>Kormi hari' uu hin yeella' in</i>	Let not bulls be ashamed to serve/ copulate..
<i>Dhaltin dhaluu hin yeella' in.</i>	Let not cows be ashamed to give birth
<i>Midhaan daraaruu hin yeella' in.</i>	Let not crops be ashamed to flower.

They also reminded the new *Abbaa Bokkuu* that the law (*seera*) was made by the people but belonged to God. The *Abbaa Bokkuu* had no power over the

law but had to keep the *bokkuu*, the symbol of law-making, with him at all times<sup>23</sup>. Thus, they said to him:

<i>Ati bokkuu nuu baaddhu</i>	Carry the <i>bokkuu</i> for us
<i>Nuyi seera keenya hin tumanna</i>	We shall legislate our laws
<i>Nuyi seera bokkuu kanatti hin bulla.</i>	We shall abide by the laws of this <i>bokkuu</i> .
<i>Ati mana kee hin hojjetin</i>	Don't build your house
<i>Ati lafa hin madeessin</i>	Don't farm (make the soil bleed)
<i>Ati balbala kee hin cufin</i>	Don't lock the door of your house
<i>Ati ibidda kee hin dhaamsin.</i>	Don't put out your fire.

The *Abbaa Bokkuu* was also reminded of his ritual duties and obligations, which are refrained in couplets or songs such as the following ones (FN 368-69):

<i>Dhiiga hin buusu</i>	He doesn't shed blood
<i>Lafayyuu hin dhisu</i>	He doesn't touch the earth
<i>Dhiiga buusaa?</i>	How will he shed blood?
<i>Sibiila hin qabatu</i>	He doesn't carry iron (arms)
<i>Afaan aannan cuuba</i>	He dips his mouth in milk
<i>Dhaabba saa aannan cuub</i>	He dips his ceremonial staff in milk
<i>Barcuma irra taa'a</i>	He sits on a chair
<i>Eebba duwwaa kenna</i>	He only gives blessing
<i>Ganama afaan duwwaa ala hin ba'u</i>	In the morning he doesn't go with an empty mouth
<i>Utuma dhuguu baateyyuu</i>	Even if he doesn't drink (milk)
<i>Afaan saa aannan cuuba</i>	He dips his mouth in it
<i>Dhaabbata cuubetu</i>	After dipping his <i>dhaabbata</i>
<i>huraa, horamaa</i>	(He says) multiply and have property
<i>Waan isatti adeemu hundumaatti.</i>	to whoever comes to him.

*Kanuma hojiin saa.  
Bokkuun kan Waaqayyooti  
Inni kun karaa waraanaati.  
Warri bokkuu waan biyya tolu*

*Kan qotu akka barakatu*

*Dhaltiin akka dhalti.*

This is his duty.  
The *bokkuu* pertains to God  
War is incompatible with it.  
The people of *bokkuu* bring  
good to the country  
So that those who farm may  
harvest plenty  
and the cow may give birth  
again.

Then there was the “beating” of the law (*tumaa seeraa*). When the law was pronounced, it was done by two *abbaa alangaa* standing under an *odaa* tree facing east. Together, they reiterated the words of the law. The pronouncement of the law was preceded by the customary ceremonial call and response *koottu-dhufe* (“Come”-“I have come”) and by the following formulaic text:

<i>Waaqni kan roobaa haa ta' u/haa ta' u</i>	Let the sky bring water/let it bring
<i>Lafni kan margaa haa ta' u/haa ta' u</i>	Let the land grow grass/let it grow
<i>Barbaadaan dugda haa labukaa/haa labukaa</i>	Let he who is looking for something/let him find
<i>Boorun laga haa labukaa/haa labukaa</i>	Let the brown water fill the roaming river/let it fill
<i>Margi kan sa' a haa ta' u kaal/haa ta' u kaa</i>	Let grass be for the cattle/let it be
<i>Saani kan abbaa haa ta' u kaal/haa ta' u kaa</i>	Let the cattle be for its owner/let it be
<i>Waaqayyo gooftan koo dhukkubsate haa maaru/haa maaru</i>	Let God my master heal the sick /let Him heal
<i>Kan wallale haa beeku/haa beeku</i>	Let the ignorant be wise/let him be
<i>Kan beeku haa bulukaa/haa bulukaa</i>	Let he who knows live a long life/let him live
<i>Nagaan biyyaa haa ta' u kaal/haa ta' u kaa</i>	Let peace be in the country/

let it be

*Waliigaltee nuuf haa kennukaal/haa kennukaa* Let Him give us agreement  
*Waliigalee nuf haa tolukaal/haa tolukaa.* Let all things be good for us.

One of the *abbaa alangaa* then asked those present to repeat the verses, to which they responded *haa ta'u* (“may it be done”) He then added (FN 406-407):

<i>Waraansi waraanii biyyaal/haa ba'ukaa</i>	Let war and sickness be out of this country
<i>Nagaa fufaa nuuf haa ta'ukaal/haa t'au kaa</i>	Let peace follow for all of us.
<i>Waaqa nagaan nu bulchee</i>	God who made us pass the night in peace
<i>Dukkana keessaa iffatti</i>	From darkness to light
<i>Rakkina keessaa bal'inatti</i>	From poverty and disease into abundance
<i>Bulfatee yoonan nu goleen</i>	He kept us well up to this moment
<i>Hoqubaa jedhaakaa!</i>	Say glory to God!

He then shouted to the people: *Hammi taa'u kun hin hambifatukaa?* (“All of you sitting there, why don't you react?”). And the people answered: *Hoqubaa* (“Glory be to God”). He continued:

<i>Bulteen Waaqayyoo lamakaa</i>	What God has given is twice as much
<i>Ammas Waaq nagaan nu bulchee</i>	God has now made us pass the night in peace
<i>Biyya nagaa qabu nu feessise</i>	He made us settle in a peaceful country
<i>Kan qotamenuu biqilchee</i>	What we have farmed he made seedlings
<i>Nagaan nu bulchee nu oolfateen</i>	He made us pass the night and spend the day in peace
<i>Hoqubaa jedhaa!</i>	Say Glory (to Him)!

People repeated the word *Hoqubaa* three times. After which he went on:

<i>Inni nagaan nubulchee?</i>	Didn't He make us pass the night in peace?
<i>Ee! Ee! [Eeyyee!]</i>	Oh yes!
<i>Nagaadhaan nu oolchee?</i>	Didn't He make us spend the day in peace?
<i>Ee! Ee!</i>	Oh yes!
<i>Gitimaa warraan galee?</i>	Didn't He give our people all it needs?
<i>Ee! Ee!</i>	Oh yes!
<i>Mataa boratiin ga' ee?</i>	Didn't He lead the head to the pillow?
<i>Ee! Ee!</i>	Oh yes!
<i>Raama gabatiin ga' ee?</i>	Didn't He lead the food to the table?
<i>Ee! Ee!</i>	Oh yes!
<i>Kan tiksan dallaan ga' ee?</i>	Didn't He bring the pasture to the fence?
<i>Ee! Ee!</i>	Oh yes!
<i>Tiksiton abbaan ga' ee?</i>	Didn't He bring the shepherd to the sheep?
<i>Ee! Ee!</i>	Oh yes!
<i>Hoqubaa fuddhaakaa!</i>	Join me in giving glory to God!

Shagerdi adds that the law must be “beaten” in the land of the *boorana* and that despised castes of *tumtuu* (smiths, weavers) and *faaqii* (tanners) are not allowed to be present: “They must stay at some distance. The *tumtuu* blacksmiths make much noise, beating, and that would mean fighting for the country<sup>24</sup>. The *faqii* are scratching skins and that would mean itching for the country.” After these prayers the two *alangaa*, this time kneeling, recited the *safuu* prayer (FN 408)<sup>25</sup>. The observance of the law was to be ensured by the *alangaa*: *Seera dhaabuun alangaa biyyaa ti. Alangaan akka seeraa nama eega. Abban alangaa mure seera jedhee Abbaan alangaa alangaa malee, hin ijaajju* (“To make laws is the whip of the country. The whip will ensure that people

abide by the law. The *abbaa alangaa* have said ‘the law has been decided’. Respect the law for the law’s sake, not for the sake of the whip”)... Before the *abba alangaa* started speaking, the *abbaa bokuu* blessed them. “He himself doesn’t say anything about the law. ... The others have only to listen. In the end everyone said: *Tumaa Makoo Bili* (“the law of Makoo Bili has been forged”) (FN 408)<sup>26</sup>.

So ends this rich account of the *buttaa* of the past. Although these words of wisdom may appear out of fashion and may not reflect the current ethos and values, we believe they are important in shedding light on the traditional Oromo culture and the moral values of the past. Bartels papers are a rich mine of information and knowledge on the western Oromo, which are still waiting for further investigation.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cecchi (1886), Cerulli (1922; 1933) and Legesse (1973: 74-76) provide accounts of the ceremony. Huntingford (1955: 43-55) provides a summary of the historical evidence. As he indicates, like those of many *Gada* rituals of the past, these accounts are “based exclusively on texts and explanations, and not on actual observation” (Huntingford 1955: 44, fn. 58).

<sup>2</sup> The materials represent about 900 hours of taped interviews and the transcribed notes total some 1500 pages and fill five volumes. Henceforth, we refer to the field notes as FN.

<sup>3</sup> Background to these informants can be found in Bartels (1983: 43-49).

<sup>4</sup> Ensermu admits that he himself did not perform *buttaa*: “my turn did not come. But I know the ritual” (Bartels Field Notes: 335)

<sup>5</sup> During Ensermu’s time, the *Abba Bokkuu* was Galalooyee Makkoo.

<sup>6</sup> According to Bartels, *guula* is any “man who ended his ruling period eight years or more ago” (Bartels 1983: 372).

<sup>7</sup> *Waddeessa*= *Cordia Abyssinica*. All botanical identifications cited are taken from Heine (1988).

<sup>8</sup> The bull “shouldn’t have colours. But if only its face (*fuula*) is white, it will do.” The informant adds that “the white colour shouldn’t be on the cheeks or under the ears, but only in the front, forming a regular white face. For the rest, the colour can be whatever colour, but only one.”

<sup>9</sup> Gragg (1982: 288) defines *miseensa* as “one who has killed a buffalo or a lion”. Paul Baxter (personal communication) thinks the word is also used of a strong woven rope or string of fibre or leather, and is applied to men of the same *luuba*, to indicate that they are strongly bound together. Here, as in other Oromo groups, it refers to those of the *raba* grade, see note 16 below. There is some confusion as to whether the animal sacrificed was a male or a female one, but it is more likely that it would have been the former.

<sup>10</sup> According to Shagerdi Bukko, *labbilalabate* is the “blinding, slaughtering and roasting of the goat... People flee because of the evil thing (blinding the animal before killing it), which is in this deed” (Bartel Field Notes: 348).

<sup>11</sup> “The lion is the *borana* among the wild animals” (Bartels 1983: 345).

<sup>12</sup> This ritual, known as *doqqee busaa*, varies from area to area (cf. Huntingford 1955: 45-46).

<sup>13</sup> *Minje* is the groom’s advisor in married life; *warsaa*, is his sister-in-law; *adaada*, is his paternal aunt.

<sup>14</sup> *Ulmaya* = *Clausena anisata* Huntingford (1955: 46), citing Cerulli (1933), says the shaft of the spear is made of *gora* (*Toddalia asiatica*) wood.



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<sup>15</sup> “On *butta*-day, the smeared blood has to stay on his forehead. After four years, there is the shedding of blood due to circumcision (*dagna qabade*). Until this moment, the *miseensa* are called *raba*. Only after *muruu*, cutting, [do] they become *guula*. If someone cannot perform circumcision for any reason, he is called *girdimee* (incomplete, impure, that which is not full). He is not *guula* yet, he cannot be called for blessing, or cursing. *Akasi* (it is like that)” (FN 339). On circumcision, see Huntingford (1955: 40-41; 47), according to whom, “The rite is therefore not the entry to manhood, but signals the departure from the governmental grade.”

<sup>16</sup> The *meedicca* is taken from both forelegs and put on the sacrificer’s right wrist, “the same hand with which he killed” (FN 348).

<sup>17</sup> Shagerdi told Bartels that his *jaala* was a borana, named Bada, meaning “wide”. It was “a good name. From that day on, my *butta*-day, everything became wide for me.” (FN 362).

<sup>18</sup> Bartels explains that spears (*eeboo*) are “for slaughtering”, while whips (*alangaa*) are “for beating the law”. A stroke of the whip in the air traditionally accompanies each new law proclaimed (Bartels Field Notes: 335).

<sup>19</sup> Bartels provides more *arrabsuu* or ritual insults on pp. 407-408 of his field notes.

<sup>20</sup> *Kalalaa*=*Thunbergia alata* or *Impomea wightii*. It is not clear why the ceremony was known as that of the throwing away of the garland.

<sup>21</sup> The *bokkuu* is kept on a bed in the house of the *Abba Bokkuu* and is placed on something wet. “It must not go to another man’s house. The *Abba Bokkuu* has to take it along wherever there is a *buttaa* ritual. The *bokkuu* is made of *ejersa* [*Olea africana*] wood. It is like a cross, something holy. It comes from Makko Bili” (FN 363-364). On Makko Bili, the lawmaker of the Macca, see Triulzi (1990). *Odaa*=*Ficus sycomorus*.

<sup>22</sup> “Not everyone goes there [to the *odaa* tree]. We choose the men to go there” (FN 406).

<sup>23</sup> Ensermu describes the *Abba Bokkuu* as “a man with good name, still living with his first wife, and in whose family nobody died...He doesn’t weed, does not work with the hoe (*sokaa*), he is given an ox, *wayaa* (heavy cloth), a slave to work for him, a woman slave to work in his house...If he works, all people get wounds” (FN 339).

<sup>24</sup> According to Huntingford (1955: 51), *tumtuu* and *faaqii* are excluded from all *gadaa* ceremonies. See also Bartels (1983: 188).

<sup>25</sup> On *saffuu* as the mutual relationship between all creatures according to their place in the cosmic and social order, see Bartels (1983: 336-337) and Megerssa (this volume).

<sup>26</sup> The pronouncement of the law was to be followed by a hunting expedition, which replaces the raids made in former days” (Huntingford 1955: 53). On the connections between the *buttaa* and the ritual wars of the Oromo, see Cerulli (1922: 68), Legesse (1973: 74; 2000: 41-90), Hassen (1990: 12), Triulzi (1990: 320-21).

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## PILGRIMAGE TO THE *ABBAA MUUDAA*

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The *Abba Muudaa*, more popularly known as the *Qaalluu*, was the most important ritual figure in traditional Oromo religion and the focus of a pilgrimage. As the sources used in the writing of this paper indicate, there is a fair amount of literature on the *Qaalluu* institution and on the pilgrimages to honor the person of the *Abba Muudaa*/Supreme *Qaalluu*, but very little has been written on how these formed an integral part of the traditional Oromo religion. This paper attempts to establish this connection by emphasizing the importance of the *Abba Muudaa* in Oromo religious experience and practice and by exploring the deeper purposes of the famous pilgrimages.

As Lambert Bartels (1983) has shown, traditional Oromo religion is based on a Supreme Deity, creator and ruler of the universe, whom Oromo call *Waaqa Gurraachaa*. *Waaqa* is an old Cushitic name for “God” and *Gurraachaa* is the Oromo term for “black”. However, for Oromo black is more than simply a color: it represents the notions of purity, truth, originality and divine mystery (Megerssa 1993: 15-16, 289). The terms *Waaqa Gurraachaa* also have other meanings. Firstly, *Waaqa* stands for a God who is the one and the same for all, the creator of everything, source of all life, omnipresent, infinite, incomprehensible, who can do or undo anything. He is pure, intolerant of injustice, crime, sin and falsehood (Melbaa, 1999: 23; Rikitu 1998:99). Secondly, *gurraachaa* means “pure”, as in the expression *bisaan gurraachaa*, pure, clean water. Thirdly, it is also the word for “blue”, and designates the color of the sky, beyond which lies the heavenly abode of God. Like the Christian or Muslim God, *Waaqa* is all-knowing, the source of all life and the fountainhead of knowledge (Sumner 1995: 33, 313). The

Oromo believe *Waaqa* to be the Almighty Master and the inexhaustible benefactor of mankind who, who lacking nothing, need not refuse us anything (Sumner 1996: 106). *Waaqa* has existed from the beginning and is the creator of the universe and all living things in it (Rikitu 1998:97). As Sumner (1995:33) puts it:

Starting with water and rocks going through the vegetable and animal world to man, [*Waaqa*] has appointed to every being its own place in a cosmic order of which he is the guardian. Sin is a breaking of this cosmic order. [*Waaqa*'s] creative ordering activity manifests itself in all things. It manifests itself in the specific characteristics of man in general, of every species of plant and every species of animal. It is manifested also in the individual characteristics of every man, of each plant and each animal taken singly.

Bartels (1983: 357) argues that "In much of the Christian message, [the Oromo] recognized their own concept of *Waaqa*; their feelings of dependence on him, their idea about peace among people being a necessary condition of *Waaqa*'s blessing." Bartels (1989: 360) was also accurate when he pointed out that the Oromo do not have impressive creation myths, such as those of the Jews and many other peoples (cf. Megerssa 1993: 97-98). He observes that for the Oromo creation begins with the element of water (Bartels 1983: 355). As Sumner (1995: 352) explains:

Water, as a material reality existing in nature, is one of the least used images in Ethiopian written literature, but in [Oromo] oral literature, water creating seasons, floods, springs, lakes, rivers, brooks, is a characteristic feature of the green and fertile regions of Ethiopia where most of the Oromo live.

The body of water that is especially connected with the origins of the Oromo is that of *Madda Waallaabuu*, the birthplace of the nation, where *Waaqa* created the first *Qaalluu*. This connection indicates that the Supreme *Qaalluu* and the *Abba Muudaa* were, and still are, the one and the same person.

Traditionally, the land of the *Abba Muudaa*, which pilgrims have visited for centuries, has been located in the regions of Bali and Sidamo in southern Oromia. It said to be a place of righteousness, wisdom, harmony, peace and *Gada* democracy. The land of the *Abba Muudaa* was the place where all the important Oromo religious and political institutions developed; it was the rich source of their historic beginnings and of their view of the universe. In short, the land of the *Abba Muudaa* provides the cultural templates for Oromo religious beliefs, their political philosophy, based on *Gada*, and their knowledge of themselves and their history.

*Abba Muudaa* literally means the “father” of the *muuda* rituals. *Muuda* refers to both the ceremony held every eight years to honor the holy person of the highest, or Supreme *Qaalluu*, and the pilgrimage to his shrine, which is a sacred site. The noun *Qaalluu* derives from the verb *qalu* “to sacrifice”. The *Qaalluu* was the person who performed ritual sacrifices, which is the kernel of the traditional religion, and who became the *Abba Muudaa* during the ceremonies held every eight years in his honor. Traditionally, there were two *Qaalluu* who were the ritual heads of Boorana and Barentu, the two original moieties. The moiety system and the institution of the *Qaalluu* were, and are, inextricably interwoven. As Legesse (2000:32) writes: “The Qallu institution is the organization at the head of the two great moieties or ‘social halves’ of the Oromo nation”. The shrines of the two *Qaalluu* were linked historically with the cradle lands of the Boorana and Barentu moieties (Legesse 2000:101). The *Qaalluu* did not have a political or military role. They were excluded from the higher decision making councils, and hence law making, and were prohibited from bearing arms and shedding blood.

Yet, because of their ritual authority and prestige, they oversaw the election of *gada* leaders (Melbaa, 1999: 25) those who were responsible for leading the nation in these respects. Above all else, they were men of blessings and men of peace and hence, were showered with gifts by the pilgrims.

The national myths about the finding of the first *Qaalluu*, though varied in form, are very similar in content (cf. Baxter 1954: 156-208; Haberland 1963: 151-8; Knutsson 1967: 144-5; 455-7; de Salviac 1910: 152). According to these myths, the first *Qaalluu* was of divine origin. Some say he “fell from the sky”. Others say that he was found with the first black heifer; and still others say that he was the *Ilma Orma*, “the eldest son of the Oromo”. This title confers upon the *Abba Muudaa* the title of father, the source of all traditions. He is “the prophet of the nation”, who guards the law of *Waaqa* and its interpretation (Pereira 1892: 214). The laws of the assemblies dealt with the maintenance of the social order, whereas those of *Waaqa*, had to do with fertility, peace and the life-giving rains, which were the *sine qua non* for farming and pastoralism<sup>1</sup>. This is why the pilgrimage to the *Abba Muudaa* was integral to the practice of the traditional Oromo religion. As Legesse (2000: 102) notes:

The great ritual significance of the Muuda ritual derives from the fact that it was and is the point in their respective cycles when the two systems intersect. It represents the encounter between the two principal institutions of the Oromo. As such Muuda is laden with meaning and stands on par, in its significance, with the *gada* power handover ceremony (Balli) and the octennial meetings of the national assembly (Gumi or Chaffe).

The *Qaalluu* institution and the pilgrimage to honor the *Abba Muudaa* were the heart, the soul and the spirit of traditional Oromo religion, which centred round *Waaqa*, to whom they turned in all their moments of joy and of distress. As Sumner (1996: 106) observes: “The Oromo knows

that what comes from [*Waaqa*], whether it is adversity or prosperity, is the best. The important thing is that one should go forth before God: to do otherwise is reprehensible.” The Oromo trust *Waaqa* and go forth before him in prayer. For, “To trust *Waaqa* is an indication of the fundamental belief that *Waaqa*, who is the source and origin of all that exists, also cares for creation by protecting it and by bestowing it with fertility, abundance and peace” (Van de Loo 1991: 284).

*Azaj Tino*, one of the authors of the chronicle of the Emperor Susenyos (1607-1632), provides us with the earliest written record we have about traditional Oromo religion. He states that the *Abba Muudaa* was spiritual head of and played an important part in the workings of the Oromo traditional religion. *Azaj Tino* was a learned man and the first objective student of Oromo culture and customs, for which he showed respect and about which he was most knowledgeable. He demonstrated the important role played by the *Abba Muudaa* and wrote graphically about the pilgrimage to honor him<sup>2</sup>. He stated that the Oromo believe in their *Abba Muudaa* as the Jews believe in Moses and the Muslims in Muhammad. “They all go to him from far and near to honor him and receive his blessings” (Pereira 1892: 214). The pilgrims to the Boorana or Barentu cradle lands came from as far away as Wallaga in the west, Hararghe in the east, Wallo in the north and from what is today Kenya in the south.

A number of important points emerge from *Azaj Tino*'s remarkably accurate information about traditional Oromo religion. First, the *Abba Muudaa* was the spiritual head of the Oromo religion. “He is the centre of . . . religious life and the rallying point of the nation, though he has no civil or executive authority. In him are personified and centralized the laws and traditions . . . and [*Waaqa*] is said to speak through him” (Huntingford 1955:83). It was in this context that *Azaj Tino* presented the *Abba Muudaa* as the prophet of the Oromo nation who guarded and interpreted the laws of *Waaqa Gurraachaa*. Second, when *Azaj Tino* was writing, the sacred lands of the *Abba Muudaa*, comparable to Mecca for Muslims and the Holy Land



for Christians, were located in southern Ethiopia. Third, just as Muslims and Christians went on pilgrimages to the birthplaces of their religions, so did the Oromo: but the Oromo pilgrims were representatives of Boorana and Barentu, thus keeping alive the roots of the ancient moieties. Fourth, non-Oromo who lived amongst Oromo did not go on the pilgrimages because they lacked roots in the ancient moieties. Fifth, pilgrimages were made every eight years. Sixth, those who went on pilgrimages were known as *jila*. They were received by the *Abba Muudaa* with marks of honor and questioned by him on Oromo laws and customs. According to Haberland's account, as presented by Knutsson (1967: 151-2), the pilgrims arrived at the *Abba Muudaa*'s residence in the evening:

They wait until all the calves that they have brought have arrived, whereupon they drive them into the *kallu*'s kraal. Thereafter they proceed singing to the ritual house (*galma*) where the *kallu* awaits them with his wife, *kalitti*, at his side. The *kallu* has wrapped his head in a lion's mane on which he has fastened two *kalacha*[?]. He is treated with the utmost reverence and no one dares to raise his eyes to him. All take places as though they were seeking to hide from him....The pilgrims are generously entertained with meat and honey wine and pass the night dancing and feasting.

Early the next morning the pilgrims passed before the *Abba Muudaa* who, after communal prayers, gave them gifts of myrrh and showered blessings upon them, which they valued highly. One of the important blessings was anointment with butter, which led Huntingford (1955: 83) to translate *Abba Muudaa* as "father of anointing". Muslim kings from the Gibe region not only sent gifts to the *Abba Muudaa*, in recognition of his ritual authority, but also regarded the presence of *jila* in their countries as conferring blessings on them. This was reported by Antoine d' Abbadie, who in 1846 saw the *jila* from Limmu-Ennarya, Gumma, Jimma and Gera,

gathered in Limmu-Ennarya before their departure on the long journey to the land of *Abba Muudaa* (d'Abbadie unpubs.: 788-90). Seventh, the pilgrimage to honor the *Abba Muudaa* served as the focal point of Oromo unity. Eighth, and finally, the Oromo maintained contact with each other and with the spiritual force of their traditional religion through the pilgrimage.

*Azaj Tino* most likely wrote about the pilgrimage to the land of *Abba Muudaa* during the early 1620s. Almeida, a Portuguese missionary and contemporary of *Azaj Tino*, wrote that "the [Oromo] are neither Christians, nor Moors [Muslims] nor heathens for they have no idols to worship" (Almeida 1954: 136). Asma Giyorgis, a Catholic missionary writing around 1905, stated that "from among the Ten Commandments given to Moses by God, the [Oromo] lack only the first one, which says, 'I am the Lord thy God . . . thou shalt have no other gods before me.' This is the only natural law they lack." Asma Giyorgis also clearly indicated that the pilgrimage to honor the *Abba Muudaa* had crucial importance to Oromo religion (Tafla 1987: 125, 132). Several reports by nineteenth and twentieth century European travellers and missionaries give pictures of the pilgrimages that are strikingly similar to those of *Azaj Tino*. Oral traditions also contain extensive references to the pilgrimage. Perhaps Cecchi's (1986: 2-30) account of the journey to the land of the *Abba Muudaa* sums up most, though not all, of the important points (translation Knutsson 1967: 148):

The journey to the *Abba Muda* is made partly to honour him and partly to receive his blessing and anointment, which qualify the pilgrims for ritual functions in their own home region. Only those who have committed no serious crimes may make the journey . . . They must be married and circumcised. This means that they must have undergone the butta ceremony and thereby completed their forty year participation in the gada system. During the journey they are said to be dressed as women and to receive food from women. They wear their hair cut short and bear no weapons. As an offering

to Abba Muda they bring a bull, and as a sign of their peaceful intentions they drive a sheep. When they reach Abba Muda, the pilgrim's leader offers food to the snake that guards Abba Muda's grotto. After communal prayers Abba Muda anoints the *jilas* and gives them myrrh. He commands them not to cut their hair and to be righteous, not to recognize any leader who tries to get absolute power, and not to fight among themselves.

The *Abba Muudaa* also commands the *jila* to teach the people to live according to the laws of *Alana* (a whip carried by *gada* leaders symbolizing the rule of *gada* law and as an indication of their authority); that is, to judge justly, not to allow forced labour, not to fight each other but drive the Sidama (Abyssinians) from their lands. From this perspective, the *Abba Muudaa* was a ritual leader who inspired Oromo resistance to Abyssinian occupation of their lands. It is, therefore, not surprising that, for the Abyssinians, the pilgrimages to *Abba Muuda* were not so much religious acts as opportunities to stir up pan-Oromo feelings and to form plans for rebellion (Huntingford 1955: 83-4). It was for this reason that Menelik banned the pilgrimage to the *Abba Muudaa* in 1900.

Because the pilgrims received the *Abba Muudaa*'s blessings and anointment, they were regarded as "saintly people" who, whilst on pilgrimage, could pass "between warring groups of people, no one maltreats them, for they are identifiable." Similarly, on their return to their homelands they "were received... with pomp and ceremony" (Tafla 1987: 133). Pilgrims were accorded the title of *jila* as Muslim pilgrims returning from Mecca were accorded the title *hajj*. They were considered to be "saints" and as a link between the spiritual father and the nation (Mizzi 1935:9 and de Salviac 1905:155-6). As a *jila* was inviolable no one touched his cattle in war or in raids and their herders went unarmed as a sign of their peacefulness. The story went that *jila* were "brothers" to both Boorana and Barentu; the rule of *jila* peace was set against the rule of rivalry between

different descent groups.

When the pilgrims arrived at the spiritual center, the *Abba Muudaa* used to question them about the laws of *Waaqa* and the customs of the Oromo. We are told that he warned against abandoning the way of life of their fathers, and urged them to preserve the pastoral way of life that guaranteed the continuity of the ancient traditions. The prayers and blessings that he showered on the pilgrims demonstrate the ideal type of prosperity that he envisaged:

Prosper, O son of Orma, return home to your family and Abba Boku. May the milk of your herds flow in abundance. May the whole village drink of your superfluity (of milk). May you be loaded with goods. May your favourite cow's udder be full of milk, from which no one drinks but the father of the family, from which none drinks but the mother of the family, from which none drinks but he who has received Unction. It is the wish of my heart that you should prosper. May Waqa be with you. May he accept your sacrifice and your *wadaja* (a communal prayer) (de Salviac 1905: 159. Translation Huntingford 1955: 83-4)

Professor Getachew Haile (2002:146) claims that the *Abba Muudaa* not only blessed the stock of the pilgrims by saying multiply, may God maximize the fruit of your labours etc., but also wished them victory over their enemies and booty in war. The last is an oversimplification, but the thought is not so different from that of those Christian and Muslim religious leaders who offered similar prayers for victory on behalf of their co-religionists and believed that God was on their side. Christian and Muslim religious leaders also admonished their co-religionists not to fight among themselves. But the *Abba Muudaa* differed from these Christian and Muslims religious leaders, whose societies often did not have democratic institutions, in that he urged the Oromo not to recognize any leader who

tried to gain absolute power. These admonitions expressed the common, central Oromo democratic value, which always sought to limit the power of leaders by a variety of social and political mechanisms (Cecchi 1986: 30). Most Muslim and Christian political systems had no similar in-built mechanisms for limiting the powers of their leaders.

The house of the *Abba Muudaa*, his *galma*, was the center for his spiritual activities and a symbol of peace and moral force. Those who sought knowledge about the Oromo spiritual universe visited the *galma*, which was a focal point of learning and religious activities, once or twice a week. They would dance, sing and beat drums in a ritual called *dalaga*, in order to achieve a state of ecstasy (Melbaa 1980: 25-6). The essence of the teaching was peace and harmony or *nagaa*. Oromo start and end all their prayers with *nagaa*, peace, in its broadest sense, which includes the safety and well being of the individual and of the community. For the community, peace is the maintenance of law and order, care of the poor, weak and sick. For an individual, it is inner peace: peace of body, mind and soul. Peace relates to an individual's imaginative sense of well tempered, balanced interrelations with other persons, the environment and with *Waaqa*. The *Abba Muudaa* connects Oromo with this Universal Peace through his prayers.

*Jila* were considered to be "men of god" and imbued with a "sacred quality" as men without sin. The concept is similar to that attached to Muslim pilgrims to Sheikh Hussein of Bali, or even to Mecca. They were protected from violence and "might even be helped on their journey by their former enemies". They, and their wives, had to be sexually abstinent for two weeks before their departure and throughout the pilgrimage, which might take six months. Indeed, they should both sleep on the floor rather than on a bed. Once en route, pilgrims should not look back for to do so was regarded as a break the pilgrimage. These concepts of ritual purity appear to have parallels with those maintained by Muslim pilgrims to Mecca. To show that they were men of *Waaqa*, pilgrims distinguished themselves by three signs. They took along with them sheep, "animals of peace", which were the ideal

sacrifice to *Waaqa* (Bartels 1983: 357); they wore trophies not associated with war on their wrists and necks “which marked them for the occasion as *nama waaqa*, men of God”; and they did not carry spears or other arms (Huntingford 1955: 83-5). They carried other insignia such as a forked staff, which had three prongs at the top, standing for, we are told, the peace, unity and knowledge of tradition. These restrictions and signs, such as the three-pronged staff, are similar to those maintained by pilgrims to the tomb of Sheikh Hussein today, but with one crucial difference; pilgrims to Sheikh Hussein go as individuals whereas those to the *Abba Muuda* were representatives of their clans.

It was probably this “cultural fit” or similarity that led Cerulli and Trimmingham to consider that Sheikh Husein, for Muslim Oromo, was a continuation of the old *Abba Muudaa* (Cerulli 1933 (2):145; Trimmingham 1952: 256). According to Legesse (2000: 95) such a connection was maintained by the Arsi:

When the Arsi lost their institutions under the double impact of a most ruthless branch of the Abyssinian imperial army under Ras Darghe, and their enthusiastic acceptance of Islam as their religion and their shield... Many of the ethical ideas surrounding pilgrims have been transferred from Muda to Sheikh Hussein.

There may be a cross-fertilisation of the “benevolence” of the *Abba Muudaa* and that attributed to Sheikh Hussein (Andrzejewski 1974: 33-4). Probably, there is a common cultural tradition underlying the prayers chanted by *jila* and those pilgrims who today go to the tomb of Sheikh Hussein. There are also similarities between the ideas of generosity in traditional Oromo society and the powerful image of Sheikh Hussein, which inspires people to show charity and kindness to his pilgrims. In essence, the two pilgrimages probably have a common origin. The *Abba Muudaa*’s “two hands”, one holding a blessing and the other a curse (Knutsson, 1967: 150),

the former so much sought after and the latter so much dreaded, are also not very different from the tradition of Sheikh Hussein (Anon 1927: *passim*). Moreover, the remote tomb of Sheikh Hussein does not seem to have suffered from Oromo attacks in the sixteenth century; perhaps it may have served as a neutral ground for settling disputes among themselves and with their enemies (Caulk 1977: 372).

As noted earlier, the residence of the *Abba Muudaa*, the *galma*, was a spiritual center, which people visited both to learn and to participate in prayers for peace, rain, fertility and plenty. Contemporary Boorana use the word *galma* to designate the residence of the *Qaalluu* as well as the special ritual houses that are built for the name giving ceremony of a firstborn son and for the *gadamojjii* rites of passage (Leus 1995: 3300). It might almost be said that just as Muslims have mosques and Christians have churches, the Oromo have *galma*. The current *Qaalluu* of the Boorana personify peace and truth and, though they do not wield political power, they have been described as “the life spirits of the Borana” (Baxter 1954: 157):

Neither Boran society nor culture can be understood without consideration of the part played by the Qallu. All Boran acknowledge the sanctity of the Qallu; it is by the Qallu that all their essential customs were ordained and by them endowed with a moral force and divine order. Further, it is their possession of the Qallu which, above all else, distinguishes the Boran “tribe” above the “junior tribes”, and makes them all superior to their neighbours.

It would seem that during the sixteenth century pastoral migrations, and for some time afterwards, that every fully-fledged Oromo group that formed part of the confederacy had its own ritual leaders who accompanied them. They were called *irreessa*, the “right hand of the Qallu” and were his emissaries who had the “right to exercise their functions from the Qallu who resided at the cradle land of the moiety” (de Salviac 1905: 104; Tafla 1987:

133, 179-83, 311). This connection helps explain the continuous link that was maintained, through the eight year cycle of *jila* pilgrimages, to the sacred southern cradle lands. “Thus the Qallu institution became the ritual force that kept the roots of the ancient moiety system alive and the pilgrimages were the branches linking the far-flung communities to those roots” (Legesse 2000: 32). The pilgrimages served as connections throughout the Oromo (Mohammed Hassen 1991: 95). Before the pilgrimage was banned, pilgrims from Harar went to Mormor in Bali, those from Shawa, Wallaga and the Gibe area to Harro Walabu. The Arsi went either to Dallo Baruk or Debanu (Cerulli 1933: 139-43; Soleillet 1886: 261; de Salviac 1905: 154-5). When, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Menelik banned the pilgrimages to the land of the *Abba Muudaa* he knowingly aimed to destroy the crucial links that sustained Oromo cultural, political and religious unity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Prayers for peace, fertility and rain are at the center of Boorana religion (Baxter 1954: 48; Legesse 1973: 216).

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Bahrey, who wrote his “History of the Galla” in 1593, did not mention the pilgrimage to the *Abba Muudaa*. He either suppressed this information, because he did not approve of the pilgrimage, or did not gather it from his informants. As I have noted elsewhere, “Bahrey’s failure to mention the pilgrimage to honor the *Abba Muudaa* is one of the many indications that his knowledge of Oromo society of the time was limited.”



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# **REALPOLITIK IN THE REALM OF THE SACRED: NOTES ON THE SUCCESSION OF THE *QAALLU* KARRAYYU OF THE BOORANA**

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Boorana patriclans and lineages are categorized into two exogamous moieties, Sabbo and Gona. Each person must take a spouse from the moiety opposite to his or her own. Each moiety has a *Qaallu*, a “ritual figurehead” (Baxter 1978:162) or a “high priest” (Haberland 1964:5 *et pas*) and a *Qaallitti*, the “sacred” wife of the *Qaallu*. The *Qaallitti* mothers an only child, her first-born son, who will, in due course, succeed his father as *Qaallu* (Asmarom 1973:46)<sup>1</sup>. This is the ideal case, but in real life it is a norm that is not necessarily followed. As we show in this paper, the actual *Qaallitti* whom we discuss raised several children. Before he assumes office, a *Qaallu* “may take any number of wives of the opposite moiety, in the same manner as an ordinary Boran” (Baxter 1954:171). Such a wife may be called a “secular” or “profane” wife (Haberland 1963:160; Knutsson 1967:146) and, as in an ordinary marriage, there is no restriction regarding the number of children she may raise. The myths of origin of the two moiety *Qaallu* suggest that they are of heavenly or extraordinary descent; this sets them apart from ordinary men (Hultin and Abdullahi Shongolo n.d.). The origin of their respective *Qaallitti*, on the other hand, is stated to be human: they both come from specific Boorana clans. Scholars may be of different

opinions regarding the character of the power of the *Qaallu*<sup>2</sup>. They generally agree, however, that the *Qaallu* has little executive authority (Baxter 1954:190) and that the office of the *Qaallu* “does not combine with secular leadership” (Schlee 1989: 24f). Legesse (1973:44) writes that the “domain of the Kallu is principally the domain of the sacred” (cf also Bassi 1996:74 f.). Both *Qaallu* are situated in a position outside *Gada*, the Boorana generation set system, hence outside the frame of political time. Thus, whereas *Gada* positions and offices are strictly temporary, the office of the *Qaallu* is life-long. Yet, the *Qaallu* interact with the *Gada* leaders, particularly in the great *muuda* ritual of pilgrimage (Legesse 1973:90f; Hassen this volume). Within their respective moieties, descendants of the first two mythical *Qaallu* have succeeded to the office for many generations. This paper highlights how the Boorana have dealt with the classic problem of the succession of dignitaries of such extraordinary descent, or with the issue of “keeping the king divine” as Audrey Richards (1969) aptly termed it. Due to limitations of space, we will focus on the case of the *Qaallu* of the Sabbo moiety, the *Qaallu* Karrayyu<sup>3</sup>.

The Sabbo moiety consists of three major segments, the Karrayyu, Mat't'aarri and Digalu. The first mythical *Qaallu* is associated with the lineage of the Karrayyu and is therefore referred to as the *Qaallu* Karrayyu. An origin myth, with many variations in its main theme, refers to his heavenly or divine descent: “He was called ‘Hurrati Daga’ which means ‘he came from a cloud of mist’ or ‘he fell from the cloud’. The name refers to his heavenly origin” (Knutsson 1967:145)<sup>4</sup>. The myth describes how he was first discovered in the bush by a Waata hunter. The *Qaallu* was wearing a phallic-shaped horn (*kalacca*) on his forehead and a chequered turban (*rufa*) around his head. There were also the other sacred objects and animals associated with the *Qaallu*, such as his sceptre (termed *gabaabo*); a calf and a sheep (termed *raadda faga* and *hoola faga*); serpents (termed *leeman*); a drum (*dibbee*) and a brass plate (*saae*). The *Qaallu* was soon appropriated by the Boorana. In the version of the

myth that we recorded, the *Qaallu* was a child who was found in the bush together with a girl of the Mat't'aarri Meta clan. When they came of age, the two young people married and produced an Only Son<sup>5</sup>. Every new marriage of the *Qaallu* and *Qaallitti* of the Sabbo moiety is seen as a sacred repetition of that original marriage (Hultin and Abdullahi Shongolo n.d.).

In the twentieth century, after the incorporation of the Oromo into the Ethiopian empire, the two moiety *Qaallu* were made into government officials. The Ethiopian administration took them to be tribal chieftains and, in accordance with its principles for the administration of the new regions, appointed them *balabats* with the title of *fitawrari*. This attempt to transform them into regional chieftains was unsuccessful, however, for the simple reason that their traditional authority was limited to their own moieties, the members of which do not constitute local groupings, but are scattered all over Boorana-land (Knutsson 1967:143). The military junta that took power in 1974 saw them as "feudalists", or as "traditional kings" that the new "revolutionary" regime should do away with.

We shall first consider some ideas regarding the traditional rules of succession to the office of the *Qaallu*, rules which Boorana refer to as *aadaa*, the generic term for "custom", and then deal with how *aadaa* has been negotiated in the actual succession of *Qaallu* in the past seventy years. The continuity in the person of *Qaallu* is symbolised by his bracelet (*ladu*). Hurrati Daga (in our own field notes spelled Urante Daga)<sup>6</sup> wore this sacred symbol of *Qaallu*-ship when he descended from the Sky. In the olden times, it is said, when a *Qaallu* "went far away" (i.e. died), the *ladu* slid down his arm by itself and onto the arm of his successor, but in more recent times the transfer of the bracelet needed human intervention. The *ladu* corresponds, thus, to the idea of coronation. It is a symbol of the continuity of the person of *Qaallu* and of the institution. The *Qaallitti* too, wears *ladu*. In her case, however, the term refers to the two ankle rings that she receives on her wedding day. These rings are not transferred to her successor; each new *Qaallitti* gets her own *ladu*.

Whilst the marriage of the *Qaallu* and *Qaallitti* of the Gona moiety is in accordance with the general rule of moiety exogamy, the *Qaallu* of the Sabbo is enjoined to break the exogamous prescript and to choose the *Qaallitti* from a specific clan, the Mat't'aarri Meta, of his own moiety. He is the sole Boorana who is not only allowed, but actually *enjoined* to break this prescript (Haberland 1963:160)<sup>7</sup>. The wedding forms part of the installation ceremonies of the *Qaallu*. In contrast to other weddings amongst the Boorana, it is a conspicuously lavish and elaborate event that lasts for several days; like royal weddings elsewhere, it differs from all other "secular" weddings. Before he assumes office, however, the prospective *Qaallu* must take a "secular" wife (*haadha warra*) and marry a maiden from a clan of the Gona moiety. This first marriage is, thus, in accord with the common prescript of moiety exogamy; and the wedding ceremony is, like other Boorana weddings, rather inconspicuous<sup>8</sup>.

The first-born son produced by the *Qaallitti* is known as *bobla* or *ilma bobla*, a term that refers exclusively to him. He is also ritually distinguished from the other sons of a *Qaallu* and from other boys in general: like the *Qaallu*, he must never carry any weapons, kill or shed blood, nor must he be cut or wounded in any way<sup>9</sup>. Consequently, he must not be circumcised and his hair must never be cut or shaved. Further, he must never have a *guutu*, the hair tuft on the crown of the head that is an important ritual emblem of a male Boorana (Baxter 1954:232f; Abdullahi Shongolo 1994:57; Leus 1995:383-84)<sup>10</sup>. In contrast, the sons the *Qaallu* bears with his secular wife are referred to as *guutu* or *ilmaan haadha warra*. Ideally, it is the *bobla* who should succeed his father as *Qaallu* and, as part of the rituals of installation, marry a *Qaallitti*. In practice, however, there are many exceptions to this ideal practice, some of which we deal with below.

Ideally, only an adult person can be installed as *Qaallu*; an infant or a young unmarried man cannot assume office (Baxter 1954:175; Haberland 1963:161). Therefore, in cases where the

*bobla* is considered to be too young to succeed, the senior officials (*hayyuu*) of the village of the *Qaallu* together with other leaders of the moiety will choose a successor among the half-brothers of the deceased. Although such a *Qaallu* is *guutu*, a son of *haadha warra*, he holds his office for life. Thus, it should be observed that “he is not a regent, who hands back the *ladu* and reverts to being an ordinary Borana when the infant becomes old enough to be *Qallu* himself” (Baxter 1954:175). In contrast to a *Qaallu bobla*, however, he does not take a new *Qaallitti* when he is installed; moreover, his “secular” wife must never become *Qaallitti*. Instead the *Qaallitti* dowager retains her position; she must not retire until her *ilma bobla* is installed as *Qaallu* and marries his own *Qaallitti*. Thus, a *Qaallu guutu* may in a sense be said to “inherit” the *Qaallitti* of his predecessor. Yet, it is important to emphasize that this is not really a re-marriage. Borana regard marriage as indissoluble even as a result of death, hence neither the status of divorced woman nor that of widow is possible (Baxter 1996:182). There is no “word which directly translates as the English word ‘widow’, because a woman always remains the wife of the man she married” as a virgin bride (Baxter 1996:181). “Ideally, and often in practice, a woman of child bearing age whose husband dies should go to live with a husband’s brother and continue to bear children to the name of her physically deceased spouse. This is a continuation of the original marriage rather than true levirate” (ibid.). Thus, a *Qaallu* who is *guutu* cannot have sons that are *bobla*; sons borne by the *Qaallitti* are always regarded as the sons of her first husband. Furthermore, a *Qaallitti* retires only when her first-born son (ideally her Only Son, the *bobla*) is installed as *Qaallu*. The case that we deal with below, the marriage of the *Qaallu* Kosi Gedo, is an exception to this rule. A *Qaallu*, on the other hand, whether he is *bobla* or *guutu*, stays in office until his death.

As Haberland (1963:159-62) and Knutsson (1967:146) have noted, the office of the *Qaallu* seldom passes straight from father



to son, but instead often goes first to a half-brother of the deceased *Qaallu*. In other words, it rarely goes from a father who is *bobla* to a son who is *bobla*. Knutsson (1967:146) states that it is “evident from what we know about the most recent generations of the Karayu kallus that this type of succession is intimately related to the rivalry between brothers”. He cites as a typical example the situation following the death of the *Qaallu* Geedo Jilo in 1938. Like Haberland (1963:160ff), Knutsson also links this rivalry to the political situation under Abyssinian rule, when the *Qaallu* were appointed *balabatt* and *fitawrari* with, among other things, the task to collect taxes for the government. Haberland (1963:160) quotes a letter dating from 1925 that he read in the British consulate in Mega, which describes the *Qaallu* as a kind of tax collector: “fitawrari Gedo, chief of the Sabbu-section, given the rank of fitawrari by the emperor Menelik, now becoming an old man, very tall and fine looking, but very fond of drinks .... now spends most of his time collecting money from his tribe.”

We do not know exactly which year Geedo became *Qaallu*, but he probably became *Qaallu* in the 1890s. He married his *haadha warra* in 1890 (Haberland 1963:160) and had five sons with her. He is exceptional in that he did not marry a *Qaallitti* from the Mat't'aarri Meta clan at the time of his installation but postponed this marriage until a few years prior to his death in 1938, when he was aged over seventy (ibid.). Geedo was, as far as we have been able to establish, regarded as *bobla*<sup>11</sup>. At the time of his death, his *Qaallitti*, Sakke Geedo, had already borne two sons. Her firstborn died at birth, or soon after. Everybody agrees that this son was, strictly speaking, the only *bobla*. When she bore a second son, Diida Geedo, his status was more ambiguous<sup>12</sup>. If custom (*aadaa*) says that only a first-born can be *bobla*, then a second-born cannot assume this position. But in this case, since the death of the first-born would break the sacred line of succession of the *bobla* forever, the situation could be interpreted in more than one way. Legesse (1973:46) states that the “Kallu is

the only child his mother is allowed to raise"<sup>13</sup>. In a case such as this one, the solution at hand would perhaps be to allow the second-born to be raised as *bobla*. Apparently, this was the way his mother saw it when some years later, in a dramatic move, she made her point on the matter clear to everyone. She threw away the sacred sceptre of the *Qaallu guutu* whom she regarded as a usurper who was preventing the rightful successor, her son, from becoming *Qaallu*.

When Geedo passed away, his son with the *Qaallitti* Sakke was obviously too young to succeed him. As mentioned above, in such a case it is customary that a half-brother succeeds the deceased and assumes the *laduu* instead. In this case, however, the office did not pass to a half-brother. As Geedo was an elderly man, there was perhaps no living brother left who could succeed him (or who was deemed fit to do so). Instead his son with a *haadha warra* was the chosen successor. His name was Kosi. Apparently, this decision was reached after long and difficult deliberations. Haberland (1963:161) reports that Kosi was not installed until a year after his father's death (as Geedo died in 1938, the installation was probably in 1939). Kosi was also appointed *balabatt* and *fitawrari* by the Italian administration (ibid.)<sup>14</sup>. One condition that had to be fulfilled to receive these titles was that the person in question was a *Qaallu*.

Being the son of a *haadha warra* Kosi was, according to custom, not expected to marry a new *Qaallitti*. On the other hand, he could not, as was customary with the *Qaallu guutu*, "inherit" the *Qaallitti* dowager as she, in this particular case, was the wife of his deceased father. Thus, the situation was complex. When Geedo passed away in 1938, he left Sakke, the *Qaallitti* dowager, with a child who was the second-born son. Nevertheless, many people, including the *Qaallitti*, regarded this son as *bobla*, who in due course would succeed his father as *Qaallu*. Given these exceptional circumstances, it took a year of deliberations before a successor could be installed (in 1939). Kosi, the *Qaallu guutu* and

half-brother of the *ilma bobla* could not assume the *laduu* and at the same time “inherit” his father’s widow. On the other hand, being *guutu*, he did not have the right, according to custom, to marry a new *Qaallitti*. Yet, this is exactly what happened. In 1940, about a year after his installation, Kosi married a *Qaallitti*, a young girl from the Mat’t’aarri Meta clan<sup>15</sup>. She was about eight years old and her name was Godaanna<sup>16</sup>. Then, about two years later, in 1942 or 1943, Kosi passed away (Haberland 1963:161). At this time, Godaanna had, obviously, not yet conceived.

By 1942-43, that is, four or five years after the demise of Geedo, we thus had the following situation. There were two *Qaallitti* (for lack of a better term we refer to them as “*Qaallitti* dowagers”, although, as already mentioned, Boorana lack a corresponding concept). One of them, Sakke, was the mother of a son that she, although he was the second born, regarded as the rightful heir of the *ladu*, and apparently, many people shared her view. The problem was that this son was too young to become *Qaallu*; that was at least how some people saw it. In the case of the *Qaallitti*, on the other hand, her young age was obviously not an impediment. The second *Qaallitti* dowager, Godaanna, Kosi’s widow, was too young to have children of her own. Given this situation, who was the obvious successor to the *ladu*?

The fact that it took another five years before a new *Qaallu* could be found in 1948, suggests that there was no obvious successor. The difficulty involved in reaching an agreement on the matter was not only related to genealogical and dynastic intricacies, but also to wider political concerns such as the constant conflicts with the neighbouring Gujjii Oromo. Briefly, one could say that those concerned with *realpolitik* wanted a strong man as *Qaallu*, while those concerned with “tradition” supported the principle that the *bobla*, the only son of the *Qaallitti* Sakke, was the rightful successor. Haberland (1963:161) states that one faction of the Sabbo, together with the Abyssinian administration, were strongly in favour of an adult and strong successor. The other party, consisting of

Boorana traditionalists, rejected this proposal on the grounds that all the adult sons of Geedo were sons of a *haadha warra*, and therefore not eligible, especially not in a case like this, where there was a pretender that was considered to be *bobla*. In the end, in 1948, an agreement on this intricate problem was reached. As mentioned earlier, Geedo had five sons with his *haadha warra*. Dambala, the second son, became *Qaallu* (the first son was Kosi, the *Qaallu* who died in 1942 or 1943). The third son, Bagago, did not obtain any office. The fourth, Galgalo, became *balabat* of the Sabbo and *fitawrari* and governor of Suruppa on the Gujji border, where he had to deal with the many conflicts between the two groups. The fifth brother did not get any office (ibid.).

Haberland (1963:161) notes that by the time of his fieldwork in the 1950s, Dambala “like a real *Qaallu*” had recently married a *Qaallitti* from the Mat’taarri Meta clan. Haberland therefore expected new difficulties of succession when this *Qaallitti* bore a son. The *bobla* of the *Qaallitti* Sakke (i.e. the son of Geedo) was then about 15 years old, and still prevented from becoming *Qaallu* (ibid.). It was probably at the time of Dambala’s succession that Sakke made her dramatic intervention and threw away the sacred sceptre of the *Qaallu*. Haberland was, as we shall see, right in his apprehensions, but he was wrong concerning the parties involved in the future conflict. Moreover, the marriage he referred to was not a proper marriage. There was no *fuud’a Qaallitti* (or official wedding). We would rather say that Dambala now “inherited” the *Qaallitti* Godaanna<sup>17</sup>, who in 1940 had married Kosi, his elder brother. Being *guutu*, Dambala just assumed the *ladu* with Godaanna, who continued to be *Qaallitti*<sup>18</sup>. She then had four sons and two daughters with him, although, as she explained to us in 2002, “I continued to give birth to children for Kosi.” Yet, the fact that she had mothered a son (or sons) was not, as Haberland had feared, the cause of the new conflict of succession that followed when Dambala passed away. Instead, the new conflict involved Diida (the son of Geedo and *Qaallitti* Sakke) and Galgalo (his half-brother, the son of Geedo with

his *haadha warra*); Galgalo was Dambala's brother. Diida's half-brothers had for many years deprived him of his right of succession. Being a powerful man and well established in the Abyssinian administration Galgalo now assumed the *ladu* and thus, once again, deprived Diida of his right. As Galgalo, like his brothers, was *guutu* and therefore not eligible to marry a *Qaallitti*, Godaanna remained *Qaallitti*. Galgalo, however, did not live long after he had assumed the *ladu*. He passed away in 1965 or 1966<sup>19</sup>.

Upon Galgalo's demise, Diida, at last, assumed the *ladu*. Moreover, even now Godaanna continued to be *Qaallitti*. The reason why Diida, the son of the *Qaallitti*, could not marry a new *Qaallitti* was that his status as *ilma bobla* was contested: being the second born, he was *guutu* and his hair had been shaved. Another reason was that two *ilmaan bobla* cannot simultaneously be in turn to succeed. This, of course, had affected Diida's position ever since 1938, when Geedo, his father, passed away and particularly since 1940 when Kosi Geedo, the son of a *haadha warra*, contrary to custom, married Godaanna. When Diida passed away in 1997, Godaanna's first-born son, D'aae Kosi Geedo, assumed the *ladu* and married a *Qaallitti*. For the first time in fifty-seven years, there was a *fuud' a Qaallitti*. In the same period of time, there had been only one *Qaallitti*, Godaanna, who had experienced a succession of four *Qaallu*. At every accession, "custom" had been reinterpreted, negotiated and adapted to existing dynastic and political circumstances.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Legesse (1973:46) states that if the *Qaallitti* brings forth daughters, they are given up for adoption.

<sup>2</sup> Knutsson (1967:142) speaks of the *Qaallu* as a “supreme ritual leader and ... adviser and ritual expert in the gada system.” Legesse (1973:44) states: “Their villages are spiritual centers around which political debate is organized. Their principal power lies in their right to elect the political (gada) leaders who govern Borana for eight-year periods.” Bassi (1996:75) refers to them as “dignitari dalle forti connotazioni sacrali” and emphasizes “Il carattere sacrale della persona del *qaallu*.”

<sup>3</sup> In this moiety there are also three ‘junior and fairly unimportant’ (Legesse 1973:47) *Qaallu* who come from the Mat’t’aarrii clan (Baxter 1954:158ff.; Haberland 1963:164f.; Schlee 1989:24). There is also mention of a fourth “junior” *Qaallu* of the Gona moiety (Baxter 1954:159). Their importance seems to be limited to their own clans. In this paper, we deal only with the senior, or “major” *Qaallu* of the Karrayyu.

<sup>4</sup> As Bartels (1983:89-111 et pas.) has pointed out, *Waaqa* has the double meaning of “vault of the sky as we see it” and what

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“approximates what is meant by the English word ‘God’”. He has also shown the enormous complexity of this concept in Oromo religion. Ton Leus (1995:828) translates *Waaqa* as “God, sky, atmospheric condition” and continues: “For the Borana the whole universe is one and enclosed. Earth, sky, sun, moon and stars are all together in ‘one place’ and are the whole membership of the universe. They don’t think in different distances in connection with stars and planets. So, the sky to the Borana is the most important part of the universe because from here comes the rain and thus life” (ibid.)

<sup>5</sup> In May 2002 we recorded a version of the myth rendered by the old mother of the present *Qaallu* (Hultin and Abdullahi A. Shongolo n.d). For a careful and accurate documentation of the myth see Baxter (1954:162-169, 195-207). Haberland (1963:160); Legesse (1973:46); Kassam (1989); Bassi (1996:75f.) and Sahlu Kidane (2002:155) also present versions of the myth. All versions differ in details on the main themes: e.g. in some versions the *Qaallu* that was found was an adult, whilst in others he was a child; in some versions he was alone, in others he was found together with the future *Qaallitti*.

<sup>6</sup> Haberland (1963:159) provides both versions: *Huránnte Dága* or *Hurráti Dága*.

<sup>7</sup> He thus marries a classificatory sister. Legesse (1973:47) states that: “He alone marries a woman who is, by normal standards, his ‘sister’.”

<sup>8</sup> Boran weddings differ from the expensive and lavish wedding ceremonies typical of many Oromo groups to the North. For a comparison of Boorana and Arsi weddings, see Baxter (1996).

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<sup>9</sup> Haberland (1963:158) states, however, that the *Qaallu* may kill in connection with sacrifice.

<sup>10</sup> Abdullahi Shongolo (1994:57) explains that *guutu* is “a head tuft, a traditional symbol of Boranness, ‘a male tuft’, a slender strand of hair that grows from the centre of the man’s head as an identification of the proper Boran.” Baxter (1954:232) notes that: “Boran mothers encourage the hair of their infants to grow, by rubbing fat into it and stroking it, and, particularly on the heads of boys, they try to raise a fine erect tuft just above the forehead. The shaving off of this tuft is [part of] the Jila [naming] festival. Such a tuft is called *gutu*. There are other forms of *gutu*, but all, to Boran, are the particular mark of the virile Boran male....In Borana the word *gutu* is often used as a poetic synonym for a brave strong man.” Women, too, have *guutu*, although different in form (Leus 1995:383).

<sup>11</sup> Haberland (1963:160-162) provides details about the genealogical links amongst successive *Qaallu* Karayyu. Quite naturally, our own findings, recorded about forty-five years later, seem to differ from Haberland’s in some details, while Knutsson (1967:140) found Haberland’s “material obscure on some points.” The intrigues and manipulations preceding the installation of the different *Qaallu* in the generation before Geedo are complicated and cannot be dealt with in this short paper.

<sup>12</sup> Haberland (1963:161f) reports that his name was Goollo. The reason why we report different names is that a person gets one name at birth and another name when he becomes *Qaallu*. Goollo Goodana was the name given at birth and the other name, Diida, was given when he, several decades later, became *Qaallu*. Geedo, the father of Goollo/Diida, was given the name Godaana at birth. Later on, when he became *Qaallu* he was named Geedo.



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<sup>13</sup> Legesse states an ideal. In real life, the *Qaallitti* may raise several children; see below.

<sup>14</sup> During the war, the Italians maintained the Abyssinian titles of rank.

<sup>15</sup> Normally, the *fuud'a Qaallitti*, wedding of the *Qaallu* and *Qaallitti*, is part of the cycle of installation rituals.

<sup>16</sup> We have this information from interviews with the *Qaallitti* herself. This marriage, of course, did not imply a sexual relationship. The young *Qaallitti* grew up as a ward in the *galma*, or home of the *Qaallu*.

<sup>17</sup> We recorded her recollections in May 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Possibly, Haberland meant that Dambala acted *as if* he were a *bobla* and not a son of a *haadha warra*.

<sup>19</sup> Galgalo's son told us that his father passed away about 1958 in the Ethiopian Calendar (that is 1965/66 in the Gregorian calendar).

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# THE OROMO ESCHATOLOGY: THE PROPHECY OF AREEROO BOOSAROO NARRATED BY BORBOR BULEE AND GUY YOO DAMBII

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This paper provides the first attempt to explore the oral apocalyptic literature of the Oromo. Different Oromo groups each tend to refer to their own particular prophets, but generally speaking, their prophecies are based on a common eschatological belief, reveal the same social dynamics, have a similar narrative style and even share some specific verses. In this paper, we focus on the Boorana version of this sacred genre, and more specifically on the prophecies of the most famous and most recent Boorana prophet, Areeroo Boosaroo.

Due to limitations of space, we do not analyze the text systematically in stylistic, normative, sociological, eschatological, typological or comparative terms, but merely present the ethnographic material with the hope of encouraging further research on this topic. Although both of us had long been aware of the importance of disseminating this knowledge, the proper channels were not available. We therefore welcome this initiative in honor of Father Bartels, the pioneer of Oromo religious studies, which led our attention back to the tapes that had been lying on dusty shelves for many years<sup>1</sup>.

## **Collection of the Texts**

The two authors collected most of the data presented here independently while each was engaged in research on other topics. Our attention was drawn to the subject by the recurrent references made by people to these prophecies, either as part of their sense of an impending natural cataclysm or of their anticipation of the coming social and historical events foretold in the prophecies.

Our material is based on interviews conducted with two Boorana elders, Guyyoo Dambii and Borbor Bulee. The Boorana community in Meegga and Meelbanaa had repeatedly identified Guyyoo as an expert of the prophecy. Marco Bassi interviewed him at his home in Doolooloo Makkalaa (Diiirree District) in 1990. He was 94 years old at the time and belonged to the Daaccitu Sooddituu clan of the Goona moiety. He had learnt the text of the prophecy of Areeroo Boosaroo from his father, but had also personally met the prophet at a ceremony. At the time, Guyyoo was only a child, whilst Areeroo was very old. Several Boorana actively interacted with Guyyoo during the interview, creating a typical dialogical narrative style. The interview turned into a group discussion resembling a spontaneous session on prophecy during which the ethnographer limited his intervention to the actual recording. The tape was transcribed and translated a month later in the field.

Boku Tache, himself a Boorana, first interviewed Borbor Bulee in 1996 in Diida Haraa in Yaaballoo District. Borbor is now 55 years and belongs to the Noonituu Baarrituu clan of the Goona moiety. He lives in Dubuluqi in the Dirree District of Boorana Zone and is famous for his rich knowledge of the history and culture of the Boorana. Borbor bases his knowledge of Areeroo Boosaroo's prophecies on what he was taught by several elders, and, in particular during the *gadaa* of Jaldeessa Liiban (1960-68) by Halakee Gorroo, who had known Areeroo Boosaroo well.<sup>2</sup>

Our preliminary review of the two versions revealed strong similarities, especially in the poetic text and interpretations, but also some differences. Guyyoo Dambii's poetry is much longer. He occasionally recalls the words of the prophet in the same medium, that is, through song (*faaruu*). He announces the words of the prophet by a short melody, followed by rhymed singsong verses given in sequences and characterized by a particular metric or dominant trope. This is, in fact, a typical feature of prophetic utterances (Csordas 1997: 322; Mowinckel 1924: 49). Guyyoo also alternates the poetic text with indirect quotations of the prophet, the latter signalled by the use of "he said" (*jedhe*) at the end of each sentence. In addition, he gives his own interpretation of the prophecy and of the relevant events currently affecting social life, often inserting other myths and traditions.

Borbor first introduces Areeroo Boosaroo and provides his poetic text. He then gives his own interpretation, in response to the questions of the ethnographer. Borbor explains that since Areeroo Boosaroo's prophecy is very popular, new verses composed by various poets are often attributed to him. During the first interview, Borbor was able to differentiate between the true words of Areeroo Boosaroo and those verses created by other poets, which are often inserted into his text. He was also able to distinguish between the elements of the prophecy introduced by other prophets at different historical periods, while Guyyoo Dambii presents all of these components in the form of a single prophetic tradition.

For this reason, we were faced with the challenge of qualifying the various sequences and quotations given by Guyyoo. We isolated Guyyoo's relevant poetry and submitted it to the attention of Borbor Bulee during a second, joint and unrecorded interview, made in February 2005, in southern Ethiopia. Borbor was able to identify the authors of most of the poetic sequences. The prophetic utterances reported in this article are drawn from both Guyyoo's and Borbor's versions,

but the order of presentation of the poetic texts is based on Borbor's philological reconstruction. We have retained references to the poetry of other prophets or to verses attributed to Areeroo Boosaroo as they now form part of the larger prophetic tradition, as it is recounted today amongst the Boorana Oromo.

### Prophets in Boorana Oromo

Prophets are well accounted for in the literature from ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and several institutional, charismatic and messianic prophets have been described by anthropologists over the last century<sup>3</sup>. Several scholars dealing with classical as well as modern prophecies have noted a direct link between techniques of divination and ecstatic practices (Davies 1990: 128; Emmet 1956: 18-19; Porteous 1938: 209; Sauerbrei 1947: 209; Spier 1935). Among the Oromo, the same correlation is clearly indicated by the fact that the same person may occasionally be described as a prophet (*raaga*) or a diviner (*yuuba*). However, the *yuuba* are considered to be much less powerful than *raaga*. There may be several *yuuba* at any given time; they predict the future and produce amulets that safeguard people from misfortune. They can be seen as specialists who have mastered specific techniques and rites that they perform at the request of individuals. They have no institutional role, thus differing from other important specialists like the *ayyaantuu*, time-reckoners, who are experts in the observation of the sky and stars, and who are often also capable of predicting weather conditions and large-scale political and social events. The *yuuba* live at the fringes of society, and may have either a good or a bad reputation. Although the Boorana do not practise sorcery, there have been times when the practices of the *yuuba* have been banned through a formal

decision taken by the Boorana general assembly (*Gumii Gaayoo*), due to their false claim to possess special attributes and to their misguided attempts to guide social life.

*Raaga* (prophets) are often described as *yuuba* with mystical capacity, who are directly inspired by *Waaqa* (God). Hence, divine revelation, the “unveiling or unfolding of things not previously known and which could not be known apart from unveiling” (Goswiler 1987: 3), is the main qualifying feature of Oromo prophets. It is said that, in the past, prophets were attached to the *yaa'a* (mobile ritual centre where the *gadaa* councillors reside during the period they stay in power), hence that they had some kind of institutional role. A good example is Moroo Uchumaa, the famous *raaga* who was attached to the *yaa'a* during the *gadaa* of Abbayii Baabboo (1656-1664). Nowadays, however, it is understood that true *raaga* only appear in history occasionally. The Boorana acknowledge several prophets. Borbor Bulee listed the following: Moroo Uchumaa, Turucoo, Amuu Areeroo, Hiboo Abbaa Harree, Waariyoo Uudati, Haweecee and Alii Boddee. All of them lived before Areeroo Boosaroo, the last fully acknowledged prophet. Some descendants of Alii Boddee are currently considered to have the qualities of *raaga*.

The story of Areeroo Boosaroo is well known and the memory of his words is relatively fresh because many of the elders who knew him personally died only recently. He belonged to the Digaluu Eemmajii clan of the Sabbo moiety. There is no information about when he was born, but he died during the *gadaa* of Boruu Galmaa (1904–1912). He was buried at Diida Baallii, located between Areero and Weeb. None of his male descendants survive at present, as he had foretold in his prophecy (verse 9 below). The last was his son, Kootee Areeroo Boosaroo. According to Borbor Bulee, Areeroo Boosaroo was not a type of *raaga* that people used to consult in order to know the future or from whom they sought advice. Nor did he attract large crowds to his home. It is said



that, while relaxing, playing the Boorana board game of *saddeeqa*, or amusing children, he simply started singing or speaking in a strange monologue. The meanings of the words, rich in metaphors and tropes, were often not clear to the people at the time. Some people thought him foolish, others a mad man, because he talked to himself and used words that were not known to them. Some, however, paid attention. His words became clearer as life and society in Boorana underwent radical changes, mainly after Menelik's conquest at the end of the nineteenth century<sup>4</sup>. Thus, the power of his prophecy was not fully recognized until after his death. However, his vocation was already understood when he was a child. Borbor explains that Areeroo Boosaroo was able to understand and translate the language of birds. He used to ask: *ee waan simphirreen tun jettu dhageettuu?* ("Listen, what are these birds saying?"). Initially, his father discouraged this kind of unusual behavior. However, when some of the things he had predicted came true, people soon started to heed his words. His strange behavior and personality later came to be accepted by the community.

As a prophetic figure, Areeroo Boosaroo clearly differs from Weber's concept of a "charismatic" leader and from the Bantu prophets that led separatist sects (Sundkler 1948). Rather, he can be said to fit the category of "ecstatic" prophets, although he was not trained in any specific techniques, did not form part of an institutional group or organized movement, and did not initiate any nativistic, revivalistic, messianic or millenarian movement (cf. Linton 1943; Wallace 1956). Areeroo Boosaroo's vocation was primarily a personal one that bordered on mental illness. Like shamans and some canonical prophets (Emmet 1956: 16), it can be said that Areeroo Boosaroo engaged in prophesizing beyond his own will<sup>5</sup>.

## The Boorana Apocalypse

In a synthetic definition drawn from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, an apocalypse is assumed to mean: a “presentation in literary form of what is claimed as esoteric knowledge acquired by revelation”, dealing especially with events connected with the end of the present age (Davies 1990: 129). As Davies emphasizes, despite the widely held assumption that apocalypses derive from Jewish prophecy, they can be seen as an expression of a common belief in ideas relating to the end of the world shared by the majority of the inhabitants of the ancient Hellenistic world. He notes that the apocalyptic genre existed in many forms throughout the ancient Near East over a long period and had its major ideological and literary antecedents in the Mesopotamian mantic tradition.

In Boorana, prophetic utterances (*himana*) expressed in poetic form are normally recited during sessions focusing on inspired prophecies revealed to several prophets at different historical times. The *leit motif* that links these utterances is the expectation of a cosmological crisis, or cataclysm of an environmental nature, manifesting itself on a large scale and affecting the Boorana as well as other peoples.

From this perspective, the narration provided in the main interviews by Guyyoo Dambii and Borbor Bulee constitutes an apocalypse in the true sense of the word. Although the text is in oral form, it is clearly based on recognized revelations. Guyyoo Dambii and Borbor Bulee refer independently to the same events, showing that they are dealing with a single, shared tradition. In both interviews, the account of the cataclysm is consistently given in non-poetic form, and the comparison shows a much lower degree of codification in this narrative and dialogical component. The narrative style is, by its very nature, more interactive, open to interpretation and commentary.

In the session with Guyyoo Dambii, the apocalyptic component and the discussions, comments and questions by the audience were intercalated with its poetic declamation. While the idea of cataclysm had the effect of heightening the attention of the participants to the relevance of what was being said, the precise representation of present-day society in poetic form (see below) foretold by Areeroo Boosaroo and others functioned as a powerful validation mechanism of the entire prophecy and, more specifically, of the apocalyptic message. Indeed, asked if Areeroo Boosaroo's predictions are about the past, present or future time, Borbor Bulee responds:

*Wannii garii waan qaraa tahe Wannii guddoon waan amma keessa jirru Ta garii ammoo waan itti yaanu.*

“Of what Areeroo Boosaroo foretold, some events have already happened, the great majority are happening and others are still expected to happen.”

During the transcription of Guyyoo's session in the village, all listeners saw the description of the events foretold by Areeroo Boosaroo as the most powerful indicator of the truthfulness of Guyyoo's words and teaching. Thus, while we separate the apocalyptic and dialogic component from the poetic utterances for the sake of description, we should note that this mixture of styles is a typical feature of the Oromo apocalyptic genre.

Due to the interactive nature of the sessions, we cannot identify a perfectly linear order of narration. Nevertheless, structurally, we can identify a tripartite pattern moving from the announcement of the portents to the cataclysm and ending with the salvation. The poetry of Areeroo Boosaroo, and of others, normally comes at the beginning, as an entry point, and is referred to again during later discussions. As we show below, the poetry describes profound changes in society,

livelihoods and life-style. These changes are themselves signs of the cataclysm predicted. In this way Areeroo Boosaroo's poetry, although it does not specifically refer to the cataclysm (reference to *badu* "being lost", "disappearing", is only made in verses 10, 52 and 53), it is brought into the narrative and ideological structure of the broader apocalyptic tradition.

Some past events are interpreted as sign of the coming disaster foretold by previous prophets. Other signs are identified with current events:

*Akkii innii hime akkana. Gaafa innii buxee ba'uu gahe gadaan Boruu lamaan jedhe.*

"He said like this. The time when Boorana arrives to the end is the *gadaa* of the two Boruu, he said."

In 1990, at the time of the interview, Boruu Guyyoo was *abbaa gadaa*. The listeners commented that Boruu Madha was going to take over the *baallii* (symbol of handing over power from one generational class to the next) from Boruu Guyyoo, hence an *abbaa gadaa* whose first name was Boruu was shortly going to succeed to power. This was interpreted as the time of the "two Boruu". The transfer actually took place about two years later, in 1992. Later during the session, Guyyoo referred back to the same sign, this time explicitly mentioning the full names of the two leaders involved in the transition:

*Ammoo gaafii dhugaan kaatu gaafa Boruu Madhaatii fi Boruu Guyyoo Liibanitti wal argan. Boruu Madhaa Liibanii farda daamaa kottee adaadiitiin Boorana too'achuu dhufa. Wannii sodaatan sun gaduma Boruu lamaanii jedhe.*

But the time when the truth rises is the time when Boruu Madhaa and Boruu Guyyoo meet each other in Liiban

[the area where the ceremony of transition is performed]. Then Boruu Madhaa comes from Liiban [to Dirree] on a red horse with white hoofs to see Boorana. That thing to be afraid of is in the *gadaa* of the two Boruu, he said<sup>6</sup>.

This type of sign forms part of what Overholt (1974: 38-40) describes as a process of feed-back generated by the prophet's message in which a component from the prophecy ("the *gadaa* of the two Boruu") is evaluated by the listeners in relation to current events as they interact with the narrator. Other signs are expected to happen in an indeterminate future, as in the case of the two foreigners (or group of foreigners), one coming from the west, the other from the east:

*Wa lamaati dhufa jedhe. Mixaa diimaatti kuunoo ila galchuutii dhufa jedhe. (Kunin nama adii, faranjii). Garanallee namatti dhufa jedhan Nama olejjaatti gaala fa'utti, namii dheeraan ulee sibiilaa dhufa jedhe. Muummeen sun jedhe. Amma namii eegan nama sun.*

Two things will come, he said. A red man ["red" is often used instead of "white" to refer to Europeans] coming from the west. (This is a white man), a *faranjii* [the Amharic term for white man]. From there [indicating the east] someone else will come, he said. A man tall enough to load a camel whilst standing, a tall man with an iron rod stick will come, he said. That is the end, he said. According to what I know, now people wait for them.

The listeners seek clarification from Guyyoo:

*Namii dheeraan sun karaa kami dhufa jedhe?*  
From which direction will the tall man come?

*Karaa Dhaddacha Warraabi dhufa jedhe Karaa Goofaa, ka La'ee, ka Irdar, ka Meelbanaa dhufee armaan Meeggatti qabata jedhe.*

The way of Dhaddacha Warraabi [one of the early homelands of the Boorana towards the east], he said. He will come the way of Goofaa, La'e, Irdar, Meelbanaa [localities of the deep *tulaa* well sites in Diirree], up here to Meegga [the place of the interview].

He then gives more details about the white man:

*Baahir gamaa mixaan diimaan laanuma, laanuma, laanuma faranjiin dhufa jedhe. Namuu hin hadhinaa jedhe. Namii isa hadhe hin ba'u jedhe. Kun nagaan yaa'a jedhe, amma nama gurraacha nagaa walldhowwu kana nagaa tolcha jedhe. Yoos isallee itti gaman. Namii isatti game hin ba'u. Warra nama guba, wa namatti gad-dhiisa. Laftilleen hin bobeetti, dhakaalleen hin boba'a. Warrii kun lolaan hin dhufu. Gaargala amma nu keessa jirru kana qabbaneessaa dhufa jedhe. Duuba nama isatti gamullee hin dhaban*

From beyond the sea, like the red termites [metaphor of the white man], slowly, slowly, slowly the *faranjii* will come, he said. Don't fight those people, he said. The man who fights will be finished, he said. Those men go in peace, he said, now they will bring peace among the black people that are denying peace to one another, he said. That time other people come to fight. Those who come to fight them [the white man] will not escape. They burn the house, they throw something at people. Even the ground is burnt, the stone is burnt. They do not come for fighting. They come to solve the problems we

have, he said. Then, there could be some people who dare to fight them.

A listener asks:

*Namii itti gamu kun nama akkami?*  
Who are they (those who are going to fight)?

*Namuma argan cufa. Sidaamaa, Boorana qabaa;  
akkana walkeessa jira Kanumatti akkana ta'a, kun ka  
badu.*

Amhara, Boorana, they are so mixed that it is hard to distinguish. It is those who dare to fight; these are the ones doomed to be finished

In a variant provided by Guyyoo himself during the same session, the white men are compared to locusts:

*Mixaa diimaatti ila galchuutiin dhufa Kun faranjii  
Waan akka awwaannisaatti qarqaarsa keessanii dhufa  
nuun jedhan Namii sodaadhaa jedhan sun nama adii*

The red termites come from the west. Those are the *faranjii*. They come to help us, in a group like locusts, he said. Be afraid of that white man.

Guyyoo also describes the foreigners as the “the people of the smoke”:

*Ka ila galchuu kuninii, nama hadhuu hin barbaadu.  
Nama kana ammoo egeri itti gaman. Waan jaarsii jedhe,  
warrii dhufu sun warra aaraa ti. Isaan qawwee  
barbaadan Innii afuuraan waan cufa obbaasuu  
dandaha. Namii sun guddoo isan qarqaaraa akkanallee  
hin millatinaa jedhe Akka jaarsii jedhetti sun nama adii.*

The ones coming from the west do not want to fight. But people will want to fight that man. The elder said that those people who will come are the people of smoke. Those who wish to fight hope to take some rifles. He can finish everything like a wind. That man helps us a lot; don't look at him with bad eyes. The elder spoke like this; that is the white man. But he does not represent the white men as enemies:

*Namii kun ammoo loon diqqeessaa jedhe. Ufii nama hin hadhuu immoo horii guddoo nyaata jedhe. Waraana amma lafatti bu'e kana qabbaneessuu hin dandaha jedhe. Warrii nama nagayaan yaa'u fakkaata. Namii wa harkatti qabate kun ammoo itti gama, namii warra kanatti game hin bada jedhe. Namii nama kana 'salamta' jalaa fuudhe bahe jedhe. Ammoo guutuu Booranaa cufaa wannii sun guddoo irra jirti jedhe. Warrii sun nama micciira qabu hin jibbu jedhe.*

That people reduce the number of cattle, he said. Don't fight that people that eat a lot of cattle/sheep/goats, he said. He is able to cool the war that now is everywhere, he said. That people seem to go in peace. People holding something in the hand [rifles] now go to fight them, the men who go to fight will be lost, he said. But for the whole Boorana that thing is very important, he said. Those people do not hate men with *micciiraa* [metallic bracelet worn by most Boorana], he said.

Although Guyyoo considers that this event had not yet happened (see below), this description of the white man fits well with the events of the Italian invasion. The soldiers were numerous enough to be represented as “termites” or “locusts”. It was a time of intense internal conflict, following the annexation of southern Ethiopia into the Ethiopian empire. A



mixed group of Boorana, Amhara and other Ethiopian peoples fought the Italians. Bombs may have caused houses to burn, and smoke to rise from the ground<sup>7</sup>. This part could, therefore, be regarded as a mixture between an ancient prophecy and events that have been observed historically or heard about, hence added as a *vatinia ex eventu* (prophecies that are made after the event has occurred). However, in the apocalyptic literature the inclusion of past history in the vision of the future is a typical construction, which slowly leads the audience from the known and familiar to the unknown.

Guyyoo also provides details concerning the tall man coming from the direction of the east:

*Kun nama dulachiisaa dhufa, kuunoo Boorana Booroo  
ka guutuu saddeetii, kunoo muummee waaqaa-lafaa jira.  
Ka aduun artii baatu sun biraa dhufa jedhe.*

That man will come to Islamize, he comes from the original place of Boorana, where the Boorana with 8 *guutuu* [the original group of the Boorana with the 8 tufts of braided hair] lived, the place that is found at the end of the horizon. He comes from the place where the sun rises, he said.

The discussion of these annunciative signs then introduces the description of the cataclysm, the central theme of the prophecy:

*Watakka isanii qulleessa, akka innii jedhutti amma  
muummeen ya geette Taa'aa dhandhee, taa'aa dhandhee,  
taa'aa dhandhee amma miishoon ya dhufte jedhe.*

Let me clarify: according to what he said, now the end has come. We go, we go, we go, now the end has come

First, the time of the disaster is qualified. It is easy to identify it with the modern period and with contemporary techniques of food production:

*Abbaan badu quufa kana keessaa bada. Dibbeen koobaa kinniisaa Dibbeen manaa dhadhaa jedhe Sa'ii tokkochilleen okolee feete guuta jedhe. Loon gaafassi hin didiqaatan. Akka isaatii amma miishoo.*

Those to be lost will be lost in the time of plenty. The base of the termite hill is full of honey. The *dibbee* [large leather butter container] in the house is full of butter, he said. The milk yield from one cow will fill an *okolee* [open leather container used for milking] of any size, he said. At that time the number of cattle will decrease. According to him that is the time of the end.

During the session, the cataclysm was not described in universal terms, but rather in terms of how the listeners should respond locally:

*Yo wannii sun dhufte fulaan namii qubachuu male fula tami?*

When those things come, which are the good places to take refuge?

Guyyo answers:

*Baddaa muka gurraachaa Areero fa, Meeffa fa, Roomso fa, Gaayoon tunleen aadaa qabdi agabuu hin qabdu, Gaayoo tanallee keessatti Kuphiliqimsaa tana cuf keessatti maqaa dhawa, Hiigollee Walchaamala Dambiitti, Booranallee boddaan akkanaa hinuma jirti, Duuba Gooroo Fugugi jedhe*

The forests with black trees, such as Areero, Meegga, Roomso, and also Gaayo because it has *aadaa* and thus a possible place without hunger; in Gaayo he mentioned places like Kuphii Liqimsaa, in Hiigo there are opportunities for Boorana at Walchaamala and Dambii; he then said Gooroo Fugugi [the mythical escarpment of Fugugi].

The reverse is also asked:

*Yo wannii sun dhufte fulaan irraa goruu malan fulaa tami?*  
Which places should be avoided?

*Qaatulaa kana Eeye ta akkana diidaa tana. Karaa Wajeeraa hin ba'inaa. Karaa Waasoo hin ba'inaa Saakullee Saakuyyee keessaan cirriqqun dhufi.*

The valley of the *tulaa* wells [sacred deep wells], yes, those plain lands. Don't go the way of Wajir [town in north-eastern Kenya]. Don't go the way of Isiolo [town in central Kenya]. From Marsabit [locality in northern Kenya] something like a split will come.

In a second version, Guyyoo describes the cataclysm in terms of "sinking", especially associated to the west:

*Ka Saakuu sunlee hin halchinaa jedhe Saaku jibbaata jedhe, ka Saakuutuu asi gala. Adoo wa dheettanillee achiin hin balla'inaa jedhe. Kunoo gara Wajeeraa, gara Waasoo hin balla'inaa sun hin arganii armatti deebi'aa jedhe. Golboo achii gad hin bu'inaa jedhe. Akkana fuula deebi'aa jedhe. Amma ila Boruu achii gula fuulii ila Boorana ti, ila galchuu duloo bowwaa buute hin deemina jedhe.*

Do not admire/aspire to be like those in Saaku (Marsabit), he said. Saaku is lost, he said, the people

from there will return here. Even though you are running to escape there, do not get lost there, he said. Don't go in the direction of Wajir and Isiolo, if you go there, you will disappear. Come back here, he said. Don't go down to Golboo [plains south of the escarpment along the Ethiopian-Kenyan border], he said. Turn the head like this [to the east], he said. Go there, face to the east, don't go west, everything will sink, he said.

The east, on the other hand, is qualified in terms of a "burning" wind or fire:

*Malii Boorana Booroo, kuunoo ka guutuu saddeetii, kuunoo fulaa aduun baatuun nama cufa isatti achi aanu suniti diirama ka'ee afuura arga. Afuura sun keessaa ibidatti baha jedhe. Ibidda sun hinlaalinaa jedhe*

The strategy for the Boorana of Booroo [the original place of the Boorana], Boorana with 8 *guutuu*, who live far in the east where the sun rises, who live beyond all people, they will see a wind rising in the east when they get up early in the morning. That wind is the fire. Do not look at that fire, he said.

The language here is highly symbolic, recalling the idea of purity expressed by the original group of Boorana (those with the eight *guutuu*), recalling the mythical place of origin of the Boorana, thus correlating the end with the beginning. The two themes expressed in the portents, the wind bringing death and the fire, recur. Like the annunciative signs, the threats thus seem dichotomized between a sinking west, where the Boorana should not go, and a burning fire/wind in the east, that the Borana should not look at.

The concluding part consists basically of a moral message, linked to the concept of salvation. It was introduced by Guyyoo in this way:

*Waan miishoo eegan ammaa tana akka anin dhagayetti buufadha Nama mixaa diimaa arma dhufa. Nama olejjaatti gaala fa'utti garana dhufa Sunitti arma hin ga'ini, ibidda sunitti hin ba'in. Waan kana sadeen dhaga'e Namii sarii sanyiin isaa Boorana ta'e wayaa bifa qabdu yaafatee, wayaa adii akka baddoo, marduufaa uyyifachuu male.*

Now my speech of what I have heard on that thing we wait for has finished. I am still waiting for the coming of men like red termites. I wait for the coming of a man loading a camel standing. Those things have not yet arrived, that fire has not risen up. I have heard about these three things. When those things come, all people belonging to the Boorana should take off the colored clothes and wear their traditional white clothes.

The cataclysm not only involves the Boorana, but it will affect all human kind:

*Naminuu diqqaa. Yo keessaa ba'u sun akka amma lafa guute kanaaniti, kana qofa hin baanne, nu'uu kana qofa hin baanne, kuunoo agasi cufa Waaqii qubuma qaba Namii ka badutti irra guddaa, kunin ba'ee kunin hafee hin qabu. Kuno namii akka keenna kun gargaarsa Waaqaa hin dhabu jedhe.*

Humankind will be reduced. When they come out of that, it will not be like now that we are filling the earth. He did not mean only these; he did not mean only us. God knows every place without limit. The people that are going to be lost are more than those that are going to

survive. You never know which ones will be lost and which ones will survive. People like us will not miss help from God, he said.

The cataclysm is determined by God; it is a cosmological crisis, but the way to escape it is partly in the hands of the people.

*Yo wannii akkasii dhufte, yo maan tahan bahan?*

When such thing comes, what should people do to survive or escape?

*Wannii ta'uu malan kunoo Booranilleen aadaa qaba Booranii duruu korma qala, korbeessa qala, uchuma buufata, waan cufa hin ta'u, goola dhaabatee dhibaayyuu bahee, ardaa ballaatti coonii qala, buna karratti qala ( . ) jedhe. Aadaa tana amma guddoo lakkise. Gaafas hamaa keenna, yaraa keenna barbaadaa. Kunoo gaafas warra gargar bahe, fulaa innii bahe hin argan*

Here is the solution. The Boorana have culture. They should perform all the crucial rituals [listed in the text]. This *aadaa* [culture] now is highly missing. Behold! That day stick together with all your people, bad and weak ones. That day, the family which splits up will be lost, the whereabouts of the split family will not be known.

This is clearly a moral message that emphasizes cultural and religious purity. Borbor Bulee laid the same stress on the moral message of Areeroo Boosaroo's prophecy in the first interview:

*Wannii innii biyyatti himu fedhe ka namuu argu aadaa baddu ta lallaaftu. Waan cufa ka akka irraa gore kana. Kormaa korbeessaa ya lakkimne. Ka namii akkuma walt-aanuun waljibbu kana. Aadaan Booranaa tun*

*ammumaa ya badde. Amma aadaa tana akkii isiin badduun tokko waan dhugan ka nama macheessaa kanatti balleesse. Namii yo wadhugu hin machaawa, machaawu waan tokkocha qubaa hin lagatu. Waan silaa aadaa namii lagachuu male kaan tokkocha qubaa hin lagatu. Aadaan hin baddii hin lallaafti duuba Wannii hedduun aadaan laallaaftuun taan ta dhugaatii tana, taan lammeessoon ka Booranii durii wayiin uf irraa eegu taan ta raagaa sun. Taan ta innii olee ittiin bulu ayyaana 27n maru kana Ayyaanii kun Booranaa waan jajjabduu. Waan isaatuu duuba amma namii beekuu Boorana keessaa ya takaantakkate.*

What he wanted to foretell is the weakening of *aadaa*; the reign of the disorderly life we are leading. The *aadaa* is already lost. We have abandoned our ritual ceremony of *kormaa korbeessa*. Brothers and relatives do not care for one another. One of the causes is the excessive consumption of alcohol. When drunk, people do what they are not supposed to do according to the tradition. This is a breach of the law. Another causal factor is that there is no legitimate prophet who guides the society in the right direction in life. Another thing is the 27-days *ayyaana*. Maintaining the knowledge and practising *ayyaana* are crucial for Boorana. This knowledge is getting very weak as the persons with the specialized knowledge are getting fewer and fewer in number.

### **Areeroo Boosaroo's Revealed Poetry**

The poetry of Areeroo Boosaroo presented in this section was collected mainly by Boku Tache in the first interview with Borbor Bulee<sup>8</sup>. It is recited as a continuous flow of variously related sequences. It is widely regarded as a

revelation directly inspired by God (*Waaqa*). Many of the facts and metaphors contained only became recognizable after the *gadaa* of Liiban Kusee (1913-1921).

The “*eegi* sequence” (1 to 7) describes irreversible cultural and ritual changes that took place at each of the *gadaa* (eight year periods) following his death. Verse 1 on the “lack of good luck/prosperity” provides the interpretative frame for indicating these changes in a negative way, in which *gadaa*, the main element of Boorana identity, can be seen as a metaphor for the Boorana themselves. After two self-referential verses (8 and 9, with 8 providing a stylistic bridge into the next sequence), reference is first made to a coming crisis, bringing this poetry into the apocalyptic tradition. The interrogative sequence (12 to 16) deals with changes in the environment, the development of towns in ritual sites, habits borrowed from other cultures, the diffusion of alcohol in towns, the adoption of foreign dress, food aid and probably use of writing.

The “*hin qamne* – “don’t have” sequence (verses 17 to 22 with 23 working as a rhymed link into the following interrogative sequence) focuses on the values that the Boorana have lost through the change, including mental health, attachment to pastoralism and social prestige, while the following interrogative sequence outlines borrowed cultural traits, including a change in political decision-making (meetings run by the government). The sequence 29 to 33 refers to the introduction of the spirit possession cult among the Boorana, while the “*taha*” sequence (34 to 39) refers to the reversal of the social and ethnic hierarchical order. The sequence 40 to 46, variously linked through several poetic devices, refers to a change in material culture (probably cars, alcohol, shoes, socks, underwear and spectacles) while the sequence 47 to 53 refers to the destructive social effect of alcohol. The closing sequence 54 to 57 probably refers to social stratification, mainly linked to the diffusion of formal education. Sequence 58 to 60 is here listed at the end of the



poetry, but was mentioned separately by Borbor. It also refers to the reversal of the social order.

- |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | <i>Eegii Adii Dooyyoo gadaan kaayoo hin horanne</i>                                     | After Adii Dooyyoo (1899-1906) <i>gadaa</i> has not had a good luck <sup>9</sup>  |
| 2 | <i>Eegii Boruu Galmaa loon fuudhaa gandii hin duulle</i>                                | After Boruu Galmaa (1906-1913) Boorana have not gone on large-scale cattle raids anymore <sup>10</sup>  |
| 3 | <i>Eegii Liiban Kusee duulii muusoo hin boojine</i>                                     | After Liiban Kusee (1913-1921) the expeditions have not taken war booty   |
| 4 | <i>Eegii gurbaa Geedoo Boorarii odaa hin bulle</i>                                      | After the son of Geedoo (1921-29) <sup>11</sup> Borana have not encamped under the sycamore ( <i>odaa</i> ) tree <sup>12</sup>                                    |
| 5 | <i>Eegii Bulee Dabbasaa dabballee raabii hin ganne</i>                                  | After Bulee Dabbasaa (1929-36) <i>dabballee</i> are not abandoned any longer <sup>13</sup>  |
| 6 | <i>Eegii gurbaa Adii Dooyyoo kalaalaa raabii hin foone</i>                              | After the son of Adii Dooyyoo (1936-1944) <sup>14</sup> the <i>raaba</i> <sup>15</sup> have not braided <i>kalaalaa</i> <sup>16</sup>                             |
| 7 | <i>Eegii gurbaa Boruu Galmaa Boorarii buttee hin dhaamne</i>                            | After the son of Boruu Galmaa (1944 – 1952) <sup>17</sup> the Boorana have not conducted the <i>buttee</i> ceremony anymore <sup>18</sup><br>[at the proper site] |
| 8 | <i>Eegii tiyya raagii dhibiin Booranaa hin jiru</i>                                     | After me, there will not be another prophet for Boorana   |
| 9 | <i>Gaafa wannii ani raagu sun taatu warra kiyya dhalaa malee kormii gubbaa hin jiru</i> | The time when my prophecies are fulfilled, male members of my descendants, except the female, will not be on  |

- 10 *Booranii badee gadaan Diida jedhee*  
*baraan xiloo jedhee* the face of the earth  
Boorana will call the  
*gadaa* by a name Diida,  
the epoch of crisis by the  
name Xiloo (sharp stick)<sup>19</sup>
- 11 *Kateebuu galaana naqee nadheen*  
*garaa walbaqassa* They put *kateebuu* in  
the river and cut the  
stomachs of pregnant  
women
- 12 *Yaaballaa ardaa jilaa gubbaatti mana*  
*hin jajaarree?* Are there not houses built  
at the wider ritual site of  
Yaaballaa?<sup>20</sup>
- 13 *Tulluu fardaa gubbaatti mana hin*  
*jaarree?* Are there not houses built  
on Tulluu Fardaa (Horse  
Hill)?<sup>21</sup>
- 14 *Mana sun keessaa wadhugaa namii*  
*deemu kun cuftii maraataa hin taanee?* Have not all men become  
mad as they drink from  
those houses?<sup>22</sup>
- 15 *Dhiiraa nadheen hin qabuu namii*  
*cuftii burree elelloo hin taanee?* Have not all, without dis-  
tinction between men and  
women, become full of  
spots of different colours?<sup>23</sup>
- 16 *Mucaan tokkochii erbee adii nama*  
*dura qabee akka loonii marrataa*  
*gula*  
*hin yaanee?* Have not all, in commo-  
tion and bellowing like  
cattle, followed a boy  
who carries a “white  
skin”?<sup>23</sup>
- 17 *Boorana surree mataa hin qamne* The Boorana who do  
not have the white tur-  
ban on their heads<sup>24</sup>
- 18 *Boorana surrii fayyaa hin qamne* The Boorana whose  
brains do not have  
health<sup>25</sup>
- 19 *Warra hidhaanaa gurdaa hin qamne* Those who do not wear  
strings on their waists<sup>26</sup>
- 20 *Warra hidhanuu loonii hin qamne*<sup>27</sup> Those who do not love  
and care for their cattle

- 21 *Warra kopeen gurra hin qamne* Those whose shoes lack 'ears'
- 22 *Ka waareen gannaa gurruu hin qamne* Those whose cows do not have [big] udders even in the time of plenty<sup>28</sup>
- 23 *Ka gurraa jedhee womaa hin dhamne* Those who do not care about their fame/reputation
- 24 *Warrii mataa goolaa hin dhufnee?* Have not people with untidy wild hair come?<sup>29</sup>
- 25 *Dubbii hin goollee?* Have they not burst into words?
- 26 *Korii olejaajjaa hin taanee?* Have not meetings been held standing?<sup>30</sup>
- 27 *Yooyyaa jedhee waldhungachuu lakkisee namii deemu cuftii harka wal hin qabannee?* Does not everybody shake hands instead of greeting each other in the customary way (kissing preceding *yooyyaa*)?<sup>31</sup>
- 28 *Gaafas wannii innii itti yaa' u nafa hin qabannee?* Has not the thing towards which they were heading touched their body?<sup>32</sup>
- 29 *Madhakii gadaa Madhaa* Confusion in the gadaa of Madha (1952 – 60)<sup>33</sup>
- 30 *Namii maraatu dide du' ee* Those who refuse to be mad shall die<sup>34</sup>
- 31 *Namii maraatu fayye* Those who choose to be mad shall be cured
- 32 *Aarii liqimsaa tahee* Smoke becomes food<sup>35</sup>
- 33 *Maraataan yuuba biyyaa tahe* The mad man becomes a diviner<sup>36</sup>
- 34 *Gaallolee Gabra taha* They [Boorana] will live on camels like Gabra<sup>37</sup>
- 35 *Ree' ee Reendila taha* They will live on sheep and goats like the Rendille<sup>38</sup>
- 36 *Wa hadhaa Waata taha* They will hunt like the Waata<sup>39</sup>
- 37 *Wal gataa nyaapha taha* They will kill one another

- 38 *Nyaaphaan obboleessa taha* like enemies  
They will become like  
brothers with the historical  
enemies
- 39 *Obboleessi garaa haadhaa walitti sidii  
taha* Brothers of one womb  
will become enemies to  
each other
- 40 *Geejjiba mi'aan godaanu duudhaa garaa  
dhabe* I fail to see loading ropes  
on the belly of the pack  
animal<sup>40</sup>
- 41 *Gumii manaa dhuqqiftu ulee balbalaa  
dhabe* The multitude talk loudly  
from inside the house, but  
I fail to see their sticks at  
the entrance<sup>41</sup>
- 42 *Kophee war seessa duudaaa naqata* They will wear shoes that  
are closed like the body of  
a rhinoceros
- 43 *Gaafasi Boorana kopheen lamaa* That time Boorana will  
wear two pairs of shoes
- 44 *Kopheetti kophee keessa jira* There are other shoes in-  
side the shoes
- 45 *Hidhaatti hidhaa keessa jira* There are other trousers  
inside the trousers
- 46 *Ilatti ila gubbaa jira* There are other eyes on  
the eyes
- 47 *Bisaan habqallee qottichaan buusee* They pour water of  
*abqallee*<sup>42</sup>
- 48 *Sanqaltichaan fooqqisa* They drink it from the  
*sanqallicha*<sup>43</sup>
- 49 *Booranii hin baduu babbadda'a* Boorana will not dis-  
appear but become  
normless
- 50 *Hin cituu hin cittaa'a* They will not perish  
but will develop scabies<sup>44</sup>
- 51 *Babbaddaan far soo dhuddee* The normless are those  
who drink alcohol
- 52 *Badiin buddeena nyaattee* Doomed to perish are  
those who eat *injera*<sup>45</sup>

53	<i>Baduu gahee beekee walii wallaaluu dide</i>	They will refuse to respect/ accommodate each other when about to perish
54	<i>Namii fulaa sadiitti qoodama</i>	Man will be divided into two places <sup>46</sup>
55	<i>Tooko hin barrisaa</i>	One flies
56	<i>Tokko wabarreesaa</i>	One writes
57	<i>Kaan qotatetti boollatti gala</i>	One digs a hole and lives there
58	<i>Kiyyaa kiyyaa gartaa gartaa?</i>	My son! My son! Do you see? Do you see?
59	<i>Harreen moggaa diddee gartaa?</i>	Do you see donkeys refusing to graze by the side [of cattle] <sup>47</sup>
60	<i>Tisseen mittoo diddee gartaa?</i>	Do you see servants refusing to be subordinate?

### Sacred Poetic Text by Moroo Uchumaa

The following two verses referred to by Guyyoo were identified by Borbor as being first formulated by Moroo Uchumaa, himself an acknowledged prophet, in the form of *hiibboo* (puzzle) during the *gadaa* of Abbayii Baabboo (1656-64). They refer to the reversal of the natural order.

<i>Adaalii marra baase</i>	A completely barren land grows grass
<i>Buqqeen dhakaa cabsite</i>	Hedge breaks the stone

### Sacred Poetic Text by Waariyoo Uudati

In Guyyoo Dambii's version the following verses were included in Areero Boosaroo's "*taha*" sequence (34 to 39).

Borbor Bule has attributed them to Waariyoo Uudati, one of the earlier prophets.

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| 1 | <i>Gumii burriyyaa taha</i>                                     | They will multiply like the swarm of birds (burriyyaa) <sup>48</sup>                       |
| 2 | <i>Burree qeeramsa taha</i>                                     | They will become spotted like the leopard <sup>49</sup>                                    |
| 3 | <i>Adoo jaarsii jiruu gurbaan qeerroo<br/>abbaa warraa taha</i> | An unmarried son acts like the father (head) of the family, while the family head is alive |
| 4 | <i>Eelee Saffara taha</i>                                       | They will depend on cooking pots like the Somali <sup>50</sup>                             |
| 5 | <i>Haga Saffaree dulattutti eessaa<br/>Boorana taha</i>         | They bow down like Muslims and then become [real] Boorana again                            |

### Poetic Text by Harmiso

The following verses recited by Guyyoo Dambii were identified by Borbor Bulee as having first been formulated by Harmiso, an oral historian (*nama argaa dhageettii*) who had learned the old prophetic traditions. He lived before Areero Boosaaro, but we do not exactly know when. His poetry is considered to adhere to the older prophecies, but to be based on the crisis that occurred during the *gadaa* of Guyyoo Boruu Ungulee (1880-1888), before the *cinna tiittee gurraachaa* ("the time of the black flies"). *Cinna* is a major cyclical crisis. The most recent was the great rinderpest pandemic and famine that affected all the eastern African pastoral communities at the turn of the nineteenth century. Elders say that the *cinna* actually began towards the end of the *gadaa* of Guyyoo Boruu Ungulee, although it is popularly attributed to the *gadaa* of Liiban

Jaldessaa (1888-1896), as this was when the maximum impact was felt<sup>51</sup>.

Harmiso presents his poetry as a number of signs, which appear in a changing world (see explicit reference in verses 7, 8, and 32), that announce the coming of the cataclysm. Both the content of the verses and the coming of the cataclysm were foretold by earlier prophets. These parts, therefore, constitute a nineteenth century poetic reformulation or interpretation of older prophecies, describing the characteristics of a future society. This reinterpretation by non-ecstatic prophets is not unusual in the apocalyptic literature (cf. Davies 1990; Emmet 1956).

Harmiso's verses are not recited in continuous succession, but each sequence is inserted into other contexts. The opening pair (verses 1 and 2) discloses the change in the fundamental values of "truth" amongst the Boorana, and refers, again, to the habit of drinking, which appeared only after the Amhara conquest at the end of the nineteenth century and is now critically affecting the society<sup>52</sup>. The sequence 3 to 8 is probably inspired by the situation of starvation during the *cinna*, linked to the idea of irreversible change. The sequence 9 to 15 is entirely dedicated to changes in the political order. It is probably based on the absence of political and juridical life (verses 9 and 10) and break down of social solidarity (verses 10) during the great *cinna* crisis, but also depicts the current political crisis of the Boorana in a remarkably precise manner. Public meetings or assemblies are still the core element of the customary political system, based on consensual decision making, where authoritative political and judicial decisions are made. While verses 9 to 11 and 14 and 15 describe the absence of good public life due either to an environmental crisis or to the marginalization of the customary political system in the modern nation-state, verses 12 and 13 seem to apply only to a specific situation of political subordination. It is difficult not to read verse 12 in modern terms, as representing the abuse of

freedom of speech and 13 and as an explicit invitation to maintain a critical attitude even in a situation of political subordination and of violation of basic human and political rights. In this light, the entire sequence can be read and interpreted in view of the incorporation of the Oromo into a different and repressive polity. Verses 16 to 41 are a powerful chiliastic sequence, illustrating the reversal of social order and values. The sequence closes, like the narrative and dialogic component of the apocalypse, with reference to *aadaa*, a complex concept referring contextually to norms and oral law, custom, tradition, or, in this context, to social order.

1	<i>Booranii dhugaa hin quufu</i>	The Boorana will not be satisfied with truth
2	<i>Boranii dhugee hin quufu</i>	The Boorana will never have enough of drinking
3	<i>Okoleen goffee okkotee bira tataa' a</i>	The <i>okolee</i> becomes empty, people will sit by the <i>okkotee</i> <sup>53</sup>
4	<i>Doolii buullessa hin qabu carfiin bulaa hin qabdu</i>	The <i>doola</i> <sup>54</sup> will not have butter, the <i>carfi</i> <sup>55</sup> will not have milk traces
5	<i>Mir gisaan mucha hin qabu</i>	The very good milk yielding cow will not have teats <sup>56</sup>
6	<i>Mirgoon gabbina hin qabdu</i>	The steer will not have fat
7	<i>Waan arra arge bor hin argu</i>	What is seen today will not be seen tomorrow
8	<i>Waan bor arge iftaan hin argu</i>	What is seen tomorrow will not be seen the day after tomorrow
9	<i>Wa hin qorinaa</i>	Do not talk at public meetings
10	<i>Wa hin murinaa</i>	Do not make judicial decisions (also: do not have political/judicial authority)



- |    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| 11 | <i>Wa hin tolinaa</i>   | Do not support those in need  |
| 12 | <i>Afaan cufadhaa</i>   | Shut your mouth   |
| 13 | <i>Gurra hin cufatinaa</i>  | Do not close your ears  |
| 14 | <i>Shanan keessan bobbaasaa</i>   | The few cows you have, take them to pasture                           |
| 15 | <i>Shantii teessan qaladhaa</i>   | The few goats you have, kill and eat them                             |
| 16 | <i>Adoo jiruu jaar sii qeerroo taha</i>                                 | There is an elder, he stays like an unmarried /inexperienced youth    |
| 17 | <i>Ijoollee qeerroo ta affarroo hin dotteesinitti abbaa warraa taha</i> | Young boys without moustaches behave/act like the head of a family    |
| 18 | <i>Angafii maandhaa taha</i>  | The senior (first born) becomes the junior (last born)                |
| 19 | <i>Maandhaatti angafa taha</i>  | The junior (last born) becomes the senior (first born)                |
| 20 | <i>Gursumeettiin gammee taati</i>                                       | The wife taken in second marriage becomes the legitimate (first) wife |
| 21 | <i>Gammeen gursumaha taati</i>  | The legitimate (first) wife becomes the wife in second marriage       |
| 22 | <i>Balchaan budaa taati</i>   | The clean person becomes the one with the evil eye                    |
| 23 | <i>Budaan balchaa taati</i>   | The person with the evil eye becomes the clean one                    |
| 24 | <i>Dhartii dhugaa taati</i>   | The false becomes truth   |
| 25 | <i>Dhugaan dhara taati</i>  | Truth becomes false   |
| 26 | <i>Ilmii warraa garbicha taha</i>                                       | The son of the family becomes (lives) like the servants               |
| 27 | <i>Garbichii ilma warraa taha</i>                                       | The servants become (live) like the son of the family                 |

28	<i>Fardii harree taha</i>	The horse becomes the donkey <sup>57</sup>
29	<i>Harreen farda taati</i>	The donkey becomes the horse
30	<i>Waraabessii nyeenca taha</i>	The hyena becomes the lion <sup>58</sup>
31	<i>Nyeencii waraabessa taha</i>	The lion becomes the hyena
32	<i>Jaldeessii gaaraalleen egeri nama nyaataa qeerramsa taha</i>	In future the baboons will eat men like the leopard
34	<i>Wannii duraa cuftii duubatti deebiti</i>	The things that were in front will go to the back
35	<i>Wannii duubaa cufa egerii duratti deebiti</i>	The things that were in the back will go to the front
36	<i>Qaroon daallee</i>	The clever/famous become ignorant
37	<i>Daalleen qaroo</i>	The ignorant become clever/famous
38	<i>Hamaan tolaa</i>	The stingy person (is) generous
39	<i>Tolaan hamaa</i>	The generous becomes stingy
40	<i>Aadmaleen aadaa</i>	Normlessness becomes a norm
41	<i>Aadaan hin gaggabdi</i>	<i>Aadaa</i> (social norm) faints

## Poetic Texts by Afanco, Aseebo and Waaree Mogorree

Aseebo, Afanco and Waaree Mogorree were important figures trained in oral history, *argaa dhageettii*. According to Borbor Bulee, the three men belonged to the same age group. Aseebo belonged to the Karrayyu clan. His village is mentioned in Vannutelli and Citerni (1899) in their account of

Bottego's second expedition to the Omo River (1895-97). At that time Asebo was an elder. Afanco and Waaree Mogorree were both from the Qarcabduu Buuyyamaa clan. Like Harmiso, Afanco, Aseebo and Waare Mongorree were not themselves prophets, but reformulated older prophetic traditions on the basis of the current experience and changes that were already taking place. The verses reported here were first mentioned by Guyyoo Dambii and attributed to these historians by Borbor Bulee. They are not, therefore, considered as a direct revelation from God.

Verses 1 to 6 have been qualified by Borbor as joke-like elements created by Afancoo and Aseebo to ostracize those that had adopted Islam. It refers to the breach of the rule of exogamic marriage between the two moieties, which occurred during the *gadaa* of Guyyoo Boruu Ungulee (1880-88), before the tribulations of the *cinna*. Verse 7 refers to the cataclysm and qualifies the following sequence (8 to 13) as a portent and refers again to abandoned rituals and customs, as well as to "blindness" and "deafness", probably in respect to proper moral and ritual behaviour.

- |   |                                      |  |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1 | <i>Sabbotti intala sabboo fuudha</i> | Men from Sabbo<br>(moiety) marry the girls<br>of Sabbo   |
| 2 | <i>Goonatti intala goonaa fuudha</i> | Men from Goona (moiety)<br>marry the girls from<br>Goona |
| 3 | <i>Miilii lafa hanqatee</i>          | The foot is lifted out<br>of the ground <sup>59</sup>    |
| 4 | <i>Miiloon wal hanqatee</i>          | The lineage splits                                       |
| 5 | <i>Garaan haadhaa wal hanqatee</i>   | The offspring of the<br>same mother split                |
| 6 | <i>Abbaa fi ilmii walhanqata</i>     | The father and the sons<br>split                         |
| 7 | <i>Gaafa waan itti yaa'u gahe.</i>   | At the time when that<br>thing is going to arrive:       |

8	<i>Ceera hin qabu</i>	(They) have no respect/ shame
9	<i>Seeda hin qabu</i>	(They) have/use no <i>seeda</i> <sup>60</sup>
10	<i>Dhawaa hin qabu</i>	(They) have/(conduct) no <i>dhawaa</i> ceremony <sup>61</sup>
11	<i>Dhibaayyuu hin qabu</i>	(They) have/(conduct) no <i>dhibaayyuu</i> ceremony <sup>62</sup>
12	<i>Gurra allaattiitti nyaata hin dhaga'u</i>	The ear is eaten by the vulture, (they) do not hear
13	<i>Ila allaattiitti nyaata hin argu</i>	The eye is eaten by the vulture, (they) do not see

### Poetic Text by an Anonymous Author

The following text, by an unidentified author, was mentioned by Guyyoo Dambii in connection to Areeroo Boosaroo's sequence 17 to 20. Whoever their author, the sequences 1 to 6 and those that follow indicate a reversal of the social order in terms of the demarcation of time, space, livelihoods (activities, land tenure, food habits). It represents a powerful critique of the social changes and loss of values affecting present day society. More specifically, sequence 7 to 19 focuses on the change from pastoralism to agriculture. These changes began at the time of the conquest, but only started affecting the economy in a significant manner from 1970 onwards, rising to a critical point in the last 10 years. The contents of verses 7 to 15, particularly 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15 were not central to public debate at the time the interview was recorded, but have become of political concern in 2005, when formal complaints are being made at recent national and international meetings of pastoralists, attended by the Boorana customary leadership.

In Guyyoo's account the sequence 20 to 27 below was added to Afanco's verses 1 and 2 on the breach of the rule of exogamy. The sequence looks like a conclusive reelaboration

(perhaps created by Guyyoo Dambii himself) of the concepts already expressed in the poetry of Areeroo and others, expressing the break down of the social order (*aadaa*), identified in marriage rules, proper verbal communication, symbols of social status (reference to the stick), food and drink (reference to the destructive effects of alcohol), solidarity, political and juridical decision making.

- |    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| 1  | <i>Hidhatee gorfoo hin qabuu</i>        | Women will not have the traditional leather dress   |
| 2  | <i>Ollaa soloola hin qabu</i>           | The village will not have internal demarcations   |
| 3  | <i>Tissaan soroora hin qabu</i>         | The cattle herders will not have <i>soroora</i> <sup>63</sup>                             |
| 4  | <i>Cicciisaa oolchaa hin qabu</i>       | The area in front of the <i>karra</i> <sup>64</sup> will not have an enclosure for calves |
| 5  | <i>Ka'imii oolii hin qabu</i>           | The youth will not have recreation  |
| 6  | <i>Alaa warraa ollaa hin qabu</i>       | The people will not have villagemen at the homestead and friends outside the homestead    |
| 7  | <i>Dirree qota</i>                      | They will till Dirree <sup>65</sup> .   |
| 8  | <i>Dirra Liiban qota</i>                | They will till Liiban Plateau <sup>66</sup>   |
| 9  | <i>Baddaa sadeen qota</i>               | They will till the three dark forests <sup>67</sup>                                       |
| 10 | <i>Lafa gad-qotetti qota baasa</i>      | They will till and exhaust the land (in productivity)                                     |
| 11 | <i>Lafa walfalmaa ila walitti baasa</i> | They will confront each other (with red eyes) over land ownership disputes                |
| 12 | <i>Loon fulaa bahan dhaban</i>          | Cows will have no place to pass   |
| 13 | <i>Karaa bobbaa dhaban</i>              | They will have no path to the grazing field   |

14	<i>Karaa galchumaa dhaba</i>	They will have no way back home
15	<i>Karaa alaa dhaba</i>	Boorana will lose paths to go out by
16	<i>Karaa awwaara hin qamnetti itti baha</i>	A road without dust will be made
17	<i>Awwaalii fulaa hin qabu</i>	There will be no place for the tomb
18	<i>Sooda fulaa bu'uun hin qabu</i>	They will have no place to go down the deep crater lake to collect salt <sup>68</sup>
19	<i>Soodduu fulaa itti dhaabatu hin qabu</i>	They will not have a place to perform the funerary and commemorative rituals for deceased parents
20	<i>Ilmatti haadha fuudha</i>	The son marries the mother <sup>69</sup>
21	<i>Abbaatti ilmee dhale fuudha</i>	The father marries the daughter
22	<i>Fuudha dabee, dabee maraate</i>	Disorderly marriage, mad in disorder
23	<i>Ulee mataa dabaatiin yaa'ee</i>	Go with a stick with twisted head (disorderly stick)
23	<i>Daba dubbata</i>	Speak with disorder
24	<i>Daba dhuga</i>	Drink with disorder
25	<i>Daba tola</i>	Help <sup>70</sup> with disorder
26	<i>Daba qora</i>	Speak <sup>71</sup> with disorder
27	<i>Daba mura</i>	Make juridical decisions with disorder

## Conclusion

The prophetic texts presented in this paper, which follow the typical narrative structure of the apocalyptic genre, announce a natural and cosmological cataclysm. The sacred

verses, on the other hand, portray a reversal or total absence of orderly social life. In these verses, although this is not stated explicitly, the expectation of the cataclysm overlaps with its signs: the apocalypse has already occurred and consists of its omens. From this point of view, the cataclysm would appear to be a metaphorical expression of the end of the social order, a negative representation of the irreversible social changes that are taking place.

It is well known that prophecy flourishes in situations of social and political stress. Sauerbrei's (1947) description of the conditions that led to the emergence of the canonical prophets in ancient Israel can also be applied to the situation of the Boorana. Like in Israel, the shift of the Boorana over the last century "from a pastoral culture through an agricultural phase to a society dominated by urban classes and subjected to the anxieties of life in a world ruled by economic and military imperialism caused strain in the moral structure of the society" (Sauerbrei 1947: 212). The revelations of Areeroo Boosaroo very clearly illustrate this change, which is manifested by the abandonment of important rituals, the development of towns and adoption of urban habits, the loss of fundamental values, the borrowing of alien cultural traits that lead to the reversal of the social order, and social stratification. The signs described in the narrative make an explicit link between the adoption of these alien elements and the apocalypse. The two men who come from the west and the east are, perhaps, metaphors for modernity and Islam, the two aspects that are currently most strongly influencing and affecting Oromo culture and society. The poetic utterances portray a society in which these two outside influences have probably already arrived. Historically speaking, the closing decade of the nineteenth century, which was a period of profound crises (*cinna*) that affected all aspects of society, marked the turning point. This was also a time of intense prophetic elaboration, as evidenced by the texts of

Harmiso, Afanco, Aseebo, Waaree Mogorree and probably by those of Areeroo Boosaroo himself.

The response of the Boorana to these alien elements is one of distance and of neutral respect. There is neither a refusal of nor an enthusiasm for the new ways. Never are these outside influences represented as antagonistic to the Boorana; never are integration, fusion and syncretism actively pursued. The changes affecting society and culture are merely seen as being contaminating. In response to these changes, like the pre-canonical holy men (*nabi*) of Israel (Sauerbrei 1947: 209), the Oromo prophets and their contemporary narrators have been appealing, through their inspired messages, against the violation of the purer traditions of the past. They are, thus, disseminating a moral and spiritual message. The two outsiders announce (and perhaps bring about) this cosmological cataclysm.

Yet for the Oromo, this apocalypse is not regarded as marking the end of the world, as in other eschatological traditions. Rather, in their “cyclical” conception of time, it is seen as marking the end of an epoch or era (*jaatama*). The end of a *jaatama* is characterized by chaos and confusion in all aspects of life, which include war, disease and ecological catastrophe, not only at the societal, but also at the global level (Megerssa and Kassam 2004; Megeerssa, this volume). It brings about a “civilizational” change, in which the old order comes to an end and a new one is born from the ashes. For, as Megeerssa and Kassam (2004: 251) explain, in Oromo time repeats itself, but never in the same way. Cycles are thus open-ended, like spirals; they make concentric “rounds” (*marā*). According to Boorana oral historians, this new beginning will be marked by a return to the origins of Oromo society, to the time of Horo, the eponymous founder of the nation (Megerssa and Kassam, personal communication).

From this perspective the apocalypse would simply describe the cyclical end of an era, implying cosmological



crisis and renovation without the need for supernatural intervention. This conception would explain why the *raaga* do not seem to have provided any innovative message. Such an innovative element would emerge out of the cataclysm in a renovated civilization. But they have indicated the way out of this crisis: looking back to the Oromo roots and maintaining ritual purity. The concept of a new era would also explain why Areeroo Bosaaroo prophesized that there would be no other *ragaa* for the Boorana after him (verse 8), emphasizing the gap between himself and the one still to be born in the indefinite future. For, according to Borbor Bulee, Areeroo Bosaaroo has also foretold the coming of a new prophet, thus announcing the return of better times:

*Inni waan jedhe Boorana cinnaa mataan gad dacha'e,  
maraataan aara ibiddaa dhugee nama raagu sun,  
bisaan habqallee ka nama maraachaa sun cufa Boorana  
keessaa badanii, raagii nadheen Karrayyuu Suunqannaa  
ta dubra Hawaxxuu Waldhinsaa irraa dhalatee Booranii  
goomittaa horata jedhe.*

Areeroo Boosaroo said that when Boorana reach the climax of their current tribulations, the mad diviners feeding on the fire smoke [*ayyaana* spirits] will disappear; that strange maddening “water” will disappear; a Karrayyuu Suunqannaa clan woman who was born from the Hawaxxuu Waldhinsa clan will give birth to a prophet. This will mark a turning point in the future life of Boorana.

What Borbor says is very widely believed in Boorana today, where people are waiting for the birth of the new prophet.

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**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> Boorana use the expression *biyeen isaalisii sablatinna* out of respect when mentioning the name of a deceased person.

<sup>2</sup> The word *gadaa* may refer either to the central grade of the generational class system or to the eight year period during which the class stays “in power”. Historically, this period is known by the name of the ruling senior officer of the generational class, known as the *abbaa gadaa*, the “father of the eight year period”. The Gregorian dates of the *gadaa* periods are based on Legesse’s chronology (1973: 190-1). This chronology has been compiled on the assumption of a fixed eight-year time span for each *gadaa*, without taking into considering the adjustment of one lunar intercalary month occurring approximately once every three years (Bassi 1986).

<sup>3</sup> The word prophet, in the sense of “foreteller”, derives from Greek. In the Greek cults, the prophets used to interpret answers contained in the oracles.

<sup>4</sup> This was the time of conquest when the *yaa’a* was attacked by the occupation army of Menelik in Liban.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah went about naked off and on for three years in the city of Jerusalem, while Amos complains about his call: “I am only a herdsman and dresser of sycamore trees – why me?”- (Emmet 1956: 19).

<sup>6</sup> The prophetic accuracy of this utterance is astonishing. The retired *abbaa gadaa*, Boruu Guyyoo, was assassinated soon after the power transfer, at the end of 1992, under uncertain circumstances. Boruu Guyyoo was actively engaged in the peace talks following the 1991-2 clashes between the Boorana

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and the Garri/Gabra Migo returnees (Bassi 1997). The transition mentioned here actually marked the beginning of a time of intense political struggle for the Boorana, which, at the time of the interview, before the fall of the Derg, was absolutely unpredicable in rational terms.

<sup>7</sup> A similar reference to the destructive capacity of modern arms during the Italian war, with a stress on the symbolic value of the soil, is made by Horra Sora in the documentary film "Bury the spear". In the same documentary, the ritual leader of the Arbore speaks about the capacity of God to speak to man in dreams, and probably he refers to the same prophetic tradition described here.

<sup>8</sup> Verses 1 to 7 were given by Guyyoo Dambii, the rest by Borbor, with several also mentioned by Guyyoo.

<sup>9</sup> *Kaayoo*: this word, used in many prayers and blessings, refers to a complex metaphysical concept (cf. Hinnant 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Refers to the practice by the *kuusa* (youngest warriors/herders in the cycle of generation classes) of shaving their long hair after a cattle raid. In some cases, the "raid" could also take place in a ritual or dramatized form.

<sup>11</sup> Refers to the *gadaa* of Areeroo, the son of Geedoo.

<sup>12</sup> Refers to a specific ritual, implemented by the *gadaa* councillors with the *qaalluu* (high religious dignitaries associated with each of the moiety and living in their own ritual village), performed under a specific holy tree. The ceremony is called *odaa bulan* and is held at Odaa, a ritual site located to the northeast of Nageellee Boorana town, in Liban

District, now occupied by the Gujji Oromo (see Legesse, 1973: 16).

<sup>13</sup> *Dabballee* is the first stage of the generation class life cycle. They are the sons of the *raaba doorii* (senior warriors), but marriage occurs on entrance into the *raaba didiqqaa* (junior warrior) stage. During the eight years of the *raaba didiqqaa* grade, until the performance of the *danniisa* ceremony, the men are not allowed to father children; any children born during this period should be abandoned in the forest. This regulation was officially abrogated during the *Gumii Gaayoo* (general assembly of the Boorana with legislative capacity) held during the *gadaa* of Gobbaa Bulee (1968–1976), but pressure to abandon the practice was probably made by the Ethiopian government earlier.

<sup>14</sup> Refers to the *gadaa* of Aagaa Adii.

<sup>15</sup> *Raaba*: warrior grade preceding *gadaa* in the generational class life cycle.

<sup>16</sup> *Kalaalaa* (*Ihunbergia alata* or *Ipomoea wightii*) type of vine made into a garland and worn on the heads of the *qomicha* (*gadaa* class) on the morning when their patriclass performs the ritual hair shaving ceremony known as *buufattoo*.

<sup>17</sup> It is the *gadaa* of Guyyoo Boruu.

<sup>18</sup> *Buttee*: complex ritual reported by several authors (see Triulzi and Bitime, this volume). Among the Boorana, it was performed by the *gadaa* at specific sites. The *yaa'a arbooraa* (the senior village of the assembly, generally composed of three villages) collected milk and put it in a large milk container, the *buttee*, in the house of a ritual specialist. Grass was brought to the *buttee* bull inside the cattle enclosure, then

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the *luuba* (generational class) that was in power began a military campaign (real or dramatized) in the direction taken by the *buttee* bull. There are several places where the *buttee* ceremony was implemented, mainly east of Mooyyaale, in the territory now lost due to Somali speaking groups during the last century.

<sup>19</sup> Foretelling the great internal conflict in Boorana during the *gadaa* of Diida Bittaataa (1872-80) when some groups killed each other with sharp sticks (*xiloo*).

<sup>20</sup> Foreseeing the establishment of Yaaballoo town at the site that used to be a ritual ground (*ardaa jilaa*) for *gadaammojjii*. Other ritual sites include Madheeraa Sirbaa, the site where the Zonal police Station was established, and Kuphii Curraa that are both now part of the town. The latter still retains its original name.

<sup>21</sup> Tulluu Fardaa is the original name of the place where Meegga town was founded by armed settlers.

<sup>22</sup> Referring to the habit of drinking spirits introduced by the northern settlers and immigrants in towns.

<sup>23</sup> According to Borbor the white skin was a code for the white paper that contains the names of relief recipients. It is important to note that relief had not been known to Boorana before 1973 (Boku Tache 1996)

<sup>24</sup> In Boorana tradition, a married man is required to wear a head turban. These days, however, even the married men go without it, whilst some wear a cap like townsfolk.

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<sup>25</sup> Borbor states that the lack of mental health is caused by alcohol intake.

<sup>26</sup> It is customary that all males, old and young, wear a string on their waists. It is called *anfala* for girls and women.

<sup>27</sup> Verses 17 to 20 were given in the following form by Guyyoo Dambii: *Mataa surree hin qabu, Surrii fayyaa hin qabu, Hidhaanaa gurdaa hin qabu, Hidhanuu loonii hin qabu.*

<sup>28</sup> Big udders signify plentifulness in milk production.

<sup>29</sup> Borbor states that people fitting the above description were first seen in Boorana land during the Development through Cooperation Campaign carried out following the downfall of the Haile Sellasie regime. The implementors were known as *samaachii*, the corrupted form of Amhaic word *zemach* meaning “campaigner”. Now the rural youth imitate this urban hairstyle.

<sup>30</sup> It is not customary in Boorana tradition to address a gathering from a standing position (*gaaddisa irra ol hin ejjan*), except during the *Gumii Gaayoo* general assembly, when a person with a loud voice is chosen to repeat what the guardian of the law, the *abbaa seeraa*, and the leadership have proclaimed.

<sup>31</sup> The typical adult to adult greeting goes: *bultiin nagayaa, horiin nagayaa*, [then kiss], *yooyyaa...*

<sup>32</sup> Referring to the loss of customary ways of life and central Boorana values.

<sup>33</sup> He was able to foretell the personal name of the future *abbaa gadaa*.

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<sup>34</sup> This may refer to the introduction of spirit (*ayyaana*) possession during the *gadaa* of Madha Galmaa (1952-60). The possessed person acts as if he/she was mad. The people of the *ayyaana* claimed that those who accept and respect the spirit would be protected by it, while those who refused would be vulnerable to disease, hence threatened by death.

<sup>35</sup> During the ceremony for the spirit, it is given incense smoke to inhale, as a form of sacrifice.

<sup>36</sup> This refers to the fact that the possessed person engages in divination during the ritual.

<sup>37</sup> Group of Oromo camel keepers, see this volume.

<sup>38</sup> Pastoral group living in northern Kenya.

<sup>39</sup> Section of the Boorana specialized in hunting.

<sup>40</sup> This may refer to trucks (lorries).

<sup>41</sup> Borbor interprets the multitude making noise from inside the house as those people drinking alcohol in town. In a typical Boorana village if there are many people talking inside a house, one would expect to find many sticks to be left leaning against the entrance.

<sup>42</sup> It is unidentified "water" poured from and drunk with unidentified utensils. According to Borbor, this "water" is now thought to be alcohol and the utensils refer to kettles and glasses (typical for *tej*) respectively.

<sup>43</sup> *Sanqallicha* refers to the unidentified utensils (see above).

<sup>44</sup> Scabies does not necessarily refer to a skin disease. It is a code for the forthcoming problems that will cause itching, cutting deep into the central values of the society.

<sup>45</sup> A typical food of highland Ethiopians made of grain called *tef*.

<sup>46</sup> According to Borbor's interpretation, these categories mean that people will be divided according to their skills and life styles. The first category refers to those who fly by aeroplane and who drive vehicles; the second category to those with writing skills, while the third category refers to those living in strange (flat top) houses in towns. Others will be left outside: *kaan diidatti hafa*. These will lead the most miserable life. Borbor says *sun nu'uu raayyaa kana*, "these are we, the ordinary rural people."

<sup>47</sup> Refers to disorder in life according to Borbor.

<sup>48</sup> *Burriyyaa*: species of small birds living in large flocks. This could be a metaphor for towns, or colored cloths, as opposed to the traditional white clothes.

<sup>49</sup> As in previous verse.

<sup>50</sup> In opposition to milk containers, hence cooked food (maize) from farming, as opposed to milk from livestock.

<sup>51</sup> An analogy could be made here with the early nineteenth century prophetic movements among in the Columbian plateau, which later generated the controversial Ghost Dance among the the Northern Piate in 1870. Vibert (1995: 218) has identified the devastating outbreaks of smallpox epidemics in the 1770s and in



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1800-1, and the resulting population decimation as key factors, leading to internally culturally-grounded processes of cleansing and renewal.

<sup>52</sup> The consumption and sale of alcohol has significantly declined in the rural areas following the ban made by the *gadaa* leadership in July 2002.

<sup>53</sup> *Okolee*: leather container used for milking cows. *Okkotee*: cooking pot made by the Waata. This metaphor refers to a shift in food habits (from milk products to grain) that became widespread only during the second half of the last century.

<sup>54</sup> *Doola*: large leather container for butter. *Carfii*: container for churning milk. *Bulaa*: refers to what remains sticking to the wall of the churning vessel from the process of butter making.

<sup>55</sup> Milk churning vessel made of wood or plant fiber

<sup>56</sup> Meaning the cow will yield only very little milk.

<sup>57</sup> The horse is highly valued by the Boorana and its significance is expressed both in oral law and ritual.

<sup>58</sup> Lion and hyena are often used as metaphors of strong and weak persons respectively.

<sup>59</sup> Meaning those people who abandon their strong cultural background (*aadaa*) will lose their identity and ground to stand on.

<sup>60</sup> *Seeda*: polite, ceremonial language, avoiding use of certain bad words. Good and respectful elders often speak in this way.

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<sup>61</sup> Part of the *gadaa* ceremonial cycle, performed by the *raabaa*.

<sup>62</sup> Performed by the *raabaa-gadaa*, but also by families at certain sites.

<sup>63</sup> *Soroora*, a type of portable wooden milk container.

<sup>64</sup> *Karra*, entrance to the cattle enclosure and to the village.

<sup>65</sup> Boorana territory west of the Daawwaa River.

<sup>66</sup> Boorana territory between the Daawwaa and the Gannaale rivers.

<sup>67</sup> These are the juniper forests of Areero, Manquubsa and Gaamadu.

<sup>68</sup> *Soodda*, minerals for cattle, found in the crater lakes

<sup>69</sup> This and the following verses refer to the violation of marriage regulations based on the fictional classificatory kinship system determined by the *luba* (generational class) affiliation, within *gadaa*. Those belonging to the generation of one's parents are considered as classificatory fathers and mothers, hence it is taboo to have sexual relations with them. The same is true for persons belonging to the generation of one's children.

<sup>70</sup> Refers to the ethical values required to sustain people in need.

<sup>71</sup> Refers to political speeches in formal meetings (*qoraa*).

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## REVIEW ESSAY

**Mootii Biyya. *Oromiayan Befaraqa: Abyssiniyocracy Weyes Democracy?* Jiituu Fine Arts, Publishing and Advertising, Addis Ababa, 1996.**

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In the 1990s there was a short-lived period when literature on every aspect of Oromo society, especially its history and politics, flowered in Amharic, Oromo and English languages. Mootii Biyya, the author of *Oromiayan Befaraqa. Abyssiniyocracy Weyes Democracy*, played a leading role in the development of political literature in Amharic on Oromo history and politics. The author is a historian by training and a journalist by profession. Besides writing a book on Oromo history, Mootii Biyya also became a famous political commentator on *Urjii* newspaper<sup>1</sup>. With his razor sharp mind, a zest for intellectual debate, remarkable mastery of Amharic language, lively sense of humor and inexhaustible supply of Amharic idioms, Mootii Biyya placed the politics of Oromia at the center stage of *Urjii* newspaper. Along with the editors of *Urjii* newspaper, and Oromo nationalist leaders, Mootii Biyya articulated the Oromo yearning to free themselves from the political domination, economic exploitation and cultural subjugation of the Amhara and Tigrayan ruling classes. Mootii Biyya's weekly commentary on *Urjii* newspaper became the voice of conscience against Machiavellian Abyssinian intrigue to control Oromia. *Oromiayan Befaraqa* is a metaphor for the struggle between the Tigrayan and Amhara elites for the control of Oromia. For more than a century, the elites of two national groups have taken turns to control Oromia, and both have used brute force to suppress the

Oromo people. Since 1991, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the new Tigrayan governing class, has been using "democracy", based on the power of the gun, and not on the will of the people (p. 276). Such "democracy", based on the power of the gun, is aptly characterized by Mootii Biyya as *Abyssiniyocracy*. The reason for this is very clear. In Abyssinian history power was always obtained through and maintained by the power of the gun. The ingenuity which the TPLF leaders added to the tried and true Abyssinian rule through brute force was to use the cover of democracy for the purpose of perpetuating colonial status-quo in Oromia (p. 301).

*Oromiayan Befaraqa* is a catalogue of the plight of the Oromo since their conquest in the 1880s. Oromia is a land richly endowed with fertile soils, abundant water and agricultural resources and minerals, and yet the Oromo have been living in abject poverty, and they are the least educated people probably in the world. The Oromo predicament is explained by Mootii Biyya, in terms of their colonial relationship with the Abyssinians, based on political domination, economic exploitation, social dehumanization, and cultural subjugation, coupled with the policy of systematic attack on Oromo national identity, independent organizations and political and cultural institutions. Indeed, the author strikes at the heart of the matter by rightly stating that the Oromo are the most humiliated and abused people in Ethiopia. They must liberate themselves from historic humiliation through their struggle, which is not aimed at waging war on others but at defending themselves and uplift their humanity (p. 9).

The author argues that the book under review was written for the purpose of fighting against racism and not to cultivate it. Oromo politics has no connection with racism or ethnic isolationism. The Oromo do not hate others because of ethnic differences. After all the Oromo have many layered connections with most, if not all, the

people of Ethiopia. The Abyssinian or the Amhara and Tigrayan elites not only know this fact, but they also fear Oromo numerical strength. As a result they always attack Oromo leadership and try to destroy their organizations because without leadership and organizations, it is impossible to mobilize Oromo human, material and spiritual resources and galvanize them to take collective action against their oppressors.

It was while writing political commentaries for *Urjii* newspaper that Mootii Biyya reflected on the Abyssinian elites Machiavellian intrigues to perpetuate colonial status-quo in Oromia. The book under review is a magnificent tribute to the author's concern for the political awakening of the Oromo. The reason for this is simple and the purpose clear. It is impossible to govern with brute force, politically conscious Oromo. Governing the Oromo through brute force can be made the thing of the past if the Oromo are united in purpose and actions (p. 9). The book speaks loud to every Oromo who reads it to realize that unless the Oromo act in unison, the Abyssinians will take turns to misrule and abuse them and control their resources. This is never more urgent than now when the governing Tigrayan ruling elite is challenged by the opposition, which wants to create a unitary state, in which the federal status of Oromia will be abolished, and the limited gains the Oromo achieved since 1991, will disappear.

*Oromiayan Befaraqa* sheds light on (1) distortion of Oromo history, (2) the Abyssinian elite's capacity to change their ideological orientation so as to garner foreign support to fight against the Oromo, and (3) the atrocities that the Oromo have suffered since their colonization. Mootii Biyya rightly states that Oromo history is ignored and greatly distorted in Ethiopian historiography (p. 40). In fact, the Amhara ruling elite did consider the Oromo as people without history. Because of that the Oromo were characterized as

“forgotten” people of the Horn of Africa. But “[t]o be forgotten while living is to suffer slow death” (p. 11). According to another historian, the Amhara ruling class also wanted the Oromo:

... To forget their own history and learn only the history of the dominant ruling elites. They wanted the Oromo to abandon their language in favor of Amharic. They wanted the Oromo to change their religion in favor of Orthodox Christianity. In those dark days,<sup>2</sup> those who respected the Oromo language and cultivated the development of Oromo history and culture were harassed, imprisoned, tortured and even killed.<sup>3</sup>

Mootii Biyya is accurate in stating that Ethiopian leaders have never stood on their own feet. They always needed foreign advisors, weapons and resources to fight against the Oromo. This started not in the nineteenth century, as our author assumes, but in the seventeenth century. For instance, Emperor Za Dengel (1603-1604) abandoned the Ethiopian Orthodox faith and converted to Catholic faith, for getting weapons and men from the Portuguese, for the purpose of fighting against the Oromo. Emperor Susenyos (1607-1632) also converted to the Catholic faith, de-established the Ethiopian Orthodox church in order to receive weapons and soldiers from the Portuguese for the purpose of fighting against the Oromo. *Dajazmach* Kassa Mercha, the rebellious chief of Tigray, welcomed the invading British forces in 1867. He opened the way for them to destroy the power of Emperor Tewodros (1855-1868). In return for his services, the British commanders rewarded Kassa Mercha with 12,000 guns, with which he defeated his rivals and made himself Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889, p. 167) of Ethiopia. What Mootii Biyya forgot to mention is that, as Yohannes came to power



came to power with British weapons, Menelik also rose to power with French support. The French provided Menelik not only with weapons of destruction, but also trained his soldiers thus facilitating the conquest of Oromia.

Menelik . . . operated with the French technicians, French map makers, French advice on the management of a standing army, and more French advice as to holding captured provinces with permanent garrisons of conscripted colonial troops. The French also armed his troops with firearms and did much else to organize his campaigns . . . Without massive European help the Galla [Oromo] would not have been conquered at all.<sup>4</sup>

Emperor Haile Selassie was returned to power in 1941, with British support. It was with the American support that the government of Haile Selassie flourished from 1944 to 1974. The Dergue survived from 1974 to 1991, mainly with Soviet weapons and western governments' financial support (p. 168). Similarly, the TPLF regime has flourished for the past 14 years with financial largess from the western countries. Seeking foreign support is an integral part of Abyssinian political culture (p. 169). Ideological orientation is part of their strategy for winning foreign support. For instance, when Meles Zenawi, the TPLF leader visited England in November 1989, he praised Albanian Communist Party (p. 175) which served as a model for the Marxist-Leninist League of Tigray. However, when the same Meles Zenawi visited the United States in 1990, he declared that his party has abandoned Communism in favor of liberal economic policy, thus baptizing the TPLF's rise to power with American blessing (p. 176). An important lesson to be drawn from what has transpired thus far is that the strategy of the

Abyssinian elites has always been pragmatic politics of self-interest. Their politics and ideological orientations are always dynamically dictated by the exigencies of the time. If it benefits them, they reorient their ideology, and tailor their politics to the needs of the time. Some may regard this as opportunism of the worst kind, but it serves them very well. The Abyssinian elites do not encumber themselves with ideological purity. They leave that task to the victims of their system.

Mootii Biyya argues that Oromo *gada* leaders never sought foreign advice, and weapons to rule their people (p. 169). This is true because in a democracy, leaders neither depend on foreign support to come to power nor need foreign weapons to suppress their own people. However, what Mootii Biyya did not realize is that failing to get foreign support exposed the Oromo to conquest and destruction. In the world of power politics, only those who acquire foreign support in the form of weapons, money, moral and political support will be able to defend and liberate themselves. As a teacher of world history for over two decades, I do not know of a single revolutionary movement or liberation front that achieved its ultimate goal without recognition and support from outside. If the Oromo leadership fails to win outside support and recognition, our cause and the future of our people will be as difficult as their past.

During the long reign of Haile Selassie, the Oromo struggled for their economic and political rights. For that purpose they established the Macha and Tulama Association, which was destroyed by the regime but contributed to the Oromo political awareness (p. 81). The government of Emperor Haile Selassie, which dispossessed and oppressed the Oromo for almost half a century was itself destroyed.

In 1974, Haile Selassie, a tyrant autocrat, was overthrown and replaced by 120 military tyrants, known the *Derg*. When they first came to power, members of the *Derg* promised three things: to

form a political party, establish the people's republic of Ethiopia, return to their barracks as quickly as possible. But they reneged on all three promises (pp. 108, 131). Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, the *Derg* dictator, condemned American imperialism, and imported the ideology of "Scientific Socialism" from the Soviet Union, for the purpose of obtaining massive Soviet support (pp. 169, 174-175). The *Derg* not only declared war on "narrow nationalism", a code name for Oromo Nationalism, but unleashed a reign of terror on the Oromo peasantry. "Like the time of Menelik, the Oromo were hunted like wild animals" (p. 187). Oromo peasants were prevented from traveling beyond their villages, which served as concentration camps, where they were guarded as cattle (pp. 165, 209). The Oromo were made cannon fodders for the *Derg*'s endless wars. As if these measures were not enough, the *Derg* embarked on two measures with which it attempted to alter the demography of Oromia. First, using international assistance in the name of fighting the 1984 famine, the *Derg* transferred more than two million northerners to Wallaga, Illubabor, and Kaffa in 1985. The *Derg* also armed the settlers to defend themselves against the Oromo (p. 166). Thus, the settlers not only took Oromo lands, but also lorded over Oromo peasants as Menelik's armed settlers did a century earlier.

Second, the *Derg* launched a massive villagization program which resulted in the creation of 12013 villages, where 12 million people were forced to live (p. 166). More than eighty percent of those affected by villagization were Oromos. Villagization transformed rural Oromia into a massive prison house (p. 165) rather a concentration camp, where Oromo peasants' movements were controlled and their produce was monopolized by the state. The Oromo, who do not know how to beg, as they did not have a tradition of begging, were so impoverished by the *Derg*, thus making them beggars, adding insult to their miseries (p. 162). The

villagization program affected the Oromo peasants, morally, culturally and psychologically. It also led to the greatest crime—the death of a huge number of Oromo and other peoples in Ethiopia (p. 165). It is believed that no less than two million peasants lost their lives<sup>5</sup> between 1974 and 1991, not to mention the millions of Oromos who were internally displaced, and half a million Oromos who were scattered into refugee camps in Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan and Kenya. When the *Derg* regime, which brought so much sorrow and destruction, was overthrown in May in 1991, it was a sigh of relief and a moment of hope for better government for the Oromo (p. 211) and other people in Ethiopia.

But they were disappointed when, after the defeat of the *Derg*, the power and the economic control of Ethiopia passed from the hands of the Amhara elites to that of the TPLF. The Ethiopian Empire was created through conquest and maintained by soldiers. The empire was a prison house of nations and nationalities. According to Mootii Biyya, since 1991, the guards of the prison house have changed from the Amhara to the Tigrayan elites (p. 39). Both elites struggle with each other for the control of Oromo resources (p. 292). To control the Oromo, the TPLF created a surrogate political organization—the Oromo People's Democratic Organization/ OPDO (p. 254) whose cover was used for destroying all independent Oromo organizations which were not under the control of the TPLF (pp. 225-226). Among independent Oromo organizations that were destroyed by the TPLF was the Oromo Liberation front (OLF), which entered into a short-lived alliance with the TPLF in 1991-92. In a military conflict between the TPLF and the OLF in 1992-93, the Eritrean People's Liberation Forces (EPLF) sided with the TPLF (pp. 242-243). It is the irony of history, that the EPLF, which contributed to the destruction of OLF military capacity in 1992 and 1993, was the victim of the TPLF aggression since 1998.

In *Oromiayan Befaraga*, Mootii Biyya makes a number of interesting observations about the TPLF regime, which is controlling the destiny of the Oromo since 1991 (p. 260). First, like the elections under Emperor Haile Selassie and Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, the 1992 and 1995 elections under Meles Zenawi did not bring about change of governments (pp. 276-278). What the 1992 and 1995 elections brought about was that Meles Zenawi is the most Machiavellian of all Abyssinian tyrants, who openly and deliberately rigged the 1992, 1995 and May 2000 elections without provoking an outrage and condemnation from the western powers that support his regime politically, financially and militarily. The current crisis, where he is attempting to rig the May 15, 2005 elections, may finally expose him to the international community for what he has always been—a tyrant who uses a cover of democracy to perpetuate colonial status-quo in Oromia. There are no people to be imprisoned permanently (p. 301). If the Oromo act in unison, they will break out of the prison house, where it is a crime to think about freedom, and a greater crime to resist the colonial status quo of Oromia (p. 28).

Second, to my knowledge, no one exposed the TPLF attack on Oromo nationalism as Mootii Biyya did, for which he was detained and tortured.<sup>6</sup> Mootii Biyya makes it crystal clear that the Abyssinian views and understanding of the Oromo question remain firmly rooted in colonially projected images of the Oromo, as scattered tribal groups, who are incapable of governing themselves. That is why the TPLF created OPDO for the Oromo. But unable to control the Oromo through its surrogate organization, the TPLF declared an open war on “narrow nationalism” a code name for Oromo Nationalism itself. This was clearly articulated in the ruling party’s quarterly *Hizbaawii Adera*,<sup>7</sup> which argues that “. . . it is necessary to crush narrow nationalism before it has a chance to

gather momentum at a country level.”<sup>8</sup> How could it be crushed? The publication provides the strategy: by isolating, exposing, and crushing “Oromo intellectuals and wealthy merchants,”<sup>9</sup> who were accused of nurturing Oromo nationalism. This particular issue of *Hizbawi Adera*, I was told, was written by a top leader of the TPLF itself.<sup>10</sup> In a four part criticism of *Hizbawi Adera* which appeared in *Urjii* newspaper, Mootii Biyya exposed the TPLF leaders’ greed and Machiavellian intrigues.

Who are narrow nationalists? Those who rule by force of arms? Those who plunder others property? Those who imprison, torture and kill for the purpose of consolidating their ethnic hegemony? The real narrow nationalists are the TPLF leaders, who believe that they deserve to rule, they are entitled to rule, they have the right to rule and others have obligation to be ruled. Those who combine capitalist greed with Stalinist cruelty, Machiavellian intrigue with Marx’s sharp tongue, American diplomacy with Emperor Yohannes’ desire for revenge are appearing in their true color. In the past they hid their true plan behind the facade of democracy. They no longer need to hide their plan for the future of Ethiopia and especially for the Oromo. They are speaking loud and clear about their plan for destroying Oromo intellectuals and rich merchants. The planned destruction will be undertaken in the name of building capitalism. Such an experiment has never been tried before. Capitalism cannot be built by destroying those who have skills, knowledge and capital, unless it is Albanian style capitalism, which is another name for backward, crude and anachronistic communism. Those whose ideological

development was shaped by Albanian communism have not yet abandoned it (Mootii Biyya, in *Urjii*, 7/16, 7/22, 7/29, 8/5, 1997).

Mootii Biyya has done a splendid job in exposing the brutality to which the Oromo have been subjected since their colonization. More than a century after their colonization, the Oromo are still abused and humiliated in all manners, big and small. The author did not limit his discussion only to the Oromo sufferings. He repeatedly mentions the abuses and sufferings of other colonized people of southern Ethiopia. The overall image of Ethiopia that emerges from this book is that, from the time of the Tigrayan Emperor Yohannes IV (1872-89) up to the time of Tigrayan Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, Ethiopia has failed to produce a single government that did not destroy Oromo organizations, a single government that did not kill Oromo leaders, a single government that did not plunder Oromo property, a single government that did not abuse the human and democratic rights of the Oromo, a single government that did not slaughter innocent Oromo, a single government that did not divide the Oromo and turn them against each other, a single government that did not attempt to destroy the Oromo identity, a single government that respected Oromo national dignity, a single government that did not destroy Oromo institutions, and above all a single government that did not monopolize political and military power for the purpose of perpetuating colonial status quo in Oromia.<sup>11</sup>

This means, since the colonization of Oromia, governments have changed, leaders have changed, and power has passed from the hands of Tigrayan elites to the Amhara elites and back to the Tigrayan elites since 1991. However, the economic exploitation, political domination and suppression of Oromo national identity remain constant. The Oromo are struggling to end colonial status quo in Oromia and to determine their own destiny without any interference from others. In that struggle, intellectual works that propagate the Oromo cause in several languages including Amharic are important. Mootii Biyya who has the mastery of the Amharic language did not hesitate writing in that language, and I hope will not hesitate to do so in the future. It is his message that counts.

Finally, *Oromiayan Befarqa* embodies the immense language the author has about the brutality of the Ethiopian system. The book exposes the callous brutality of Ethiopian leaders who have created a nightmare for the Oromo and other colonized peoples of Ethiopia. This is a very interesting and much needed book in the Amharic language on Oromo colonial experience.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Urjii* was a weekly newspaper that focused on Oromo issues and published in Amharic in the 1990s. The paper was suspended when its editors were detained in November 1997. For a short time, publication was briefly resumed in 2002, after the editors were released and resettled in Canada.

2. Those dark days refers to the period before 1974, when teaching, preaching, writing and broadcasting in Oromo language was



prohibited in Ethiopia

3. Araarso Badhassa, *Seenaa Dhalootaa and Hidda Oromoo Sooddo* (Addis Ababa, 1995), p. 1.

4. Lord Lytton, *The Stolen Desert* (London: McDonald, 1966), 160.

5. *Federal Ethiopia at a Cross-Roads. The Path Toward Justice, the Rule of Law and Sustainable Human Rights and a Critique of the 1995 Reports of Amnesty International and the New York Branch of the AAICA* (Addis Ababa: 1995), 180. According to this source “an estimated 2 million or 7 percent of the 1974 population was lost during the period 1974-1991.”

6. Mootii Biyya was detained in September 1997 and kept illegally in detention until April 2000. He escaped from Ethiopia to Kenya from where he came to Canada for resettlement.

7. *Hizbawi Adera*, 1977. Volume 4, Number 9, December 1996 - February 1997. This quarterly of the ruling party appears in Amharic, Oromo and Tigre languages.

8. *Hizbawi Adera*, p. 9.

9. *Ibid.*

10. In 1998, I was told by one of the former highest ranking ruling party's official that this particular issue of *Hizbawi Adera* was written by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi himself. I cannot disclose the name of this official at this moment.

11. Mohammed Hassen, *Review Essay: Gezetena Gezot, Matcha and Tulama Self-Help Association* by Olana Zoga, *The Journal of Oromo Studies*, Volume 4, Numbers 1 and 2, (July 1997), 236.

## BOOK REVIEW

**Ibsaa Guutama, *Prison of Conscience: Upper Compound Maa'kalaawii, Ethiopian Terror Prison and Tradition*. New York: Gubirmans Publishing, 2003. 413 pp. Bibliography. Index. Price \$30.00. Paper.**

*Prison of Conscience* offers an in-depth, roller-coaster journey of the Oromo in recent Ethiopian history. It is an important book that needs to be read as a wonderful addition to the growing list of publications detailing the experiences of political prisoners during the dreadful years of the *Derg* and its successor, the *Woyane* (Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front/EPRDF) regime that is at helm of state power in Ethiopia at the present.

After reading a book such as this, one is tempted to invoke a cliché and say that the spirit of the book reflects the author's complex personality. A long time activist, Ibsaa Guutama is a multi-talented intellectual. In 1966, while studying at Haile Selassie I (Addis Ababa) University, he had won student poetry contest entitled: "*Who is an Ethiopian?*" In his professional life, Guutama played notable roles in both the *Derg* and the EPRDF regimes. Under the *Derg* he served as provincial and department administrator. Under the EPRDF, he also briefly served as minister of education, in 1991-92, before he resigned and went to exile when the Oromo Liberation Front left the Transitional Government of Ethiopia.

Under the two regimes, however, Guutama served more years in prison than in office. In the 1980s he spent a decade at the *Maa'kallowii*, Ethiopia's notorious prison where many political prisoners were detained for a long time without any trial. Like many of his colleagues, Guutama endured the horrifying brutalities in this prison. In a frightening detail, he recounts every moment of the prison conditions and the lasting impact of the psychological trauma and physical ailments that resulted from the merciless interrogations and tortures by government agents. While Guutama

and his friends suffered the gruesome prison conditions, government propaganda, in the most cynical and grotesque fashion, excoriated the Oromo prisoners as a source of trouble. The book exhibits some of the worst features of the Ethiopian justice system.

As the title suggests, this book not only describes about *Maa'kallowii* prison, but outlines the severe and inhuman conditions under which political prisoners were held in Ethiopia. Unlike Taffera Deguefe's *A Tripping Stone: Ethiopian Prison Diary* (2003), its coverage is phenomenally wide. It is loaded with hilarious anecdotes that add depth and context to the Oromo culture and nationalism. The book further details the steps taken by the politically savvy Meles Zenawi who carries on a venomous anti-Oromo campaign in the mold of Emperors Tewedros, Yohannes and Menilik. It also shows the *Woyane's* long history of cruelty and extra-judicial killings.

Finally, Guutama tells a story of the Oromo peoples' resilience and endurance in the face of losses and sufferings, countless indignities and hardships. The author gives the reader unerring scenes of historical and political realities of the Ethiopian Empire that is founded on injustice and cruelty for the Oromo and other conquered peoples. Furthermore, Guutama debunks the myths of the grand *Habesha* [Ethiopian] traditions where the rulers took no responsibility for the injustices done to their subjects. He writes:

No one of the *Habesha* [Ethiopian] rulers was magnanimous enough to take responsibility for wrong done [...] Haayila Silassee felt there was nothing wrong after impoverishing the empire for fifty years. Mangistu wanted to shift responsibility to his juniors or to the opposition instead of apologizing for his seventeen years of mismanagement." (p. 24).

The author is at his best when he narrates the important role that some Oromos played in Ethiopia during the last century. Guutama castigates, in every manner he could, the self-loathing Gobana's children and their all-too-willing accomplices who for

the last fourteen years have tried to pathetically ingratiate themselves with EPRDF. On the other hand, he also points out the poignant moments when *Qubbee*, a Latin alphabet, replaced the Amharic script that was ill suited to write in the Oromo language. This simplified orthography has facilitated the writing and learning of the Oromo language in schools and for administrative purposes. The adoption of the *qubee* for writing *Afaan Oromoo* marks a turning point in the history of Oromo literature.

The narrative structure of this book is somewhat disjointed which could have been corrected by careful editing. Despite this shortcoming, the book is compelling because Guutama writes with passion. It forces the reader to contemplate the conditions of a political prisoner in modern Ethiopian state. With an impressive compendium of factual data, the book is highly informative. One cannot just put it down.

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## SHORT NOTICE - NEW OROMO DICTIONARIES

**Tilahun Gamta/Xilaahun Gamtaa. *Galmee Afaan Oromoo fi Afaan Ingilizii Barsiisu (Comprehensive Oromo-English Dictionary - COED)*.** New York: Karrayyuu Publishing, 2004. 863 pp. \$50.00 paper

**Ibsaa Guutama. *Qooqaa Addaa Afaan Oromoo (Special Oromo Dictionary)*.** New York: Gubirmans Publishing, 2004. \$60.00 Hard cover; \$50.00 paper.

Until very recently, Oromo dictionaries were quite rare. Major bilingual, Oromo-English dictionaries started to appear only after 1980. Earlier, only a few Oromo-Italian dictionaries were published by missionaries and circulated in small quantities. Since 1990, however, several Oromo-English dictionaries were published both in Oromia and abroad. In 2004, two more dictionaries—Tilahun Gamta's (Xilaahun Gamtaa) *Comprehensive Oromo-English Dictionary (COED)* and Ibsaa Guutama's *Qooqaa Addaa Afaan Oromoo: Special Oromo Dictionary* (2004)—were added to the growing list of bilingual dictionaries. The latest additions are particularly important because they document the Oromo struggle to develop their language. While writing these dictionaries, both authors have endured a lot of challenges.

When he published his first *Oromo-English Dictionary* in 1989, Tilahun Gamta had encountered huge resistance from Ethiopianist scholars who did not like his decision to use Latin alphabet instead of the Ethiopic (Geez) orthography. But since then, things have changed. After the fall of the *Derg* regime in 1991 and during the brief Transitional period in 1991-92, the *Qubee* system was officially adopted for the writing of *Afaan Oromoo*. In the 1990s, school textbooks in Oromia were converted

into the *qubee* system. Tilahun's Oromo-English dictionary served as a catalyst in the preparation of these textbooks for schools.

However, although it was very well received when it was published, the first edition of *Oromo-English Dictionary* did not systematically utilize the *qubee* system. The new expanded edition addresses this shortcoming. In fact, the new edition does more than updating the writing system. Thoroughly revised, COED includes new vocabularies and, in some cases, improved definitions of the old entries. The introduction includes useful sketches on phonology and grammatical rules of the Oromo language.

Ibsaa Gutama's *Qooqaa Addaa Afaan Oromoo - Special Oromo Dictionary* is another valuable addition to the growing list of Oromo dictionaries. The author worked on this project under very difficult circumstances for more than two decades. Initiated in prison and completed in exile, the dictionary is part of the Oromo national struggle and the author's contribution to it. In the 1980s, while he was detained without trial, Gutama collected vocabularies from political prisoners who came from various parts of Oromia. In 1991-92, when he briefly served as Minister of Education in the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TEG), Gutama worked very closely with linguists and translators who prepared textbooks for schools in Oromia. After he resigned from the TGE, he worked on the project in exile.

Like Tilahun's COED, *Qooqaa Addaa* includes user's guide and a brief note on grammar. The dictionary is both mono- and bilingual. Part one contains Oromo-Oromo entries. Part two and three include Oromo-English and English-Oromo entries, respectively. It also contains very useful list of units of measurements, personal names, and the names of plants and animals, partly with equivalent scientific designations, that are found in Oromia. *Special Oromo Dictionary* is particularly rich in political terms that are frequently used by the nationalists.

Together with Mahdi Mude's (1995) and other dictionaries published in Ethiopia and Kenya in the 1990s, COED and *Qooqaa Addaa Afaan Oromoo* would play an important role in the

development of *Afaan Oromoo* as a literary language. Undoubtedly, researchers will find them as useful tools of Oromo Studies. Both dictionaries are privately printed and distributed by the authors. Copies can be purchased by contacting them directly at the addresses provided in this volume of the *Journal of Oromo Studies*.

*Guluma Gemed*  
*University of Michigan-Flint*

## NOTE TO CONTRIBUTORS

*The Journal of Oromo Studies* publishes original research on the Oromo and other related topics. Contributors should submit three copies of their manuscripts to: Dr. Guluma Gemed, Editor, *The Journal of Oromo Studies*, Department of Africana Studies, The University of Michigan-Flint, 303 East Kearsley Street, Flint, MI 48502. Manuscripts can also be submitted in MS Word format through e-mail (ggemed@umflint.edu) as an attachment file. In preparing their manuscripts, contributors need to pay attention to the following:

- The manuscript should not be more than 10,000 words or about 25 double-spaced pages, including notes and references.
- Manuscripts should include an abstract of about 200 words.
- Whenever necessary, tables, figures and maps can be attached. Figures, tables, and maps must be camera ready.
- As much as possible, spelling of Oromo terms should follow the current *qubee* system. Exceptions are allowed when referring to local dialects, songs or quoting from old documents written before the *qubee* system was implemented
- All notes should come at the end of the text, but before list of references (bibliography), and under a subtitle: **Notes**.
- All references in the text should be limited to the name(s) of the author(s), year of publication and page number(s). The year of publication and page number(s) should be separated by colon (:). For example, when referring to page 15 of Asmarom Legesse's *Oromo Democracy*, the short reference in the text will be (Legesse 2000:15).
- The bibliography should include all references used in the



text and must be listed under a subtitle: **References**. Multiple works of the same author(s) should be listed chronologically. For specific details, refer to the 15th edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style* or *The Style Guide for African Studies Review* (<http://www.umass.edu/anthro/asr>).

- Additional information can also be obtained from the Editor at the address listed above.

## RECENTLY PUBLISHED OROMO DICTIONARIES:

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Author: Xilaahun Gamtaa/Tilahun Gamta

Title: **Galmee Afaan Oromo fi Afaan Ingilizii  
Barsiisuu Comprehensive Oromo-English  
Dictionary (COED)**

Publisher: Karrayyuu Publishing, New York, 2004

Price: \$50.00 (add \$5.00, for mailing)

For purchase, contact:  
Karrayyuu Publishing  
22 Metropolitan Oval, #6F  
Bronx, New York 10462

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Author: Ibsaa Guutama

Title: **Qooqaa Addaa Afaan Oromoo – Special  
Oromo Dictionary**

Publisher: Guberimans Publishing, New York, 2004

Price: \$60.00 (Hard Cover), \$45.00 (paper). Add  
\$5.00 for mailing.

For purchase, contact:  
Gubirmans Publishing  
30-49 Linden Pl. #2  
Flushing, New York 11354