

# The Journal of Oromo Studies

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## **Editor's Note**

### **Mekuria Bulcha**

Beyond the Oromo-Ethiopian Conflict

### **Asafa Jalata**

The Oromo, Change and Continuity in  
Ethiopian Colonial Politics

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The Economic Viability of Oromia and Its  
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### **Tilahun Gamta**

Qube Affan Oromo: Reasons for Choosing the  
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## **Book Reviews**

\$6.00

The Journal of Oromo Studies (JOS) is an international scholarly publication of the Oromo Studies Association which serves as a vehicle of expression for its members and others. It is a peer reviewed journal that is published biannually. The JOS seeks to promote and facilitate rigorous analysis, synthesis, and policy recommendations of scholars on any interdisciplinary issues pertaining to the Oromo nation. As such, the journal welcomes scientific research findings of scholars on the Oromo history, culture, society, politics, economy, system of government, science and technology, law, medicine, agriculture, and regional political and economic cooperation. The JOS will also consider other topics not listed above. The major criterion for acceptance of articles is that they demonstrate high academic and practical quality research which broadens our knowledge base of the Oromo people.

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## Editor's Note

This first issue of the *Journal of Oromo Studies* (JOS) is a dream come true for the Oromo Studies Association (OSA). The prime aim of the *JOS* is to provide a forum for the promotion and facilitation of rigorous analysis, synthesis, and policy recommendations of scholars on any interdisciplinary issues pertaining to the Oromo nation. The journal welcomes scientific research findings of scholars on the Oromo history, culture, society, economy, system of government, science and technology, law, medicine, agriculture, regional, political and economic cooperation. Obviously, the journal will also consider other topics not listed above. The major criterion for the acceptance of any contribution from our members or non-members is a demonstrated academic and practical quality research which broadens our knowledge base of the Oromo people.

Our vision for the future of the Oromo Studies Association and the *Journal of Oromo Studies* is that the OSA will serve as an umbrella for branch associations (Oromo Agricultural Association, Oromo History Association, Oromo Economic Association, Oromo Medical Association, Oromo Legal Association, etc.) and their respective journals. We all know that such specialized associations and journals require the existence of a sufficient number of constituents. We are very optimistic that Oromos around the globe will come together to show their own people and the world at large what they can do in unison in articulating issues that will help to improve the economic and political conditions of their people by making research-based policy recommendations. Equally, we believe that the knowledge base and research results of the contributors to the *JOS* will serve as indestructible forces for forging a rightful place in history for the Oromos. The bell tolls for all Oromo and Non-Oromo scholars to come home (join the Oromo Studies Association) and preserve the Oromo culture and identity by bringing their scholarship to bear

Finally, we want to acknowledge the dedication of the Associate editors for giving their best in making constructive suggestions in the peer review process and the contributors for complying with the standards we set for our journal. The *JOS* is a forum for your voice, and thus, we hope that you will participate in it, nurture it, build it, promote its individual and institutional adoption, and support it morally and materially.



# Beyond the Oromo-Ethiopian Conflict

by Mekuria Bulcha

## 1. Introduction

The Oromo and the Abyssinians have confronted one another for centuries as "great historical antagonists."<sup>1</sup> Their antagonism became even more profound with the conquest of Oromia by the Abyssinians towards the end of the last century. Ever since their forced incorporation in the Ethiopian Empire, the Oromo had felt unjustly treated and struggled to restore their rights and freedom. But, because there was little means of communication between the various regions into which Oromia was parcelled and administered by consecutive Ethiopian regimes both before and after the Italian occupation of 1936-41, Oromo resistance and struggle against the Ethiopian administration was sporadic, localized and fragmented up to the middle of 1960s. This situation was wrongly construed, by several observers, as total lack of identity and an absence of nationalism among the Oromo. Margery Perham, a researcher in Ethiopian and African affairs in the 1930s and 1940s, for example, wrote,

*... there is no such a thing as a Galla nation, nor even yet as a Galla consciousness, and there seems every possibility at this date [1946] that a development that would be so disastrous to Ethiopia may be avoided. At present the Gallas ... present no more than a series of provincial problems. ...*<sup>2</sup>

Perham's words were echoed by many expatriate Ethiopianists even today.<sup>2a</sup> But, even if what Perham called "provincial problems" were seemingly unrelated, she and those who quoted her without any reflection had failed to recognize that those problems were manifestations of Oromo nationalism.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, contrary to what has been suggested by these ardent advocates of Oromo assimilation into the Abyssinian culture and the Ethiopian state, pan-Oromo nationalism began to take a definite form already in the mid-1930s with the formation of the Western Oromo Confederation. As Edmond Keller has remarked,

*There is evidence that the "fact of conquest" during the age of European colonial expansion in Africa and the simultaneous development of the concept of the modern nation-state served as a catalyst for the development of genuine Oromo nationalism. Sporadic local revolts were endemic throughout the period of Ethiopian colonialism. Several major incidents, however, stand out: the Azebo-Raya revolt, 1928-1930; the Oromo Independence Movement [the Western Oromo Confederation] of 1936; and the Bale Revolt, 1964-1970. There is some question as to whether the 1928 and 1964 revolts constituted struggles for national liberation, but about the 1936 incident there is no doubt.<sup>3a</sup>*

As education, election to the Ethiopian parliament and recruitment into its armed forces and educational institutions gradually brought many Oromos together from the different corners of their country during the post Second World War period, they were able to see more clearly the similarity of their experiences and commonality of their aspirations. Consequently, Oromo nationalism, which was somewhat dormant particularly during the 1950s, began to strongly manifest itself in the middle of the 1960s, and a liberation front with political and armed wings was established in the mid-1970s to struggle for Oromo freedom.<sup>4</sup>

The Ethiopian governments, both under Emperor Haile Selassie and Colonel Mengistu, had made relentless attempts to curb the growing sense of Oromo identity and nationalism. The results, however, became the opposite of what they wanted to achieve. Two important landmarks in the

history of the Oromo, i.e., the formation of the Macha-Tulama Association and the peasant uprising in Bale, had taken place during the reign of Haile Selassie. Although the Haile Selassie regime was brutal in suppressing these movements,<sup>5</sup> the struggle of the Oromo people continued to take a definite course and spread to the various country and classes of their society. During Menegistu's period, the Oromo struggle for independence became even more vigorous, formally organized and coordinated.

The military and political achievements of the Oromo liberation movement over the last three decades and the level of consciousness manifested among the population today, indicates that the process of transition of the Oromo from a subject people who have, so far, been relegated to the status of second class citizens in Ethiopia to a free nation has already began. Today, the struggle for self-determination involves Oromos from all walks of life. The intensity of political activities and the level of awareness manifested throughout Oromia during the last two years, indicates that the Oromo struggle has entered its decisive phase in the 1990s.

As in the past, Oromo struggle for freedom will continue to encounter serious obstacles and entail armed conflicts even in the future. The violation of electoral procedures during the June 1992 regional elections<sup>6</sup> by the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPDRF), in itself, entails one such obstacle. The internationally witnessed manipulation of the elections had aborted the process of peaceful transition to democracy in Ethiopia as laid down in the Transitional Charter of July 1991, and has resulted in the withdrawal of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) from the coalition that formed the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE). It has thereby sparked off open conflicts between the Tigrean forces of the EPDRF and the Oromo people.

Although they are aware of its human and material costs, most Oromos, in fact, see today armed struggle as the surest way to independence. In addition, the replacement of Amhara rulers by Tigreans political and military elites, the presence of Tigrean forces in Oromia and, above all, the manipulation of the regional election in June 1992 have caused such degree of resentment and have immensely activated Oromo resolve to fight for their independence.

Apparently, political negotiation as a peaceful method of solving conflict is not totally abandoned by the Oromo. On its withdrawal from the TGE the OLF had proposed a new peace conference to create a coalition for a transition to a permanent state structure in the region. It has suggested that such a coalition should involve all political forces in Ethiopia, including those that were excluded from the transitional government formed in July, 1991.

The peaceful proposal made by the OLF to end armed conflicts was endorsed by many organizations inside and outside Ethiopia. Nevertheless, there are problems with an all party transitional administration. The major problem concerns the nature of and roles the so-called multi-ethnic organizations aspire to play in the coalition to be formed.

First, notwithstanding the epithet "Ethiopian" attached to their names, all such organizations are Amhara organizations. The leaders and members of these organizations tend to regard themselves as having the final say in determining what is good or bad for everybody in Ethiopia and regard the other, nationality or ethnic based, organizations as their subordinates. The few non-Amhara members of these "Ethiopian" organizations are individuals upon whom the imposed Abyssinian culture and the Ahmaric language have had profound assimilatory effects. Since such individuals had rejected their ethnic identity, they seldom share the aspirations or represent the interests of the ethnic groups they had originated from. Consequently, they represent only themselves in these organizations.<sup>7</sup>

Second, the Amhara organizations are too many in number.<sup>8</sup> Although these organizations are politically fragmented, the contents of their political programs are more or less the same. The maintenance of "Ethiopian unity and territorial integrity," which is an euphemism for centralism and Amhara domination, is the main project on their political agenda. The *raison d'être* for many of them, therefore, seems to be competition for power rather the solution of Ethiopia's fundamental political problems. Or as Alex de Waal has put it,



*Though there is no explicitly formulated core program, the centralists' main aim is to retain their privileged position in the army, bureaucracy and commerce. . . . This set of objectives is often wrapped in a set of political beliefs that are best termed "Abyssinian fundamentalism." Adherents of this ideology are characterized by a psychological identification with a greater Ethiopia . . . and a belief in the superiority of the values of Ethiopian centralism. . . . The adherents' naivete and fervor truly warrants labelling the movement fundamentalists.<sup>9</sup>*

Third, many of these organizations and groups are those who in the past were partly responsible for the development of the political problems that we see in Ethiopia today. The centralists range from the ultra-conservative Moa Anbessa Party, which will restore the Amhara monarchy to the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and MEISON remnants, and including prominent members of the Dergue and its party, the Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE).<sup>10</sup> In general, the existing so-called multi-ethnic organizations have neither past records nor sound programmes for the future to give them credit to participate in a transitional administration.

Fourth, and most important of all, few of the "Ethiopian" organizations are willing to accept the right of self-determination to the oppressed nationalities. They resist the very concept of autonomy for the nationalities. Thus, they tend overlook or trivialize the historical, social and cultural grievances articulated in the political manifestations and armed conflicts in Ethiopia. Even those who admit the centrality of the question of nations and nationalities in such conflicts, are totally opposed to any territorial demarcation and administrative autonomy based on nationality/ethnicity, even in the context of a united Ethiopia. Decentralization, will obviously, thwart their aims and interest of maintaining total control over affairs of the state. A close scrutiny of the political literature produced by these organizations and their adherents, in fact, indicates their strong desire to turn the political situation in Ethiopia to the pre-1974 imperial period and/or revoke the progress that the various oppressed peoples have made towards self-determination.<sup>10a</sup> Given the current political conditions in the region and in the whole world, this is, indeed, an unrealistic wish. But, as Alex de Waal has remarked, "Despite its anachronistic nature, Abyssinian fundamentalism is a cultural-political phenomenon with deep roots . . . It will not be eradicated by obvious political setbacks. . . ." <sup>11</sup>

Ethnic identity is something that Amhara elites have so far failed to recognize as the cause of conflict in Ethiopia. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>12</sup> the Amhara elites and intelligentsia are, and have always been, reluctant to acknowledge that the conquered peoples had separate histories from that of Abyssinia and that they have suffered great deprivation under Abyssinian rule during the last one hundred years. This attitude is one of the obstacles to reconciliation and understanding between the Amhara and the other nationalities, particularly those in the south. When it comes to the rights of nationalities, the views held by the Amhara intelligentsia, including the leaders and members of the "Ethiopian" political organizations, are not in any way different from that of the Mengistu or the Haile Selassie regimes. Therefore, for the Oromo and other oppressed peoples in Ethiopia, it will hardly make sense to unite with these "fundamentalist" groups if they were to solve the present conflict which is basically about ethnic or national identities.

## 1.2 Coalition of Ethnic Organizations for Peace and Democracy

Like all empires, Ethiopia was created through the violation of national and territorial integrity of nations and peoples. Therefore, peoples (nations, nationalities or ethnic groups depending on how ones prefers to call them) are the constituent components of the Ethiopian polity today. And the conflict is about identities that these nations or peoples want to preserve. Efforts to establish a centralized and homogenous Ethiopian polity through forced ethnic fusion has failed.

Most of the ethnic groups and certainly all of the major ones have their own political organization/s. Today, there is no political organization that is genuinely multi-ethnic in Ethiopia. It also unlikely for a strong, ethnically neutral and politically influential organization of this nature to emerge in the near future. What is logical and probably most constructive, therefore, is forming a transitional assembly and government composed of the organizations of the various peoples. For this to materialize without serious obstacles, the Amhara political elites need to recognize that the Amhara people are one nation/ethnic group among other nations/ethnic groups in Ethiopia and participate in the transitional administration as such. It is also important to realize that Ethiopia can be united only if the various nationalities so wish, and that the wish of the nationalities can be articulated only through their own organizations.<sup>13</sup> Critics of "ethnic politics" in Ethiopia and abroad have, so far, been unable to acknowledge this fact. But, as one writer put it,

*Peace in Ethiopia will remain elusive . . . until the dominant Amhara-Tigre groups learn to respect the wishes of other nationalities whose concern for the future remains theirs alone to determine.*<sup>14</sup>

The seeds of nationalism have taken roots among the different nationalities in Ethiopia. Therefore, any attempt to suppress these aspirations for self-determination would only add more fuel to the conflict that is already taking its toll in human lives and resources. It would also greatly undermine possibilities for cooperation and unity now or in the future.

With regard to the Oromo, *bilissumaa* (freedom) is what every Oromo wants today, and the independence of Oromia seems to be simply inevitable. In an insightful political treatise, Ernest Gellner had suggested that when someone has a cause to feel unjustly treated by culprits from another 'nation,' and if he can also identify enough of the victims as being of the same 'nation' as himself, nationalism is born. And when nationalism succeeds, a nation is also born.<sup>15</sup> Gellner's theory has much relevance to the Oromo situation.

## **2. Post Conflict Problems and Prospects**

The end of the Amhara-Tigrean domination in Oromia will come sooner or later. This would not, however, mean the end of struggle for the Oromo. When the rights to self-determination are secured other challenges will come to the surface. These challenges primarily include economic reconstruction, social rehabilitation and political stability. For freedom to have its full meaning, these challenges will have to be properly addressed. Even if freedom is yet to be achieved, the struggle for self-determination has already taken firm roots among the Oromo. One would, therefore, expect that proper attention is also given to the future by all concerned bodies in the Oromo societies, although the focus obviously is to concentrate more on the demands of the present military and political concerns.

To start with, it is pertinent to assess the challenges that will face the Oromo people in the post conflict period and to take stock of the resources they have to meet these challenges. This article attempts precisely to do that in this section

### **2.1 The Economy: Challenges and Prospects**

First let us briefly look at the economic history of Oromia. The reason why we should make a brief excursion through the economic history of Oromia is to make an inventory of the damages done over the decades and gain some insights into the nature and the underlying causes of the current poverty and underdevelopment of Oromo economy and society. The poverty in Oromia and other parts of the Ethiopian empire is not something that can solely be explained by the lack of modern technology of their societies. Neither is the chronic poverty that has engulfed the lives of the peoples in the region, particularly in Oromia, attributable to lack of resources

and natural disasters. It is, to a great extent, the result of a chain of historical and political events prevailing over a longer period of time.

The mass poverty and cultural deprivation we see in Oromia today is to a large extent the legacy of the Abyssinian colonial rule. Reports by travellers during the latter part of the last century and oral history indicate that the Oromo people were generally prosperous before they were conquered by the Abyssinians.

The Abyssinian conquest, in general, was characterized by outright plunder and looting. Traditionally, the Shawa kings partly derived their incomes slave-trade and booty collected from the surroundings Oromo communities against whom they conducted constant raids. Some vivid descriptions of such raids were left behind by European travellers who were in Shawa during the first part of the 19th century<sup>15a</sup>. The historian Kofi Darkwah, wrote,

*It is true that thousands of cattle and war captives were brought back from the campaigns, for example, an expedition conducted in September 1841 to Finfinni district (where . . . Addis Ababa was later founded) returned with 14,042 heads of cattle. Another expedition made to Soddo Galla country in . . . 1943 returned with . . . 87,000 heads of cattle.<sup>16</sup>*

Thus, looting and plundering Oromo property began long before Menelik, but was limited in scale. Up to the 1870s only those Oromo districts that bordered on the Kingdom of Shawa were affected by such cattle and slave-raiding expeditions. Under Menelik (King of Shawa 1865-89, Emperor of Ethiopia 1889-1913), the expeditions penetrated deep into the Oromo territory and were turned into permanent conquest. The plunder of the entire Oromo territory and that of the other peoples in the south was also conducted on a grand scale. Menelik needed resources to feed his large army and to pay for weapons that he was importing in large amounts. He needed the weapons to expand and control his empire. Therefore, he grabbed every thing that he could lay his hands on particularly in those parts of Oromoland that resisted conquest. Consequently, between the 1880s and the early decades of the present century, Oromo economic resources were severely depleted, many of its provinces were laid waste and depopulated, first by war, and then by starvation and epidemics that followed the conquest.

Travellers who witnessed the consequences of the conquest have described the scale and magnitude of the deprivation it had inflicted upon the Oromo and other peoples in the south. In 1896, the geographer, Donaldson Smith wrote, "instead of the war-like, fine race of men" (he refers to pre-conquest Oromo) "What we . . . found was only . . . natives presenting the most abject appearance imaginable." He added, ". . . the Arussa (sic) Galla here, as elsewhere, were regarded as slaves and were even sold in the market as such."<sup>17</sup> Even those Oromo regions and kingdoms such as Jimma Abba Jifar, Leeqa Naqamte and Leeqa Qellem, which submitted to Menelik without much resistance were not entirely spared from the degradation and economic deprivation caused by the conquest.

### 2.1.2 The case of Jimma Abba Jifar

In comparison to other regions of Africa at that time, some parts of Oromoland were even considered more prosperous and ruled by elected leaders or benevolent kings. A good example, was the kingdom of Jimma Abba Jifar, which was conquered in 1882. The British traveller, Henry Darley, who lived in the region for several years during the 19th century wrote about this Oromo Kingdom,

*This town and district at the time of I which I am writing was one of the richest and most fertile, and best governed in Africa. In this I do not except the white governed district all over the continent . . . There Abu [sic] Jifar reigns like a patriarch of the old, and when he dies, his name ought long to be held in revered memory by his*

*people. . . . his assistance to trade, the liberality of his views, and his open handed policy, has brought them into the position of the wealthiest and I fully believe, the happiest . . . . state in Africa.*<sup>18</sup>

Darley was not exaggerating the prosperity of the Kingdom of Jimma. His remarks were supported by other travellers. The Swiss traveller, Montadon, who was in the region in 1910 had reported that Jimma was indeed superior to the Amhara provinces in handicrafts, agriculture, and the efficiency of government, and added, “. . . the Abyssinians, . . . who have known only how to deforest . . . are astonished at the industry of the Oromo and the abundance of their land.”<sup>19</sup> Even though the rest of Oromia may not have been as flourishing as the Kingdom of Jimma, it was rich in livestock, grains and other products at the time of conquest.

Jimma is part of what was known as the Gibe States the 19th century. The five Gibe states, including Jimma, the various kingdoms Leeqa and principalities of Wallaga, the Kingdom of Kafa and several other smaller independent entities in the region (now southwest Ethiopia), had, for a long time, been the richest part of Northeast Africa and produced most of the commodities exported from there. This region was conquered by the Abyssinians in the 1880s and was subsequently ravaged and impoverished. However, Abba Jifar II had, through shrewd diplomacy, managed to save his people from Abyssinian greed for 50 years. He maintained the autonomy of his Kingdom until 1932 by accepting Menelik's suzerainty and the payment of an annual tribute of \$200,000 to him, a very large sum for that period.<sup>20</sup> Darley, who had witnessed the destruction and enslavement of the Kingdom of Kafa, Maaji, and numerous communities and peoples in the region, anticipated that the same thing would also happen to Jimma upon the death of Abba Jifar. He wrote,

*At his death (Abba Jifar), . . . I fear for the future of this people. The mouth of every Abyssinian waters when he travels through their territory, and I am sure they will make a determined effort to seize it. . . . If they do so, the country will quickly revert to the same state as the rest (sic) of Abyssinia, for the wealth of this . . . country is derived from the conciliatory rule and liberal policy of its ruler, which encourages instead of cramping trade and industry.*<sup>21</sup>

Darley was absolutely right. Upon the death of Abba Jifar in 1932, land in Jimma was confiscated and distributed among the Abyssinian nobility, soldiers and settlers. Frank de Halpert, who was in the region in 1934 observed,

*An uneducated governor, . . . distinguished for his loyalty to the Emperor rather than his merit, was sent to take over. He brought with him large numbers of Amhara soldiers, officials, and police, who regarded the Jimma people as a conquered race and set about enriching themselves. The prosperity of the market was at once affected as new tolls and levies were exacted from traders.*<sup>22</sup>

Thus the Abyssinian rule had negative effects on the Oromo economy. Before any recovery from the calamities of the conquest was made, another crude form of exploitation known as the *gabbar* system was imposed upon the Oromo. This system was based on the confiscation of land and its distribution along with its ex-owners (Oromo peasants) to the Abyssinian nobility, the state agents, the Coptic Church and settlers who came to Oromia in the wake of the conquest.

B. Tellez, who was in Abyssinia in the 16th century wrote that “The Agaas looked upon war with the Abyssinians as a less evil than peace, because they did them less damage in war, and their oppression was great in time of peace.”<sup>23</sup> The situation of those peoples who were conquered by the Abyssinians at the end of the 19th century was even worse. In many regions in the south, the indigenous inhabitants were first devastated by war in which the Abyssinians used modern European weapons against peoples armed with spears and other traditional weapons.

Following military defeat these peoples were forced to live under a very heavy social and economic oppression. For example, the obligations that the Oromo, who were turned into *gabbar*s (serfs/tenants), had to meet were such that their burden and living conditions were considered even worse than that of slaves. A *gabbar* handed over to the landlord more than two-thirds of his produce, provided free labor to his household, paid taxes to the state, and contributed cash and labor to build government offices, prisons and churches not only in the village or district where he lived, but sometimes hundreds of kilometres away from his home in the provincial capital. The *gabbar* household had no savings and barely survived from year to year. Thus, the changes in landownership and the introduction of the *gabbar* system lowered the standard of living and undermined the economic security of the Oromo which the former socio-political structures had afforded them.

The landlords, most of whom went south as simple soldiers during the conquest, or settlers and famine "refugees" afterwards, devoted their time to idle leisure, rarely invested their incomes in economic ventures and thus wasted resources that they extracted from the Oromo and other conquered peoples on imported consumer goods. Since the Ethiopian state has been built on the principle of wealth extraction rather than wealth creation, there were more disincentives than there were incentives for the peasants in the south to increase agricultural production. E. Cerulli who was in the region during the first decade of this century wrote that coffee production "deteriorated rapidly after the land was granted to Shoan nobles who set the people to forced labor collecting the berries."<sup>24</sup> Bieber who was in Ethiopia in 1905 and 1909 had also witnessed that "the desire of the Amharas to enrich themselves quickly had greatly impoverished the country."<sup>24a</sup> Some areas were hit harder than others. In Borana in the south, "The population was not large and the soldiers pressed so hardly upon the *gabbar*s allotted to them that many fled to the bush or into British territory."<sup>25</sup> Frank de Halpert, remarked about the situation in Kaffa,

*Judging by the traces of abandoned villages and cultivation, the population probably decreased by about three quarters in the fifty years before 1936. The old commerce died out. A traveller would rarely see a Kaffa native on the tracks and often when he did the native would flee in fear.<sup>26</sup>*

Darley who visited Maji in 1909 and again in 1919 reported a serious deterioration of the living conditions and security of the native population. He blamed the rapacity of the Amhara governors and soldiers for the destruction and poverty he witnessed in Maji.<sup>27</sup> The Italian conquest of 1936 gave the Oromo some respite from the excesses of the *gabbar* system and *naftanya* exploitation. The Italians restored land to its rightful Oromo owners. But it was a short-lived respite. The oppressive system was re-imposed on the Oromo with the restoration of Haile Selassie's government in 1941.

## 2.2 Introduction of Capitalist Agriculture

The 1960s saw some modernization of the agricultural sector. This, however, has never become beneficial to Oromo tenants wherever its effects were felt. The introduction of commercial farming resulted in a rapid deterioration of their economy and security as they became victims of large scale evictions.

Although some of the other nationalities in the south were also affected, the main victims of both the *gabbar* system and the negative consequences of the commercialization of agriculture in the late 1960s and early 1970s were the Oromo. Oromo pastoralists along the Rift Valley in Shawa, Arsi and Sidamo lost their grazing land to commercial farms and plantations. In some cases they were even denied the possibility to survive as wage-laborers in their home areas, because the farm and plantation owners were reluctant to employ pastoralists and recruited laborers from elsewhere in the empire.<sup>28</sup>

Even externally financed development projects such as the well known Chilaalo Agricultural Development Unit (CADU) in Arsi which was designed to meet the needs of the ordinary peasants by raising productivity resulted in the eviction and displacement of Oromo peasants and pastoralists on a large scale. When the *naftanya*, most of whom were absentee landlords, saw a more efficient exploitation of "their" land in the CADU program they simply evicted the tenants and started to farm the land taking advantage of the credit system meant for poor peasant cultivators or leased it to commercial farmers. In a period of only five years about 20% of the tenants of the project districts in Chilaalo *awraja* (province) were evicted.<sup>29</sup> Even where the Oromo were involved in agricultural development, their benefits were limited and the bulk of the wealth generated went to absentee landlords in the capital and the garrison towns of the south. As several indigenous and expatriate researchers have noted, the social distance between the landlord class and the tenant class grew wider as the consequence of Haile Selassie's political and economic policies of the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>30</sup>

### 2.3 Colonel Mengistu's War Economy

Rural land and large scale private commercial farms were nationalized by the Dergue in 1975. But the state, which thereafter owned the nationalized land, proved to be as exploitative as the landlords it had replaced. The Dergue, increased taxes on peasant households and introduced new methods and ways of extracting more rents. By and large, the military regime expanded an economic policy that was deeply marked by what Bichaka Fayissa has characterized as *rent seeking behavior*. Fayissa argued that this policy proved highly detrimental to economic development since it involved (a) artificial interferences with markets, and (b) enhanced resource wasting activities by the state and groups that used the state to control the country's wealth and resources.<sup>31</sup> The Dergue was even less judicious than previous landlords in its extraction of rent. In order to collect taxes, "contributions" and even grain quotas imposed by the so-called Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC), the Dergue cadres forced many peasants to sell their oxen and other means of production thereby destroying their means of livelihood.

The Dergue surpassed the previous regime and the landlords not only in its rent extraction capacity but also *resource wasting activities*. It did not only militarize politics but also bureaucratized economics. In turn, the entire state bureaucracy was dominated and controlled by the military. Consequently, the Ethiopian economy was turned into a war economy. Since the regime fought its wars mainly with Oromo resources—human and material—Oromo households had to bear much of the heavy burdens of the regime's economic policy.

The impact of the war on the Ethiopian economy in general can be explained by the astronomical rate of increase in military expenditure and the parallel decline in economic growth during the last two decades. In 1974, the annual military expenditure was about 134 million birr. By 1990 it had risen to over 2.3 billion birr; an astronomical increase of 2075% in just fifteen years. If we look at the annual government expenditure, we find that military expenses accounted for about 13%<sup>32</sup> of the state budget in 1974; and it was over 60% in 1990.<sup>33</sup> It should be pointed out that these figures do not include the "contributions" that the regime forcibly collected for several years, in cash and kind, from the public. From 1975 to its demise in 1991, the Dergue reportedly had spent US\$17 billion on weapon imports.<sup>34</sup> As the result of the war, GNP growth stagnated or kept on decreasing over the last two decades. There was some growth from 1970 to 1980, although not a significant one. Then a period of total stagnation and decline has followed. The agricultural sector was hit most severely, and from 1980 onwards, agricultural production had successively declined.<sup>35</sup>

The Oromo people bore much of the economic burden resulting from the Dergue's war policy. The war was fought with weapons which were partly bartered with coffee that was extensively extracted by the state owned Agricultural Marketing Corporation from Oromo peasants. Food

production was affected in various ways. Continued conscription of able bodied young men into the militia significantly reduced the labor force every where in the south. Military conscription hit hard particularly the Oromo economy and society as the majority of the regular soldiers and the unpaid militia in the Ethiopian army were taken from Oromia. In 1975, there were about 50,000 men in the Ethiopian army. By 1990 these were approximately 400,000. Thus, with an estimated total population of about 50 million and a GNP per capita of about US\$100 (one of the lowest in Africa), Ethiopia became, under the Dergue, one of the most militarized states in the world.<sup>36</sup>

Production capacity also diminished as oxen and seeds, the main capital input of peasant agriculture in Ethiopia, were sold to "contribute" to what the Dergue called "defense of the motherland" or pay taxes. The peasants were also continuously harassed, particularly in or near war zones and their movements were restricted through villagization and their incentives to produce undermined.

Because the majority of the militiamen who were used as cheap cannon-fodder in the wars the Dergue conducted on several fronts in the past seventeen years were Oromo youngsters, the socio-economic consequences of the war have been devastating on innumerable Oromo households and communities. Perhaps as many Oromo youngsters were killed in the war over Eritrea as the Eritreans who died in the actual fighting in 30 years: The difference is that the Oromos lost their lives for nothing and the Eritreans sacrificed theirs for independence. Some reports indicate that nearly 500,000 soldiers of the Ethiopian army were killed<sup>37</sup>; and thousands were disabled and survive with the help of their families and relatives or as beggars. Even though it is now more than one and half years since the Ethiopian army was defeated and dispersed, thousands of families do not know the whereabouts of their members who were conscripted into the army by the Dergue years ago. The war has caused large scale family disintegration and turned an unknown number of young women into widows and their children into orphans. The socio-economic consequences of such a situation in a current African setting is not difficult to guess.

## 2.4 EPRDF and the Economy

Due to the EPRDF presence in Oromia the situation is even becoming worse. The EPRDF has no viable economic program, nor the capacity to carry out any economic reform. The front simply lacks two of the most important things needed for such a task: popular support and skilled and experienced manpower. The EPRDF has very few educated and experienced people among its members and supporters. This includes even its leadership. To make matters worse, it is laying off relatively experienced and trained people from the different ministries and replacing them with unexperienced and less educated EPRDF cadres. Here, history is repeating itself in a very peculiar manner. A European writer who knew Ethiopia very well made the following comments about the Abyssinian presence in the south in the 1930s.

*The Abyssinians had nothing to give their subject people, and nothing to teach them. They brought no crafts or knowledge, no new system of agriculture, drainage or road making, no medicine or hygiene, no higher political organization, no superiority except in their magazine rifles, and belts of cartridges. They built nothing, . . . idle domineering, burning timber, devouring crops, taxing the meager stream of commerce that seeped in from outside, . . . enslaving the people.*<sup>38</sup>

There are some striking similarities between the situations then (1930s) and now. Like the *naftanyas* of the imperial period, the Tigrean leaders and forces of the EPRDF have very little to offer the peoples of southern Ethiopia. They are there mainly to exploit their resources. They can do that as long as they have more weapons than Oromo organizations.

The EPRDF government is not capable of initiating economic development in Ethiopia. Ever since the EPRDF came to power, all development activities are in fact at standstill in most parts of country. The productive sectors of the economy are largely non-operational. Businessmen are harassed on political grounds and some Oromos have closed down their firms and left Ethiopia or are displaced within the country. According to *World Bank Report 1992*, GNP per capita has, dropped from the already disastrously low level of US\$ 120 in 1990 to US\$ 80 in 1992.<sup>38a</sup>

For thousands of families, the socio-economic problems caused by decades of war is already exacerbated by manner in which the EPRDF treated former members of the Ethiopian the military forces. As reported, 300,000-400,000 regular soldiers and security men were demobilized in 1991 without compensation. The decision is practically a collective punishment of not only the soldiers, but also of their family members for crimes they have not committed. Consequently, about 1.5 million people, the majority of whom are Oromos, have been deprived of their means of survival. This has caused great strain and burden on the extended family system. Many of the ex-soldiers, particularly those who were physically handicapped during the war, now live as beggars in the urban areas.<sup>39</sup>

To reiterate the salient points of what has transpired so far, the cumulated results of decades of looting, slave trafficking, of excessive exploitation, and of war economy are total impoverishment and underdevelopment not only in Oromia but in the Ethiopian empire in general. The Oromo, and other conquered peoples in the south were not only alienated from their means of production, but what was extracted from their land and labour was not invested in business and development ventures. It was either wastefully consumed by the landlords who passed their time in idle leisure, or spent by the state on the procurement of destructive weapons which was often used against the people. Thus, contrary to what was suggested by some of the most ardent *Ethiopianists* regarding the benefits of *pax Amharica*, the Oromo, as Marina and David Ottaway have correctly observed "never derived any advantage from being Ethiopian subjects."<sup>40</sup> Socially and politically, they were ruthlessly oppressed; economically, they were exploited and outrageously underdeveloped.

The question is: Is there any hope to overcome the problems and particularly the economic mess that the previous Ethiopian regimes had left behind and which is now deteriorating further under the EPRDF? Is it possible to improve an economy that has deteriorated so much and for so long within a reasonable period of time? With regard to Oromia, my answer as a social scientist with research and work experience from that region is yes. The rehabilitation of the war torn economy and society is, obviously, a Herculean task demanding enormous resources. Nevertheless, the Oromo people, have significant amount of natural resources and a steadily growing cadre of educated and skilled manpower to gradually solve these problems, given that they are free to make their own decision.

### 3. Reasons for Optimism

Today the most urgent concern of any government in the Horn of Africa should be feeding the population and fighting hunger. Food self-sufficiency is also a priority in Oromia. Therefore, the battle for food is among the first peace time battles to be waged by the government of the future. Fortunately, the Oromo territory is endowed with natural and human resources which, if coupled with sound economic policy, could make food self-sufficiency possible within a short period of time. It is even plausible to suggest that there are sufficient resources to turn Oromia's *subsistence economy into a surplus economy*. Let us briefly look at these resources.

#### 3.1 Agricultural and Livestock Resources

Reliable estimates indicate that only half of the land area suitable for crop production is under cultivation in today's Ethiopia. Much of this extensive unused land is located in the south including



Oromia This means there is a high potential for developing a sustainable food production both for domestic consumption and external market. Besides coffee, which is at present the main export crop, the potential for the production of fruits, pulses, oil seeds, cane sugar, grape-vines, spices, tea, vegetables, etc., is simply enormous.

Because of the recurrent famines, the Horn of Africa is often depicted as a dry and totally barren region. This is only partially true; and it is not true for Oromia at all. In normal years rainfall is sufficient for crop production, in many parts twice a year. Oromia is also the source of most of the major rivers in the Horn of Africa, on which countries like Egypt, Sudan and Somalia depend for survival. Hundreds of streams criss-cross the Oromo country. Given these resources, the potential for irrigated agriculture, particularly in the lowland areas, is very promising. In addition, the potential for electrical energy production is very significant. So far, only a very small part of this potential is exploited.

The availability of resources and its energy potentials make Oromia quite suitable for the expansion of industries, particularly agriculture based ones such as extraction of sugar, edible oil, textiles, etc.—for domestic use and export.

Although the export of skins and hides and live animals constitute a significant foreign currency earner in the Ethiopian economy, the livestock sector is so far under exploited and underdeveloped. With the very rich culture that the Oromo have in animal husbandry and the vast rangeland areas of the country there is great potential for the expansion of this sector.

Ethiopia has already one of the largest livestock populations in Africa most of which are said to be raised by Oromo peasants and pastoralists.<sup>41</sup> But so far very little use is made of that economic asset. Therefore, if and when the quality and quantity of dairy products, meat and leather goods for domestic consumption and export are improved a substantial contribution to the economy of Oromia can be expected from this sector.

Thus, located near the markets of the Middle East and Europe, Oromia's potential to earn foreign currency is quite significant, if her agricultural and livestock resources are developed and properly exploited.

### 3.2 Mineral Resources and Forestry

Oromia has substantial mineral deposits that can be commercially exploited. In addition to gold and platinum that are currently exploited, deposits of many other minerals including iron ore, natural gas, etc. are reported. The amount of gold and platinum that has been prospected under the previous regimes was quite modest. But the Mengistu regime had made significant investments to expand production. If exploited properly gold and the other mineral resources could be a significant source of revenue for the state. The mining industry could also employ thousands of people.

According to existing reports, most regions in Oromia were covered by dense forests at the turn of the century. During the entire period of the present century, these forests were subjected to intensive encroachment and degradation. Even here the colonization of Oromia and the kind of land tenure policy followed by consecutive Ethiopian regimes had a role to play.

Under the Dergue, the forests were subjected to further degradation due to large scale clearing to establish state farms, schemes to resettle people from the north; and intensive widespread logging as the result of villagization. Although the Dergue had also made significant attempts to fight environmental degradation through tree planting programs, it was not enough to compensate for the negative effects of its policies.

The EPRDF government is not in a position to conserve the existing natural forests or protect the planted plots. If protected from further destruction, the remaining forests in Oromia are still of great economic value. Although some 2400 plants are identified in the forests of the southwest regions,<sup>42</sup> an exhaustive list of the flora and fauna of all the forests is not yet made. The identified plants are said to constitute some unique genetic resources. It is believed that these resources

may become increasingly significant both for science and the genetic engineering industry in the 21st century.<sup>43</sup>

The scenic beauty would also make them attractive for "eco-tourism"<sup>44</sup> To the scenic attraction, the majestic mountains, and the Rift Valley Lakes with their wild life and exotic birds can be added.

Besides, there are large areas of bamboo forests in the Dhidheesa, Dabus, and many other river valleys, and along the Sudanese border in the west. These forests are without doubt resource base for a profitable paper and pulp industry. Furthermore, the optimum conditions, i.e. abundant rainfall, fertile soil and warm climate which are available in most parts of the Oromo country, make the restoration of the natural environment a viable undertaking in a relatively short time. Hence, an aggressive reforestation and conservation state policy is all to be most needed in order to make forestry a significant sector in the Oromo economy in the future.

What I have tried to point out, so far, is that the Oromo people have resources to uplift themselves from the prevailing level of poverty within a relatively short time and to embark on the road to sustainable development. I have also argued that the present economy of subsistence can be transformed into a surplus economy within a reasonable period of time and without much difficulty. I am suggesting, therefore, that once that is achieved, it would not be impossible to gradually start to industrialize the economy. However, peace and political stability are necessary conditions to realize these goals. Oromo self-determination is, of course, a prerequisite for peace; but, self-determination can give dividends and peace can be durable only when the oppressive alien rule is substituted by a democratic political order. This takes us to the political challenges of an emergent Oromo state.

#### 4. Political Challenges

For a century now the Oromo have been deprived of the right to run their own affairs. Therefore, when political freedom is achieved, building a state and its bureaucracy would not be an easy task. There are a number of factors that can contribute to insecurity and instability if they are not properly handled in time. I will briefly discuss two of them below: colonial legacy versus democracy and minority issues.

Several writers have traced the anti-democratic tendencies of African regimes to historical and structural handicaps that resulted from colonial rule. The colonial state was conceived in violence and was maintained by violence. It curtailed popular participation in government and fostered power and privilege. Colonial rule negated and to a great extent weakened indigenous democratic cultures and practices. The authoritarian colonial culture was inherited by African elites on independence. That legacy has contributed to the poor performance of most African states with regards to democracy and development.

What has happened under European colonial rule elsewhere in Africa has also happened in Oromia under the Ethiopian rule. The democratic political culture represented by the *gada* system was suppressed and replaced by an authoritarian Abyssinian system. There is a group of Oromo elite schooled in the Ethiopian political culture which is profoundly undemocratic.<sup>45</sup> Political stability and economic development in independent/autonomous Oromia can be guaranteed only if the mistakes committed by political elites elsewhere in Africa are actively avoided. This could be done if the Oromo society continues with the revival of its pre-conquest political culture; I mean the democratic *gada* culture. By the revival of the *gada* culture, I do not mean a wholesale reinstatement of its rituals and structures. What is to be revived is the democratic values, beliefs and ideology that supported popular participation, subjected political authority to popular will, made transfer of power peaceful and democratic and above all encouraged and promoted loyal opposition.<sup>46</sup> Free debate and loyal opposition are crucial for promoting democracy and political stability. These have to be promoted by Oromo elites, their political organizations, public institutions and the state.

#### 4.1 Minorities and Minority Rights

Whether Oromia becomes an independent state or a partner in a federation with other neighboring states, there will always be some minorities living within its borders. The manner in which Oromo leaders handle the questions of minorities will be a crucial factor in the development of good relations with their neighbors and enhancement of their stature in the international community.

There are two types of minorities in Oromia today. The first category belong to groups whose homelands, like the Aderes of Harar City, are small enclaves within the Oromo territory. The size of this population group is very small. Nonetheless, their rights to develop their identities and guide and decide their destiny should be respected and encouraged. The Oromo people and their organizations have an obligation to give these peoples unreserved assistance in their efforts towards social and economic development.

The second category of minorities consists of migrants and their descendants who came to Oromia during last one hundred years. They number today, perhaps, between two and three million persons and come from different parts of Ethiopia. Almost every ethnic group is represented in this category. However, the majority are second and third generation descendants of *naftanya* families, government and Coptic Church functionaries, and migrants who came to Oromia at the end of the last century and the beginning of the present one. They are concentrated in the major urban areas. But many of them live also in dozens of small rural towns. In general, they constitute a privileged section of the society. They apparently own a large proportion of the businesses in Oromia, and hence have an important role to play in its economy. Since the capital city is located in Oromia, most of the senior functionaries in the public and the private sectors in Ethiopia belong to this group.

Although a numerical minority, the Amhara-Tigre section of this group have enjoyed, so far, the status and privileges that the majority of the population were denied. Even in free Oromia of the future, they should not be considered as a "political minority," but as citizens holding equal rights and privileges with the Oromo. The choice of citizenship should, of course, be left to them. From the Oromo point of view, however, language should be the only criterion to define them as a minority; their civil and human rights, as well as their equality with the Oromo, before the law, should be guaranteed by Oromo political organizations.

The minorities have also obligations to fulfil. Harmonious co-existence demands their recognition of and respect for Oromo rights. In that regard, there is much that the settlers and descendants of settlers in Oromia can learn from the Russians of the ex-Soviet Republics. The Russian settlers, who as in some of the Baltic states constitute more than 40% of the population, (Latvia over 50%, in Estonia over 40%) had recognized not only the rights of the indigenous populations, but many of them have even voted with them for separation from Russia. Obviously, the change of status that such a transition involves is not without its pains and problems. However, for peace to come to Ethiopia the privileged minority that dominated the Oromo and the other peoples for a century must accept the reality and follow the courageous example of the Russians. To harp on the intransigent and unrealistic rhetoric of "territorial integrity" or to cling to the hollow concept of "Greater Ethiopia," as some groups in the diaspora seem to interminably be doing, is tantamount to preparing a recipe for continued war and more bloodshed.

The Oromo should show solidarity with other ethnic groups and nationalities such as the Sidama, Walaita, Kambata, Anuak, Berta, Afar, etc. who constitute the most oppressed societies in Ethiopia. The Oromo have a common experience of conquest and oppression with these peoples. The linguistic, cultural and ethnic ties between the Oromo and most these peoples are also much stronger than it is with the Abyssinians. As the largest nation or "ethnic group" in the region and those with relatively more developed resources, the Oromo have a responsibility to cooperate with these peoples and protect their rights. The leaders of the concerned people must also recognize the fact that close cooperation with the Oromo is absolutely necessary, not just to confront

Amhara-Tigre domination from the north, but to create durable peace and sustainable economic development in the region.

## 5. Conclusion

The net result of the Ethiopian rule, in Oromia, for the last one hundred years has been underdevelopment: social, cultural, linguistic and economic. However, Oromia is still endowed with human and natural resources that can be utilized to create a viable economy in a relatively short period of time. But it would not be plausible to talk about economic development in Oromia until its people are in charge of their own affairs and are in control of their resources. Again, as we have seen elsewhere in Africa, political self-determination, in the absence of democracy, will not automatically lead to socio-economic development. One can only hope that Oromo elites will learn from the post-independence African experience and avoid the mistakes committed by African political elites elsewhere during the post-independence period. The Oromo society has a heritage that had promoted democracy and strongly discouraged dictatorship. Obviously, Oromo political elites have also much to learn from their pre-conquest political history in order to build a democratic society and create conducive conditions for economic development.

Economic development in Oromia will, without doubt, also have positive effects on the neighboring societies and their economies. This would mean in the first place, opportunities for thousands of traders, professionals, and employment for skilled and unskilled migrant workers from Amhara, Tigray, Eritrea, Gurage, Walaita, etc. During the past two decades, Ethiopia has become a synonym for food deficit zone. The development of Oromia's agricultural potential is one of the means to overcome this deficit and ensure food security in the region.

## End Notes

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1. The phrase used here is that of Donald Levine, (see *Greater Ethiopia*, 1974, p. 128), but for the details of the historical antagonism between the Oromo and the Abyssinians, see Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia: a History 1570-1850*, Cambridge, 1990

2. Margery Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, 2nd Edition, 1969, p. 377

2a Donald Levine, op. cit., and Christopher Clapham belong to this category of Ethiopianists. In his book, *Haile Selassie's Government*, (1969, p. 81), Clapham maintains "... the Galla are a very diverse people, ... and it cannot be taken for granted that they will arise as a united political force in the near future, or at all."

3 Perham had, nevertheless, guarded her assertions regarding "lack of consciousness" and "inevitable" malleability of the Oromo people into the Abyssinian cultural and political fold. She also had speculated, "In the Amhara-Galla situation there is always the possibility that religious intolerance upon one side, or the other might provoke the Muslim Gallas to first raise the banner of religion and then nationalism and attempt to rally not only their pagan but even their Christian kinsmen" (ibid. p. 378). It should be noted that the development of Oromo nationalism did not follow this religion based scenario.

3a. Edmond Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia*, 1991, p. 161.

4. Gadaa Melbaa, *Oromia: An Introduction*, (1983), gives a detailed description and analysis of the development of Oromo nationalism. See also Richard Greenfield and Mohammed Hassen, "Interpretation of Oromo Nationality," *Horn of Africa*, vol III, no 3, 1981, pp.3-14, for a discussion of Oromo nationalism.

5. The Macha Tulama Association was banned in 1967 and many of its leaders were sentenced to death and long terms of imprisonment. See Bonnie Holcomb & Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia: The Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa*, 1990, pp. 295-298. For the list of members who were imprisoned and sentenced to death or died while in prison, see *Ayaana Yaadannoo Waggaa 30ffaa*, ('The 30th Anniversary of the Macha and Tulama Association') Macha and Tulama Association, 1992. pp. 23-25

6. Regarding the manipulation of the local and regional elections of June 1992 by the EPRDF, the reports of all the national and international observer groups were unanimous. See for example, Gilbert Kulick's article "Ethiopia's Hollow Elections" (*Foreign Service Journal*, Sept. 1992), and the reports of the various Observer Teams

7. Such individuals are, for example, contemptuously referred to as "Gobanas" ("traitors") by the Oromo.

8. In July 1991, six organizations bearing the epithet "Ethiopian" had signed the Peace Charter and participated in the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE). Then, there were at least as many such organizations that did not participate in the TGE, and many more have come into existence since 1991.

9. Alex de Waal, "Ethiopia: Transition to What?", *World Policy Journal*, Fall/Winter, 1992, pp. 720-737.

10. There is as much hostility between some of these organization as between them and the EPRDF, or OLF. Next to the Somalis, the Amhara are the most politically fragmented ethnic group in the Horn of Africa today.

10a. Most of the articles and letters which vehemently oppose the drawing of regional boundaries based on ethnicity, the adoption of the Latin Alphabet in Oromo writing, the Eritrean referendum, etc. and are published in the *Ethiopian Review Magazine* are mainly by the members and sympathizers of such organizations. The contents of some of these articles are confused and self-contradictory. See, for example, Fikre Tolossa's (sic) contributions. He often talks about issues he does not really grasp.

11. A. de Waal, *ibid.* p. 729.

12. See for example, M. Bulcha, "The Transitional Charter of Ethiopia," *The Oromo Commentary*, Vol. I, nos. 1&2, 1991.

13. It is only a transitional government with representatives from the various ethnic groups which can successfully put to practice the ideas contained in the transitional charter of July 1991.

14. Mohamed Farah, "The Challenge Continues," *The Oromo Commentary*, Vol. I, no. 1, 1991, p. 30.

15. E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 1983.

15a. The German missionary, Krapf, who followed King Sahle Selassie on one of his annual expeditions against the Suluta Oromo north of the present day Addis Ababa wrote in 1941, "The soldiers take all they can get in the houses, and then burn them. As the harvest was over, the King could not, as *he generally does* (my emphasis), burn the fruits, but much wheat was destroyed with the houses." cited in Greenfield and Hassen, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

16. Darkwah, *Shewa, Menelik and the Ethiopian Empire*, 1978, p.192.

17. Donaldson Smith, "Expeditions through Somaliland to Lake Rudolf," *Geographical Journal*, 1896, pp 123-27.

18. Henry Darley, *Slave and Ivory: A Record of Adventure and Exploration in the Unknown Sudan and Among Abyssinian Slave-raiders*, 1926, pp 128-29.

19. Cited by Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, *op. cit.* p. 305.

20. *ibid.*

21. *ibid.* p. 306.

22. Frank de Halpert was Haile Selassie's advisers in the early 1930s in matters concerning slavery. His report as cited by Perham, *ibid.* p. 322.

23. Cited by Perham, *op. cit.* p. 32.

24. Cerulli, *Studi Etiopici I*, Rome 1936, cited in Perham, *ibid.* p. 307.

24a. *ibid.* p. 319.

25. Hudson, A. *Seven Years in Southern Abyssinia*, 1927, cited in Perham, *ibid.* p. 314. Hudson reported that 4000 Boran gabbars had sought refuge across the frontier in the British colony of Kenya at the time he was writing.

26. F. de Halpert cited in Perham, *ibid.* p. 321.

27. Darley, *op. cit.*, pp. 198ff. For a detailed scholarly study of the motives for and consequences of the Abyssinian conquest of Oromia, see Holcomb & Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia*. . . . *op.cit.*

28. An official of the Matahara Sugar Plantation told me in 1987 that the displaced Karayyu Oromo were excluded from employment on the plantation, even as labourers.

29. Edmond Keller, *op. cit.*, p. 126. See also J. M. Cohen, *Integrated Rural Development: The Ethiopian Experience and the Debate*, SIAS, 1987, p.127-28.

30. See for example, E. Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia*, 1988, p. 146.

31. Bichaka Fayissa, "Rent Seeking Behavior of the Ethiopian Rulers," *Oromo Commentary*, vol. ii, no. 1, 1992, pp.17-21
32. *Ethiopia: Statistical Abstract, 1976*, p.149
33. Various estimates. Menegistu admitted that in 1988 that about 50% of the state budget was spent on military expenses.
34. *The Indian Ocean Newsletter (ION)*, Nov 16,1991, p. 4. It is reported that the Dergue bought 370 aircraft, over 1,700 tanks, 1,600 other armored vehicles and 4,000 pieces of artillery.
35. This was a result of bad economic policy, drought and conscriptions of the most potential section of the rural population into the militia
36. *The Militarization of Africa*, Final report of an international symposium, Nov 10-12, 1986 at SIPRI, Stockholm, Scandinavian Inst of African Studies, p 9
37. ION, op cit.
38. Cited in Mohammed Hassen, "Militarization of the Ethiopian State," *Oromo Commentary*, vol ii no. 2&3, 1991, pp. 12-20
- 38a. Quoted in *Local and Regional Election in Ethiopia 21 June 1992*, Norwegian Institute of Human Rights, 1992, p. 7.
39. It remarkable that these soldiers did not resort to robbery. Even if it is alleged that sporadic armed robbery had occurred in a few places; it is insignificant given the number of soldiers who were demobilized, the amount of weapons in private hands, the miserable conditions of the soldiers and their families, and the absence of effective government in most parts of the country. It was said, in fact, that when the Mengistu regime collapsed, many of the demobilized soldiers were seen exchanging their weapons with bread instead of using them to rob people.
40. Marina and D. Ottaway, *Ethiopia: Empire in Revolution*, 1978, p 132.
41. ION, Feb. 22, 1992, p.7
42. Assefa Kuru, *Soil Erosion and Strategic State Policy: The Case of Ethiopia*. Helsinki 1986, p 39.
43. See for example, SIDA High Level Technical Mission, *Ethiopia 1992: Change and Continuity Recommendation for Future Cooperation*, Feb. 1992, p.44.
44. *ibid.*
45. See M. Bulcha, "History and Political Culture vs. Ethiopia's Territorial Integrity," *The Oromo Commentary*, Vol. II, 1, 1992.
46. Regarding the democratic aspects of the gada system see, among others, Asmerom Legesse, "Oromo Democracy," paper presented at the Annual Oromo Studies Conference, Toronto, Canada, 12-13 August 1989. Also his main work on the subject, *Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of African Society*, 1973.

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# The Oromo, Change and Continuity in Ethiopian Colonial Politics

by Asafa Jalata

With the demise of the Mengistu regime in May 1991 due to domestic and international political conditions, Ethiopian Amhara hegemony was replaced by that of Ethiopian Tigray. But the new Tigrayan colonial government is having difficulty because of the revolutionary challenge from the Oromo national movement. The opposition of the Meles regime to a democratic transition killed the hopes for a peaceful resolution of the conflict in the Ethiopian Empire. The new Tigrayan colonial rulers, mainly supported by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Sudan and U.S. governments, have openly manifested their colonial nature and brutal aggression against the Oromo nation and others.

The formation of a coalition transitional government and the adoption of a charter that would guarantee basic human rights, freedom of association and expression, the right of ethno-nations for self-determination, and the formation of a democratic state within two years indicated political changes. However, the domination of the transitional government by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and its subsidiary organization, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and the blockage of district and regional elections in June 1992 indicated the continuity of Ethiopian colonial politics. The continuity of Ethiopian colonial politics forced the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to withdraw from the coalition government and resume its protracted guerrilla armed struggle for the liberation of Oromia from Ethiopian colonialism.

## The Emergence of the New Tigrayan Colonial Regime

The IPLF was militarily successful in the late 1980s mainly because of the support it received from the EPLF, the Sudan, Libya and particularly the USA. The critical understanding of the relationship between Christian Eritreans and Tigrayans is very essential. In addition to their common experiences of domination by the Amhara rulers, both Christian Eritreans and Tigrayans have been historically related peoples who speak the same language and who claim the same origin and history. One source argues that "Eritrean Christians are . . . Tigrinya speakers, kin to the inhabitants of the adjacent district of Tigre. This is a key factor which affects the future of both Ethiopia and the entire Horn of Africa."<sup>1</sup> Because of this ethnic affinity and the need for alliance against the Amhara government, the EPLF helped the Tigrayan nationalists in creating and building the IPLF and eliminating the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party from the soil of Tigray in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

To create alliance against the Ethiopian government, the EPLF also assisted the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). However, later the EPLF sided with the IPLF and helped it in "recycling" Ethiopian soldiers who were captured at war fronts by forming the so-called Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) not only to fight against the military regime, but also to conspire against the OLF.<sup>3</sup> The assistance the TPLF obtained from the Sudan and the USA was also very decisive for the spectacular success of the TPLF.<sup>4</sup> According to Agency France Press, "The United States backed the Tigre People's Liberation Front (TPLF) for several years in their struggle against Lieutenant-Colonel Mengistu's regime and it was on American advice that the IPLF became the EPRDF, though former Tigrean guerrillas still dominant in the movement."<sup>5</sup> In the 1980s, both the EPLF and the IPLF began to directly get relief aid from Western countries for their hunger-stricken populations. Using this economic assistance, the TPLF changed its hungry young men and women to fighters and built itself militarily, organizationally and diplomatically.

Mengistu's political and economic policies led to disaster; famine, poverty, unemployment and war became part of the life in the Ethiopian Empire. Further, the unsuccessful military coup of 1989 weakened the position of the Mengistu regime. The goal of obtaining massive arms and military expertise to keep the empire intact made the regime completely dependent on the Soviet Union and Western economic assistance, particularly on emergency relief aid. The Ethiopian colonial state cannot survive without the support of one superpower or the other. Therefore, the changing relationship in the late 1980s between the USA and the USSR had a serious consequence for the Mengistu regime. The USSR provided military equipment that was estimated at US \$12 billion between 1977 and 1991.<sup>6</sup> This could not guarantee the survival of the military regime. The USSR notified Ethiopia that after 1992 it would not renew its arms transfer agreement.<sup>7</sup> Then Ethiopia began to look to the USA for assistance.

The US government agreed to act as a broker between the military regime and the EPLF, the strongest liberation front. The US also continued to support the TPLF and prepare it as an alternative to the Mengistu regime. Recognizing the weakness of his government, Colonel Mengistu began to talk about political and economic reforms. He proposed some economic liberalization and political changes. The Mengistu regime was forced by both domestic and international politics to consider a peaceful solution to liberation wars.<sup>8</sup> The gradual decay of the Mengistu regime and the intensification of the liberation wars continued in 1990 and 1991. The close relationship between the EPLF, the Sudan and the TPLF was very essential in creating a new power bloc in norther Ethiopia.<sup>9</sup> In 1991 the EPLF and the TPLF collaborated in marching to Amhara and Oromo territories. Supported by EPLF armor, TPLF/EPRDF units captured Wallo, Gondar, Gogjam, Nekemte and parts of Shawa without serious resistance from the Ethiopian army.<sup>10</sup> Later it became clear that the EPLF and the TPLF/EPRDF made a political deal to forge this collaborative effort.

The OLF also expanded its liberated areas in eastern and western Oromia. The intensification of the liberation wars in the early 1990s forced the military regime to negotiate with the three liberation movements. The USA brought together the EPLF, the TPLF, the OLF, and the Ethiopian government for the London Peace Conference on May 27 and 28, 1991. Before this conference began Mengistu accepted the US advice and left his position to his loyal follower, Tesfaye Gebre-Kidan. When he fled to Zimbabwe, Mengistu's army was paralyzed and disintegrated.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. government endorsed the TPLF/EPRDF seizing Ethiopian state power. Tuso comments that the Tigrayan "dominated EPRDF, supported by the EPLF military forces and management skills, marched into Addis Ababa and seized power without any significant resistance."<sup>12</sup>

Since the OLF did not fully liberate Oromia as the TPLF liberated Tigray and as the EPLF liberated Eritrea, it was not accepted as an equal participant in the London Peace Conference. The Conference's decision was mainly based on military capability. That was why the EPLF demand for a referendum to determine Eritrean political destiny was recognized while that of Oromia was suppressed.<sup>13</sup> The OLF immediately called for an independence referendum for Oromia and criticized the agreement signed in London.<sup>14</sup> The barrel of the gun and the superpower decided everything. Meles Zenawi, the leader of the TPLF and the EPRDF, became the head of the interim government of Ethiopia. A peace conference was held in Addis Ababa from July 1-5, 1991 to adopt a transitional period charter and to form a transitional coalition government. Except for the inclusion of other political organizations, the basic nature of the interim government was not changed since the EPRDF remained the dominant political force in the transitional government. This increased the political tension between the new regime and the OLF. The OLF was annoyed because the Tigrayan government was replacing that of the Amhara without creating "a broadly based provisional government that would prepare the country for free election."<sup>15</sup>



## The Root of Contradictions

The Oromo became very furious when the TPLF and its supporters continued Ethiopian colonialism. As one source asserts "A new reality is being created, mainly by the Tigreans, who are, nonetheless, divided into Tigreans, who endorse an all-Ethiopian vision (TPLF), and Eritreans (EPLF) who are committed to secession. Among themselves, Tigrean speakers have already formulated an option of political separation between Addis Ababa and Asmara."<sup>16</sup> The contradictions between successive Ethiopian colonial ruling classes and the Oromo have been both historical and contemporary. As Yohannes of Tigray began to colonize Oromia, Meles Zenawi of Tigray and his organizations committed themselves to save Ethiopian colonialism and become the new rightful rulers of the empire. Hasselblatt captures this political situation when he argues that the Tigrayans want "to take over the ruling role that was played by the Amhara, as if Meles wanted to take his place in the line of imperial figures beside [Yohannes], Menelik, Haile Selassie and Mengistu, whose highest political goal was the subjection and exploitation of rich Oromia."<sup>17</sup>

The occupation of Oromo territories by TPLF/EPRDF soldiers, the domination of the transitional government by the Tigrayan rulers and their attempt to shape the direction of the Oromo national movement clearly showed the continuation of the historical contradictions between the Oromo and the Ethiopians. In Ethiopian ethnic-class hierarchy, the Tigrayans have been second to the Amharas. Successive Tigrayan ruling classes have enjoyed advantages from the creation and maintenance of the Ethiopian Empire. Through the adoption of the charter and the formation of the transitional government, the TPLF/EPRDF attempted to legitimize its interim state power and began to establish its political authority. The OLF entered the Tigrayan-dominated transitional government to prepare the Oromo people for national liberation struggle.<sup>18</sup>

The new Tigrayan rulers are mainly interested to take power from the Amhara rulers and keeping the empire under their control by introducing some cosmetic changes. For them, this is a revolution. For the Oromo, a revolution is the total destruction of the Ethiopian colonial system. "If we accept that national liberation demands a profound mutation in the process of development of productive forces," Cabral writes, "we see that this phenomenon of national liberation necessarily corresponds to a revolution."<sup>19</sup> Currently the Tigrayan regime is the main enemy of the Oromo nation. The TPLF created such political contradictions with the Oromo by using its own ethnic-based political power first, and then extending it beyond Tigray in the name of multinational political power by creating its puppet organizations as it would fit its political objectives. For the TPLF, except its God father, the EPLF, independent organizations, such as the OLF, are undesirable and must be destroyed.<sup>20</sup>

The TPLF formed the EPRDF coalition under its guidance. This political strategy temporarily worked well for the TPLF and enabled it to finally seize Ethiopian state power. However, the TPLF/EPRDF could not totally establish its authority over Oromia because of the resistance from the OLF and the Oromo people.<sup>21</sup> Since Oromia occupies three-fourths of the Ethiopian Empire, the Tigrayan government has confronted a serious political problem. For the OLF, the Tigrayans struggle for national self-determination was a genuine national struggle; but the TPLF's creation of puppet organizations under its leadership to seize and dominate Ethiopian state power absolutely undermined the principles of democracy and national self-determination. Since the TPLF/EPRDF has seen the OLF as the main obstacle for its political objectives, it tried its best to undermine or destroy the OLF through different mechanisms. One of the major immediate contradictions between the OLF and the TPLF was the creation and the use of the OPDO in undermining the Oromo question.<sup>22</sup> The TPLF interprets "Ethiopian history" only from the perspective of the Amhara-Tigray ruling class that denies the colonization and incorporation of Oromia into Ethiopia. The Oromo have been struggling for decolonization and democratization to which the Amhara-Tigray ruling class has always opposed.

After the formation of the transitional government, the TPLF/EPRDF began to violate the

charter by passing decrees by force majeure of its members in the Council of Representatives. By disregarding the OLF army, the TPLF-dominated transitional government declared the EPRDF army to be a "national" army<sup>23</sup> The OLF should have opposed and fought this decision from the beginning. Before any election was held, the EPRDF aimed at housing the OLF army in barracks so that it would be easy to control or destroy it.<sup>24</sup> The EPLF, supporting the EPRDF's position, made a proposal in which the OLF army would be reduced to 15 thousands and housed in barracks and the remaining would be demobilized.<sup>25</sup> Considering the Eritrean proposal as 75% reduction in its army and unilateral disarmament of the OLF, the OLF rejected this proposal and provided its counter proposal.<sup>26</sup> The plan to reduce and demobilize the OLF army showed how the TPLF/EPRDF and the EPLF tried to marginalize the OLF in order to control Oromia and its people. This led to a series of both military and political confrontations.

The OLF stayed in the Tigrayan-dominated transitional government for one year for its own political advantages. After concentrating on military activities for many years in some regions, the OLF opted to use the new opportunity for political mobilisation of the entire regions of Oromia. The OLF continued to work on both political and military areas to prepare for any situation it might face in the future. Since the OLF recognized its political popularity and the numerical strength of its constituency, it believed that it could democratically defeat the TPLF/EPRDF. Recognizing this danger, the TPLF/EPRDF used its military strength and Eritrean assistance to undermine democracy and establish its authority over garrison cities in Oromia. The Tigrayan government's attempt to consolidate Ethiopian colonialism and the emergence of the OLF as a popular political force among the Oromo have intensified the development of Oromo nationalism.

### **The Development of Oromo Nationalism and Tigrayan Reaction**

The new political change facilitated the blossoming of Oromo nationalism. The OLF extended its politics from the periphery to the center by becoming a junior partner in the Tigrayan-dominated government. For the first time after their colonization, the Oromo politically challenged Ethiopian colonial politics under the leadership of the OLF. This new condition temporarily allowed all Oromos to send their representatives to Habro, Arssi, Finfine, Naqamte, Ambo and other places to openly discuss and develop a strategy that would allow them to actively participate in the Oromo national movement.<sup>27</sup> OLF leaders and cadres openly explained what all Oromos should do to determine the future of Oromia.<sup>28</sup> Oromo elders and community leaders gave their blessing and demonstrated their support for the OLF.

OLF cultural and musical troupes through traditional and modern musics, poems, and speeches thoroughly articulated the necessity of removing oppression, exploitation, and cultural suppression.<sup>29</sup> On all these events, three important things were emphasized: The Oromo unity, the OLF leadership and the liberation of Oromia. Hiltzik observed one of these events and commented that in Finfine (Addis Ababa) "Any unwitting observers who happened upon a public ceremony in a stadium near here recently could be forgiven for thinking they had strayed across the border into another country. Speaker after speaker evoked the name of the 'nation of Oromia.'"<sup>30</sup>

After realizing that the OLF is an independent and matured organization, the majority of the Oromo have accepted it as their sole and true organization. That is why Oromo elders and leaders demanded four small Oromo organizations,<sup>31</sup> including the OPDO, to join the independent Oromo national movement.<sup>32</sup> When it was in the coalition government for about a year, the OLF attempted to enable Oromia to achieve the right of national self-administration under its national assembly; to bring the Oromian national resources under the total control of the Oromo; to decentralize state power according to ethno-nations so that power cannot be concentrated under a central government; to guarantee Oromia the right to develop its culture, language, and education; and to guarantee Oromia the right to build its own army to defend its national interest.<sup>33</sup> For the OLF, these were important minimum political objectives; it struggled and sacrificed hundreds of lives

to make these objectives practical and workable. But the TPLF/EPRDF prevented the implementation of these minimum political objectives.

The Tigrayan government, from the beginning, opposed the unity and independence of the Oromo national movement;<sup>34</sup> but it has been challenged by Oromo nationalism.<sup>35</sup> The emergence of the Tigrayan government and the development of Oromo nationalism brought two conflicting social processes. One is the process through which the TPLF/EPRDF has attempted to rule over Oromia through its surrogate organization, the OPDO. The other one is the process through which the OLF has struggled to enable the Oromo to freely and democratically decide their political future. These contradictory processes are the products of the contradiction between the charter and the decrees that the TPLF/EPRDF passed by its force majeure in the Council of Representatives to legitimize its colonial rule.

The emergence of the EPRDF army as the "national defence army" practically violated the idea of Oromian self-rule.<sup>36</sup> Representatives of Oromos in Oromia and abroad passed resolutions and demanded that the TPLF/EPRDF should stop its intervention in the Oromo affairs through its military and OPDO. The central themes of these resolutions charge that the TPLF/EPRDF: (1) violated the charter by intimidating, killing, imprisoning, and torturing Oromos for supporting the OLF, (2) involved itself through its army and surrogate organization, the OPDO, in the internal affairs of Oromia; (3) conducted a war of aggression in collaboration with colonial settlers against the Oromo people; (4) organized minority nationalities against the Oromo people through its propaganda and military intervention; (5) divided Oromia and incorporated parts of it to the regions of other peoples; and (6) looted the economic resources of Oromia to build Tigray.<sup>37</sup> Oromo civilians have been disarmed by the peace and stability committees of the EPRDF. The new Tigrayan rulers have declared war on the OLF and the Oromo people.<sup>38</sup>

Africa Watch, a Committee of Human Rights Watch in the U.S., expressed its concern with the absence of the rule of law, i.e., arbitrary detentions and killings by members of the EPRDF forces.<sup>39</sup> The EPRDF forces continue with armed conflict in Oromia. They disrupt relief operations while thousands of Oromos starve to death in Hararghe, Bale and Sidamo; they violate Oromo human and national rights.<sup>40</sup> Rev. Ronald K. Ward comments that "the Meles government is fostering its own political parties in the regions, creating insecurity and then using insecurity as an excuse not to call elections. . . . The government knows that if it called an election now that [the] OLF would win by a vast majority but it hopes that by delaying, funnelling aid through OPDO and by military threat it can install its own puppet rulers in Oromia."<sup>41</sup> As we shall see below, Rev. Ward correctly predicted the political ambition of the new Tigrayan rulers.

Meles openly expressed that development activities would be postponed in regions like Oromia because of the lack of peace and stability.<sup>42</sup> This implies that all resources are going to be directed to Tigray where the TPLF controls absolutely. The Tigrayan nationalists recently planned to create 31 universities and colleges in Tigray as soon as possible.<sup>43</sup> From where does Tigray get funds for these projects? The Meles government is primarily interested in developing Tigray by exploiting the resources of the Oromo and others that it rules. Rev. Ward argues that "the Tigrean forces are raping the country and taking everything possible back to Tigray. In one way or another Meles will funnel aid to his own people."<sup>44</sup> Ward recommends that economic aid for Oromia must be given to Oromos; and the emergency aid for the people of Oromia must be given through the Oromo Relief Association.<sup>45</sup>

But Western governments and their NGOs continue to finance the Tigrayan government as they financed the Mengistu government before. Hasselblatt understands the nature of the Ethiopian state and the commitment of the West to support successive Ethiopian regimes. He comments that "The question around which everything revolves is how long the large Oromo nation, with its basically democratic traditions and culture, will tolerate being exploited and bullied by the Tigre, who currently dominate the government and tend to be authoritarian in their methods. . . .

Those who neither see or ask this question will completely misconceive the situation in Ethiopia, just as most [of them] . . . did during the Mengistu period."<sup>46</sup>

When the OLF declared that it had about 40,000 guerrilla fighters,<sup>47</sup> the new regime sought an immediate war, assuming that time would permit the OLF to build more forces. The OLF demonstrated its refusal of a conventional war with the EPRDF forces by withdrawing from cities. The OLF does not want to fight a war as it is planned by its enemy; but it has taken defensive guerrilla actions. Between August 1991 and May 1992 both clashes and cooperation existed between the EPRDF and the OLF. After gaining dominance in the new government "by filling all key government posts with EPRDF men,"<sup>48</sup> the TPLF/EPRDF began its attack on the Oromo national movement.<sup>49</sup>

The operating of the OLF "above the ground for the first time" and its competition with the EPRDF for political power annoyed the Tigrayan government.<sup>50</sup> The EPRDF forces have continued their attacks on the Oromo people and the OLF. The OLF denounced the EPRDF policy of war provocation and the massacre of hundreds of innocent civilians.<sup>51</sup> As district and regional elections were to take place in Oromia, the EPRDF began to worry that the Oromo might reject its OPDO and vote for OLF members and supporters.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the Tigrayan forces intensified war of aggression on the Oromo people. On April 16, 1992, the EPRDF and the OLF agreed to a U.S. mediated cease-fire.<sup>53</sup>

### **The New Colonial Regime and its Allies**

The Bush administration continued to support the Tigrayan regime despite its violation of Oromo human and national rights. In addition to secret and relief assistance during this period, the US gave US \$34 million to deal with the problem of ex-soldiers; and the World Bank and USAID began to provide economic assistance.<sup>54</sup> The World Bank also agreed to provide this regime US\$650m for an Emergency Recovery and Reconstruction programs.<sup>55</sup> A source notes that "The money that the state receives from abroad . . . falls into the hands of the . . . the TPLF, which has sole control of . . . the bureaucracy. In this way, two-hundred and sixty-million U.S. dollars recently flowed into these channels."<sup>56</sup> This regime is getting all these privileges because of the backing of the US government. The regime expropriated all state financial infrastructure, economic resources and available funds to build its army and security networks.

The OLF tried to convince the US that supporting the transition to democracy is the only positive role it can play. To assist the Tigrayan government financially and morally is to invite colonial dictatorship and war.<sup>57</sup> Despite all these problems, the OLF emerged as a formidable liberation front. The Oromo people rejected the EPRDF forces and endorsed the OLF as their independent and principled liberation front. The OLF mobilised the Oromo people to democratically solve the Oromo question. But the TPLF/EPRDF demonstrated its colonial and dictatorial nature by blocking district and regional elections. This was done in the presence of international observers in June 1992.<sup>59</sup> This unfortunate political condition forced the OLF to withdraw from the coalition government. Since the Oromo have been denied the possibility of determining their destiny through democracy, they have resumed their armed struggle to regain their lost freedom under the leadership of the OLF. It is impossible to harmonize the political economy of Ethiopian colonialism with the Oromo national liberation struggle. The Oromo and the OLF are combining the processes of liberation, democratization and transformation as prerequisite to work with other peoples.

The Ethiopian Empire is in the process of dying. In Ethiopian ethnic-class hierarchy, its two top social layers were already gone. The Amhara system that maintained these two layers, the monarchy and the military, could not survive the revolutionary social volcano that has been erupting since the early 1970s. The Tigrayan social layer that emerged from the subordinate to the dominant position also will not survive the revolutionary crisis that is in the process of total eruption.

The Oromo national movement (that galvanizes the largest ethno-nation against the Tigrayan minority and their puppets) is challenging the Tigrayan attempt to dominate and keep this empire intact. One astute journalist comments that "In an age when new stages are emerging with bewildering rapidity out of the ruins of long sacrosanct political entities, the Ethiopian Empire . . . seems far less secure than the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia were on the eve of their breakups."<sup>59</sup> Should Ethiopia take the Soviet Union's path of peaceful disintegration, or should it take the Yugoslavian way of "ethnic cleansing" in order to maintain the empire? Unfortunately, Ethiopia has chosen the Yugoslavian way without considering its consequences.

Although the US supported the emergence of the Tigrayan regime, its interests would not be served by adding dependent clients on which it spends billions of tax payers' dollars. The US government played "a key role in the necessary demise of Mengistu" by supporting the emergence of the EPRDF.<sup>60</sup> An Oromo commented that the U.S. "only wants to bring Emperor Yohannes to his 'rightful' throne."<sup>61</sup> Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Herman J. Cohen, justified the US economic support to this regime.<sup>62</sup> The US also recently agreed on the first bilateral aid to provide about US \$900 million to Ethiopia.<sup>63</sup> Except for its spiritual love for the Habasha, there is no pressing economic or political reason that forces the USA to spend millions of dollars to support the Meles regime.

The OLF resumed its low intensity guerrilla armed struggle that will make the support for this regime very costly. Sooner or later, the US will learn that it is very costly to support a minority regime in an empire where the majority resists. The assistance that comes from "humanitarian organizations and governments that have fallen in love with the Abyssinians,"<sup>64</sup> Hasselblatt argues, is attempting to destroy the Oromo ambition and struggle for political democracy. Of course, the U.S. can play a vital role in resolving or intensifying the contradictions in this empire. If it continues its financial and moral support to this regime, it intensifies the problems. But if it supports human rights and democratic principles, it can play a positive role in a peaceful and democratic conflict resolution. As one source comments "Withdrawal of US support would . . . mean a brake on financing from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the European Community."<sup>65</sup>

The USA can play a positive role in a transition to democracy if it accepts the position of the Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Africa, Mervyn Dymally. He argues that it would be "shameful and irresponsible for Ethiopian leaders to recklessly lead their people into another unnecessary war."<sup>66</sup> According to Dymally, Ethiopia cannot maintain good relations with the USA without free and fair elections, fair trial for political prisoners by an independent judiciary, respect for human rights and distribution of development aid without discrimination. The Meles regime violated all these things; but it still enjoys financial and moral support from the US government. The Meles regime killed thousands of Oromos because they struggled for their natural rights. Currently, the Meles regime created three concentration camps at Hurso (Hararghe), Diddheesa (Wallaga), and Bilate (Sidamo) where it practices "ethnic cleansing."<sup>67</sup> The American government said nothing about all these human rights violations; and it has continued its support to the regime. It is to the benefit of all parties to the conflict in the empire state of Ethiopia if the US implements its initial promise of, "no democracy, no assistance."

The Meles regime also depends on the Eritrean transitional government. The Eritreans played a decisive role in enabling the TPLF to seize Ethiopian state power by fighting side by side with it. There are still several Eritrean army units in Ethiopia helping the EPRDF against the OLF; and the EPLF has promised Meles to send more units when they are needed.<sup>68</sup> Eritrea badly needs peace and economic relations with Ethiopia. As the Eritrean Government foreign minister said, "The troubles in Ethiopia can have an impact on Eritrea and they adversely affect the stability of the region."<sup>69</sup> Eritrea desires economic integration, a common currency and double nationality that can link it closely with Ethiopia.<sup>70</sup> The EPLF believes that these things can happen if Meles Zenawi and the EPRDF continue to hold to state power in Ethiopia.

The EPLF sacrifices some of its soldiers for some economic benefits that Eritrea needs from Ethiopia. If Oromia is not controlled by Ethiopian Tigray, there cannot be such economic benefit, according to the Eritrean rulers. This is, of course, a short-sighted political and economic calculation. It destroys the warm relations that the Oromo and the Eritreans developed during their struggles against Ethiopian colonialism. In fact, the contribution of Eritrea for the survival of Ethiopian colonialism under the Tigrayan leadership for temporary economic benefits can be risky for the future of Eritrea. Both Tigray and Eritrea depend on Oromian resources for their economic developments as the Amhara did for one century. Realizing this condition, Cappelli notes that "a stark economic determinism drives the Tigrayans' efforts to the southern lands. The northern regions which gave birth to the EPRDF have been reduced to agricultural wastelands by decades of soil erosion, over-population, and war, a marked contrast to the fertile, well-watered Oromo lands which contain all of Ethiopia's coffee wealth, and significant deposits of gold and natural gas."<sup>71</sup> Until Oromia defends itself militarily, all Habashas never hesitate to attempt to maintain control over Oromian resources.

Eritrea dearly paid for its independence. Nearly 50,000 fighters were killed; 10,000 were disabled; and about 750,000 Eritreans were dislocated during the thirty year of the liberation war.<sup>72</sup> Since the Eritrean economy was devastated by war, now it depends mainly on international emergency relief aid.<sup>73</sup> Because of all these reasons, Eritrea cannot afford to indulge itself in the problems of the Ethiopian Empire if the OLF and others continue their guerrilla warfare against the Meles regime. Since Eritrean and Tigrayan soldiers also fight against the Southern Sudanese national liberation movement on behalf of the Sudan, the Sudanese government attempts to undermine the Oromo national struggle. It might be difficult for the OLF to fight a conventional war at this time against the Sudan and Eritrean-baked TPLF/EPRDF. But through a "low intensity guerrilla war,"<sup>74</sup> the OLF can gradually and effectively cripple the dying Ethiopian Empire by intensifying its economic and political crises. The Meles regime cannot survive for long time under such crises.

## Conclusion

If Western countries, spearheaded by the USA, continue to contribute to the existence of the Meles regime, the OLF can easily stop Western support through its guerrilla activities. McWhirter and Melamede report that Western support "has been held up by the marred elections and the renewed fighting. Many development agencies . . . have already pulled out because of a breakdown of security. With many foreign governments and investors adopting a wait-and-see attitude, the Ethiopian economy continues to flounder. Unemployment and under-employment have reached all-time highs, and the currency value continues to shrink."<sup>75</sup> For the Oromo, there will be no human and ethnonational rights until the Ethiopian colonial system is totally uprooted.

The Ethiopians' fear of Oromian independence and their opposition to the Oromo national movement might force the Oromo people to opt for the creation of an Oromian sovereign state. On the other hand, if the processes of decolonization, democratization and transformation take place through a peaceful negotiation, the Oromo people may choose to build a multicultural democracy based on democratic principles and voluntary association. The Ethiopian government and its supporters cannot decide the fate of the Oromo people. Oromia must decide its national destiny through a referendum. There are several factors that can contribute to the success of the Oromo national movement. These factors are the emergence of the OLF as a formidable national liberation front, the size of the Oromo population and the commitment of the Oromo people to politically and militarily decide their destiny.

## Endnotes

The version of this paper was presented at the Oromo Studies Association Annual Conference held at the University of Minnesota on August 1-2, 1992, and the 1993 Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association held on December 4-7. Some of the arguments of this paper are also raised in my book, *Oromia and Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868-1992* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993). I would like to thank Michael Betz for his valuable comments.

1. *Rising Opportunities and Lingering Risks in Post-Mengistu Ethiopia*, P.R. A. Consultants Ltd, 4 Brook Street, Hanover Square, London W1Y 1AA, England, October, 1991, p. 9.
2. *Ibid*, p. 8.
3. Gebru Tareke, *Ethiopia: Power and Protest—Peasant revolts in the twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge Univ Press, 1991), p. 224.
4. See Lisa Beyer, "Ethiopia: Rebels Take Charge," *Time*, June 10, 1991.
5. See AFP, Ethiopia-politics, Nairobi, June 24, 1992.
6. *Rising Opportunities and Lingering Risks*, p. 15.
7. John W. Harbeson, "The Horn of Africa: From Chaos, Political Renewal?," *Current History: A World Affairs Journal*, May, 1991, p. 222.
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# The Economic Viability of Oromia and Its Impact on the Politics of the Horn

by *Belletech Deressa*

## Introduction

The Horn of Africa has been an arena of uninterrupted armed conflicts for over four decades. These conflicts, especially in the Ethiopian Empire state, are rooted in 100 years of colonial history, geography, and economy. They have been aggravated by outside interventions such as the United States and Western countries in support of Haile Selassie; the Soviet Union in support of Mengistu Haile Mariam's military regime, and currently, by a few countries in the Northern Hemisphere and some neighboring African countries in support of the Tigrian dominated Government of Ethiopia.

The support for the latter government is especially ironic since some of the cohorts from the neighboring countries do not have stable government, have not resolved the political struggle in their own backyards, and are not economically independent. Unless there are mutual benefits, one wonders how these countries assist a regime that does not represent the majority of the people, and are reluctant to uphold Oromia and the struggle of Oromo people.

This paper attempts to address the role of economic viability of Oromia and its political implication in the Horn of Africa. The concept of "viability" refers to the capability of economic survival, and social development within the realms of its natural resources. In order to establish concrete evidence on the economic viability of Oromia, this paper highlights the trade and commerce that existed before the formation of the Ethiopian Empire. Some of the political events during the invasion and occupation of Oromo regions will be addressed. In this paper, "Abyssinia" refers to northern Ethiopians such as Amhara, Tigrye, and those who claim to belong to one of these two ethnic groups. Oromia, or the land of Oromo people "biyyaa Oromo," lies in the middle of the Horn of Africa, extending from the border of Somalia in the east, to the border of Sudan in the west, the border of Kenya to the south, and in Northern Wallo bordering Afar. The area is over 600,000 square kilometers of richly watered, fertile farm land. While Oromia is a land locked country, it has resources that will enable it to develop to its full potential in trade and commerce. The major rivers such as the Wabi Shebelle, Gibe, Dabus, Awash, Dawa, Ghenale, Baro, Abbaya and its tributaries are potential sources for hydro-electric power and irrigation. Baro is navigable up to Gambella during the rainy season. By their nature and peculiar characteristics, the rivers have had a tremendous impact on the lives of the people. The rivers have promoted especial ties, regionalism, and identity, for example "bishan laga tocco dhunee gudanne" has special meaning. Oromos also descend into the valleys for fights in order to prove one's physical superiority, or strength "Yo namma tate lagati kotu." The rivers are their pride. Some of these rivers flow beyond the borders of Oromia to arid regions where they become very important for the survival of the neighboring countries. The climate, the land, and the natural resources of Oromia are attractive.

Oromia is the largest nation in the Horn of Africa with an estimated population of over 28 million. While being the largest African country, in comparison, Sudan has 24 million people, Kenya 22 million, Somalia 8 million, Abyssinia and Eritrea combined make about 22 million.<sup>1</sup> Oromo language is spoken by many people in the Horn of Africa, including Kenya, Somalia and the Eastern part of Sudan.

At the heart of the issues underlying today's conflicts in the Horn, especially in Oromia, lie four legacies of the past:

- 1) the legacy of the European Industrial Revolution, and colonial rule, running parallel to and at times cooperating with, Ethiopian Imperial Expansion.
- 2) the legacy of Ethiopian Imperial Expansions and the political subjugation of Oromo people
- 3) the legacy of outside imperialists' intervention and economic penetration after World War II, with Ethiopia as the main focus.
- 4) the legacy of 1960's newly independent African countries, the affirmation of territories by the Organization of African Unity, and most of all, the desire of Ethiopian dictators to control the Oromo economy at any cost

### **European Industrial Revolution and the Ethiopian Empire State**

The revival of European interest in the Ethiopian Empire state, particularly Oromo regions, was not a unique phenomenon. It was part of the general European penetration of Africa in the 19th Century, and it was multifaceted. In essence, it had political and economic origins. The industrial revolution that transformed European society, starting from the end of the 18th century, at the same time ushered in a new pattern of relationships between Europe and Africa.

The European revolution in production could not be contained within the confines of Europe. The manufacturing of industrial goods far in excess of what Europe itself could consume made the conquest of African markets imperative. Thus in the Horn, as elsewhere in Africa, European officials who came into contact with Abyssinian rulers were above all ambassadors of commerce. This was the case with the European officials to set foot on Abyssinian soil in 1804, Sir George Annesley, and later Viscount Valentia, from Britain. The promotion of commerce was the dominant theme of the first treaties concluded between European officials and Ethiopian colonial authorities, such as those between Negus Sahle-Sellase, the British captain W. Cornwallis Harris (1841) and the French Rochet d' Hericourt (1843); and between Ras Ali II and the British Walter Plowden (1849).<sup>2</sup> The second dimension of European interest in the Abyssinian Empire state, as in the rest of Africa, was a resurgence of missionary activity which is not a focus of this discussion.

It was clear that the Europeans were more interested in the natural resources and fertile land in the Horn of Africa and Oromia. But in order to engage in trade, and get into the heartland of the Horn, the Europeans had to negotiate with the kings and rulers of the Abyssinian Empire state. It was easy for the Europeans to deal with one king rather than various rulers in the area. The European interest in getting access to resources was matched by the Abyssinian dream of conquering the Oromo people. In order to establish one strong empire, the Abyssinian colonizers needed European armaments to control Oromia and the rest of the region.

The European colonial powers; Italy, Great Britain, and France, had installed themselves in the Horn of Africa by the end of the nineteenth century. In 1882 the Italian government took over the Red Sea port of Assab and in 1885 they occupied Massawa. The French took control of Djibouti, and the British took control in Kenya and Sudan. Every colonial power sent emissaries to the court of Menelik of Shoa, to intrigue each other, and Menelik put this to good use. Menelik concentrated in building a strong empire of his own by conquering territories to the south of Abyssinia and by building a large army, using the skills of Oromo and his foreign contacts to purchase arms. Between 1886 and 1891, his army invaded, Wallega, Kaffa and Arssi. By 1897, his right to all of Hararghe, the Ogaden, Bale, and Sidamo had been grudgingly recognized by the Europeans, while the British established themselves in Somali land.

### The Expansion of Commerce and Trade in the Nineteenth Century

The Ethiopian Empire state long-distance trade in the 19th century had two major routes; of these, the most important route at the outset was the link between the southwest and the north. Beginning from Bonga in Kaffa, this route linked such important commercial centers of Jiren in Jimma, Saqa in Limmu-Ennaraya, Assandabo in Horro Gududru, Basso in Gojjam, and Darita in Bagemder, with the imperial capital of Gondar. From there, one branch went to Matamma on the Ethiopian-Sudanese frontier, and another via Adwa to Massawa on the Red Sea coast.

The second major route ran from west to east. By the end of the 19th century it had become the most important artery of commerce in the Ethiopian Empire. From Jiren and Saqa in the southwest, this route passed through such commercial land marks as Soddo and Rogge (near Yaras mountain, visible to the east of Finfine), to Alyu Amba the commercial capital of Shoa, near Ankober, then Shoa's political capital. Thence, the route continued to Harar, the political and commercial center of the east, and on to the coastal Somali towns of Zeila and Berbera.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the main arteries of trade there were three other types of interaction. The first was localized trade in the highlands, the second was trade relations between the peripheral lowlands and the adjoining highlands, such as between the Anuak and the Oromo and between the Afar and the Wallo. The third was with some anachronism designate trans-frontier trade, such as trade from Wallega to Sudan and from Southern Oromia, Borana to the coast of Somalia, and Kenya.

### The Economic Significance of Oromia and the Invasion by Menelik

The geography and topography of the country led to two conclusions of economic significance. Firstly, because of the variety of climates and soil the country is endowed with, it has the advantages of growing a wide variety of crops in larger quantities. Wheat can be cultivated in the cool uplands, and teff, maize, barley, millet, tropical as well as semi-tropical grains in the lower altitudes. Livestock can be reared in almost all parts of the country. The southern slopes provide first class terrain for coffee and sugar cane production. Its forest resources, however limited, have the potential wealth, and its rivers are obvious sources of hydro electric power production.

There has not been a thorough exploration of the country's mineral wealth, but gold, platinum, petroleum, silver, tin, copper, asbestos, potash, sulphur, and other minerals are known to exist. On the whole, Oromia—by the standards of the surroundings parts of Africa—is a highly favored, fertile, temperate, and well-watered region, providing excellent opportunities for economic diversification.

Extremely rich supplies of gold had long been found in Wallega and Benishangul and smaller quantities in the Abbaya and some of its tributaries, while large deposit of platinum also existed in Wallega. The gold of Wallega, according to Bartlet, was largely found in deposits of sand or other alluvium formed by the action of running rivers or streams. Relatively pure gold would normally be concentrated on the bed or within a few feet of it, while the coarse metal would be scattered as far as twenty feet or so from the original deposit. Platinum invariably occurred in metallic state, most frequently in old river beds in layers of sand in which gold was often present.

Menelik's occupation of Wallega in 1886 and Beni-shangul in 1898 was mainly to control the gold and natural resources of the rich Oromo land. When French engineer Aubry asked Menelik in late 1880's to see the gold country, Menelik had replied "if you had a safe would you give the key to the first comer?" (except that the safe belonged to Oromo people not Menelik). However, later on Menelik arranged for French engineer Camboul to explore several areas including Wallega and Enarya.<sup>5</sup>

In 1901, a Belgian company, Mines d'Or, was sent to Wallega to mine. By 1906, Nejo was the principle mining center and 800,000 dollars worth of gold was extracted from which half was given to Menelik by the company. Three-quarters of the gold came from Dabus and Beni

Shangul. Menelik in 1906-1909 sent many European mining companies to other parts of Oromia and the mining industry expanded considerably during the regency of Haile Selassie, and even more during Mengistu Haile Mariam, to pay the debt owed to the Soviet Union.

At the end of the 19th century Pankrust noted that Wallega supplied Finfine (Addis Ababa) with gold, ivory, coffee and civet; four articles which were monopolized by Menelik as well as cattle goats, horses, mules, chickens, cereals, legumes, tobacco, wax, agricultural implements, saddles, and household goods such as table and chairs.

Sayo, also known as Dembidollo, was a great commercial center for coffee and skins which were exported to Sudan. Nakemte by the end of the century also had considerable commercial significance.

After the Anglo-Egyptian conquest of Sudan and Menelik's conquest of Ethiopia, an important trade route developed through Gambela and the Baro river on the basis of Anglo-Ethiopian cooperation. Despite the prevalence of the tsetse fly which prevented the use of mules and obliged traders to rely on donkeys, the town rapidly increased in importance, and was very appropriately described by Montandon prior to World War I as the Dire Dawa of the west. By 1909 at least three foreign firms had established themselves. Exports of coffee, wax, rubber, civet and gold increased and in exchange imported textiles, soap and wines.

In the early 19th century Harar's traditional exports, were slaves, ivory, coffee, tobacco, woven cotton, mules, hulks, wheat, haranji (a kind of bread eaten by travellers) butter, honey, gums, myrrh, wax, sheep's goat and saffron.

The ivory trade was monopolized by the Amir, elephants were in abundant in Jarjar, the Ererr forest, and the Harar, and were hunted by Oromos who exchanged the ivory for small quantities of cloth. The Amir, who purchased all available ivory, sent it to Berbera where it was sold. The coffee trade was also important even before the occupation of Menelik.

Large quantities of agricultural produce were also brought to Harar from Arssie and Shoa, as well as oats, maize, wheat, teff, durra and barley were brought to the city from west, central, south and eastern Oromia for export. After Menelik's occupation of Harar, the fertile lands and businesses were taken over by settlers. Before the occupation of Menelik, Ogaden's main exports were ostrich feathers, ivory, skins, gum, myrrh and fat as well a coffee which passed through the area from Arssie. Another very important commercial center was Borana, which had ties with the neighboring provinces. Donaldson Smith records that the people of Borana traded with Konso and the Oromo of Jamjam, as well as with Kaffa, and supplied the Konso in particular with nitrate of soda, locally called mugad or megada (which was mixed with tobacco to give it a spicy flavor), cattle goat and sheep, in return for tobacco, coffee, durra, cloth, beads, iron, and brass wire. Jamjam provided Borana with ivory from the north and carried on a transit trade in Borana coffee and Kaffa cloth and grain.

Borana was also in contact with the Somali coast. The Oromos from the interior journeyed down to the Juba area. With the development of British East Africa now known as Kenya, Borana trade across the southern frontier increased in importance, particularly after the opening of the road from Moyale to Nairobi.

Jimma was the richest province, producing coffee, ivory, civet, wax and honey. Coffee was an important export. In late 19th century, Jiren was the capital of the province, and the nearby market of Hirmata, was of great commercial significance. The area was visited by merchants from Tigrye, Gondor, Gojam, Shoa, Massawa, Harar, Kullu, Konta, Janjero, Walamo, Gera, Gomma and Gumma. Jiren was one of the principal markets for ivory, civet, coffee, cotton, coriander, crafts, shields, horn cups, beads, bracelets, chains of iron, copper, tin and silver, saddles, baskets, wooden tables and chairs.

Bonga in south of Jimma was also an important center of commerce and trade. Another important town was Gore, which grew as a result of the opening of the Baro river route to Sudan. Even before World War I, there were five foreign traders in town; two Greeks, one Syrian, one

British and one German, while at the end of the war there were 40 foreigners, Greek, Armenian, Syrian and Belgian.

After World War II, Great Britain and France gradually withdrew from direct control of their colonies. Somalia achieved political independence in 1960 and Djibuti in 1977, although their economies remained shaped by their economic ties to their former colonizers and the links to the wider capitalist market. But, the Abyssinian Emperor Haile Selassie actually claimed Eritrea and declared himself as emperor of Ethiopia. Even though almost all African countries gained their independence in the 1960's, Oromia was not even mentioned in their vocabulary, its history was distorted, and it was engrossed in, and considered part of, Ethiopia (although the many Oromos do not consider themselves Ethiopians). Many Oromos, especially the peasants, cannot even pronounce "Ethiopia," and the concept itself has no meaning for them.

African nations, especially the Organization of African Unity (OAU), did not want to address territorial issues and the plight of Oromia, Eritrea, and other nationalities in the Ethiopian Empire State. The neighboring African countries who became members of OAU knew that the Ethiopian Empire state could not survive economically without Oromia, since Oromia holds the keys to basic survival of the Empire. The neighboring countries also needed the Ethiopian Empire state for trade and commerce, especially the newly independent and newly formed African nations of the twentieth century. One must also understand that some of these newly independent nations formed in the 1960's are composed of various clans and ethnic backgrounds and are concerned about their own unity.

The colonial rule left behind a patchwork quilt of states whose boundaries other African nations then swore to preserve. But the colonized people will persist in the liberation struggle in the Horn especially in Oromia, until they obtain their freedom, democracy, equality and justice.

### Use and Abuse of the Oromo Economy

In order to modernize the Ethiopian army, to support bureaucrats, and to impress foreign governments, Haile Selassie had to exploit the peasant population. He had to create mechanisms with which he could extract surpluses exceeding the costs of state maintenance. Revenue was raised by 1) increasing taxes on the agrarian population, 2) converting land into a commodity, and payment in kind into payment in cash, and 3) raising commodity production to meet the demands of the world economy and reorganizing the customs administration to provide fiscal centralization.

The state claimed for itself most of the fertile, well-watered highland areas, which it then devoted to the production of crops. The highland population was scripted to northern settlers and to officials and their auxiliaries. The "Koros," for whom peasants performed a wide range of services surrendered a substantial part of their produce through a share cropping system. Non-compliance or delinquency had its price: according to some observers, the overlord, and more frequently his/her representative, the *neftnya* (rifleman), ignores any excuse which the peasant makes, no matter how valid, imposes a fine which is collected by the simple methods of seizing the farmer's livestock and household. The settlers were often at liberty to whip or flag, chain or detain his/her subjects even for minor infractions.

An Ethiopian scholar, Gebru Tareke (1991), stated that lowlanders were spared the outlandish forms of exploitation and degradation largely because of geographical and cultural imperatives. The uncongeniality of the climate, the meagerness of exploitable resources, and the difficulty of controlling a fiercely independent and mobile population discouraged settlers into the "fringe peripheries." The imperial state made little attempt to reorganize the nomadic pastoral society other than imposing tribute on it. However, as much as possible the state attempted to collect tax on livestock. The aristocracy, which provided the social base for the monarchical state, owned immense tracts of land throughout the country, concentrated mainly in the southern regions.

The state and the ruling family owned almost two-thirds of the land, and most of the remaining land was owned by the Orthodox church and some aristocrats. The farmers rented land and paid one-third to two-thirds of their produce to the landlord. Land became a commodity in the south. The scarcity of land left the farmers no choice except to farm on the same plot from year to year which reduced the fertility of the land. The so-called Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 and land reform of Mengistu Haile Mariam did not solve the peasant problem.

Agricultural activities took place within a closely interconnected network of farming and animal husbandry. Cultivation was and still is, a full time occupation for the majority of the population. Government policy has encouraged the production of cash crops such as coffee and cotton for export to the western world. Low fixed prices of agricultural products benefiting urban consumers at farmers's expense have undermined the initiative of farmers to produce food crops beyond their own immediate needs.

Currently, coffee—which originated in Kaffa—is a cash crop that accounts for 50 to 65 percent of Ethiopias' export trade.<sup>6</sup> In 1988, the value of exported coffee was about 600,000,000 birr, the total value of food and animal commodities exported is estimated at \$870,000,000 birr. Some of the major importers are USA, Germany, Japan, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, China, Djibuti, Kenya, and Kuwait.<sup>7</sup> Because of Oromia's location within the tropics, citrus fruits, bananas and vegetables also thrive.

Livestock and animal products—primarily hides and skins—account for 14 percent of the Ethiopia's exports, as well as for one-fourth of its agricultural output. In the early 1980's, an estimated 66 million sheep, goats, and cattle grazed mainly on Oromo pastoral land, along with about 6.8 million horses and one-million camels. This livestock total is probably higher than that of any other African country. In the late 1980's and early 1990's drought has decreased these numbers, nevertheless, livestock production is still significant in Oromia.

Oromia also provides employment for other ethnic groups from the northern part of Ethiopia. The introduction of coffee as a cash crop increased the number of migrant workers. Every year the Abyssinians from the north migrate to the west, east and south during coffee picking seasons. Once they see the productive Oromo land, most of the migrants settle. These settlers make a living by working for the Oromo people on the farms, some as water carriers (often Oromos refer to them as Gojje, Gurage, or Tigrye) depending on the origin of the migrant. Once they have enough savings they start a business. In a few years, they become rich business people by exploiting the peasants and charging them enormous amount for the goods. Some of the migrants who speak the Amharic language and read Giez end up being Orthodox priests although they have no theological education and may not understand the content of the Bible. The Orthodox church, during the reign of Haile Selassie, owned a large proportion of the land. The salary of the priests are paid by the people. The Orthodox Churches' policy of Celebration of Saints Days limited the number of working days for farmers and affected productivity. In every aspect, the Abyssinians exploit the economy of Oromia as well as the people.

The forest of Oromia is disappearing due to mismanagement, overgrazing, and lack of well developed agricultural practices. The wildlife has been extinguished because elephants were hunted for ivory, and lions and zebras for their skins. Some of the wild animals have migrated to the neighboring countries such as Kenya. The fertile top soils are washed out due to soil erosion and as a result, some parts of Oromia are turning into desert.

The mountainous nature of the country in the west, central north, and south make transportation and communication difficult. The distance from eastern to western Oromia, as well as from the north to the south has its disadvantages because of underdeveloped means of communications and bad roads. Except for the railway line connecting Finfine and Djibuti, the government did not make the effort to construct roads in Oromo regions. The few roads that were constructed such as between Finfine and Assosa, were built to transport the military to the border of Sudan.

11 Ethiopian political leadership showed only interest in exploitation not in growth and

development of Oromo land, and the Ethiopian colonial leaders extracted the natural resources of Oromia rather than develop Oromia. During the Marxist regime, Oromo coffee and other produce from Oromia were used to pay the government debt and to purchase arms. These arms were used against the Oromo people and the successors of Mengistu, under the false pretense of democracy, are trying to exercise a similar drama.

Currently, the resources of the south are being transported to north, and war is being waged in Oromia. Agricultural production and economic development is at a stand still. Farmers are unable to work on the farm because of civil war. Business people are forced to leave or close down their business. Schools, hospitals, and infrastructures are destroyed or abandoned in towns and villages because of the occupation by the Tigrian soldiers. The impact of the economic destruction in Oromia will be felt not only in Oromia but in the Horn unless drastic measure is taken to stop the aggression and exploitation. Nevertheless, the streams, rivers, and water of Oromia; its trees and grasses; and its wild animals will continue to shelter and feed the liberation front fighters until Oromia becomes free.

### Conclusion

Prior to colonization, Oromia was able to export and import goods to the neighboring countries such as Somalia, Kenya, Sudan, Egypt, Djibuti, and Ethiopia. Lack of access to the sea port did not hinder trade and commerce with other countries. Oromia has essential resources which would enable the country to exist without the Abyssinians.

During the Ethiopian famine which occurs frequently in Tigrye, Eritrea, part of Wallo, and part of Begemder and Gojjam, the Oromo regions fed the entire population. Since the climate in the northern part of the Ethiopian Empire State, especially Tigrye, is not conducive to agricultural production, and the infestation of locust is common in the north, food supply for the north comes from the south. Environmentalists predict that the Sahara is moving even further south, crossing half of the northern region of Ethiopia at a rapid rate which will make the situation much worse. This could make the north completely dependent on the south or Oromia for their food supplies. For the Abyssinians, the independence of Oromia is seen as losing of control over their own life and cutting their life line. The conflict that exists in Oromia, and the war declared on Oromos in Oromo land is a clear evidence of this belief. Aggression and invasion are not solutions, rather searching for mutual benefits in trade and commerce between Oromia and Abyssinians offers the best alternative.

The Horn of Africa, Oromia in particular, has a vital role in both the African and World economy. Economic interdependence between western industrialized nations and southern developing countries is imperative. Oromia, like many other countries, will develop its natural resources and will have its share in a developing world economy and trade with its neighbors. Development and economic interdependence can be fully achieved in a peaceful environment and neighborhood. The Horn will be better off, politically and economically, if the countries accept and respect the self-determination of every nation. The occupation of Oromia by force will not be a lasting solution for Abyssinian's economic survival.

What may be needed in the future is improved transportation and communication, the development of better methods of irrigation and hydro-electric, the development of sustainable agricultural methods, reforestation, improved mining methods, an improved educational system and appropriate technology. Oromia has the resources to do the above *if and only if* the Oromo people have control over their own land.



## Endnotes

1. The State of World's Children. *The United Nations Children's Fund*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1992) 72-73.
2. Bahiru Zewde. *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1974*, London: James Curry (1991) 24-25.
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# Qube Afaan Oromoo\*

## *Reasons for Choosing the Latin Script for Developing an Oromo Alphabet*

by Tilahun Gamta

The Oromo are "a very ancient race, the indigenous stock, perhaps, on which most other peoples in the Horn of Africa had been grafted!" Afaan Oromoo, a highly developed spoken language, is at the top of the list<sup>2</sup> of the distinct and separate 1000 or so languages used in Africa. It is classified<sup>3</sup> as one of the Cushitic(Kushitic)<sup>4</sup> languages spoken in the Ethiopian Empire, Somalia Sudan, Tanzania, and Kenya.

Of the Cushitic languages spoken in Ethiopia, afaan Oromoo, Somali, Sidama, Haddiya, and Afar-Saho are the languages with the greatest number of speakers. Afaan Oromoo had remained essentially a well-developed oral tradition until the early 1970's when the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) began to use it as an official language in the liberated areas. Additionally, the Front adopted the Latin script as its official alphabet.

The adoption of a script for afaan Oromoo has been a burning issue. In the 1970's both Sabean and Latin scripts were suggested. Until 1974 when the Mengistu regime came to power, writing afaan Oromoo in any script had been officially banned. Although Mengistu's regime lifted the ban and reluctantly allowed the use of the Sabean script, it continued to pay only lip service to the development of the Oromo language. For instance, the regime made the teaching of afaan Oromoo illegal at any level in its school system.

About five months after the collapse of Mengistu's regime in May 1991, the OLF convened a meeting of Oromo scholars and intellectuals on November 3, 1991. The purpose of the meeting was to adopt the Latin script the OLF had been using or suggest an alternative. Over 1000 men and women attended the historic meeting which met in the Parliament Building in Finfinnee. After hours of discussions and deliberations, it was unanimously decided that the Latin script be adopted. Some of the reasons for this landmark decision are as follows:

### **Linguistic Reasons**

Writing<sup>5</sup> itself has passed through three stages of development before reaching the alphabet stage. The three stages, each of which are very briefly discussed below, are iconography, logography and syllabary.

Iconography consist of drawings of animals or objects. The drawings were disconnected and fragmented, and they were intended to give merely a static impression. Later, standardized pictures were selected, arranged in a series, and were made to tell a story in the same way as today's action photographs do. Iconography was common among North American Indian tribes.

Logography is the use of signs to represent word. In English, for example, whole words such as one, two three and dollar are respectively represented by the signs 1,2,3 and \$. Chinese, which uses a minimum of 4000 characters, is the only language that uses the logographic writing system today.

Syllabary is a set of characters which represent syllables. A syllable is a part of a word in which a vowel sound is heard. For example, the Oromo word bilisummaa has four syllables, namely, bi li, su, and mmaa. In a syllabary writing, each sign stands for a syllable of a consonant and vowel. From the point of view of a linguist who may wish to explicate the sounds of a language, one of the major drawbacks of syllabary writing is that its characters do not represent the vowels and the consonants of a language separately.

The Sabean syllabary, used in Ethiopia today, is a very good example of a syllabary writing. It should be clear that this syllabary is merely a progenitor of the script adapted for writing Geez

(liturgic,) Tigre, Tigrinya and Amharic. The Sabeian syllabary, too, was suggested as another alternative. However, its roughly 250 characters are too unweildly to adapt to afaan Oromoo. After failing to read *The Galla Spelling Book* by Aster Ganno and Onesimos Nasib (written in Sabeian syllabary in 1894), Cerulli eloquently expressed his frustrations in these words: “. . . reading this small book is very like deciphering a secret writing. . .”<sup>6</sup> It must also be added that the Sabeian syllabary not only fails to indicate vowel length and gemination, but also slows down a writer’s speed since each symbol, which cannot be written cursively, must be printed.

An alphabet is a set of characters used to represent the basic sounds of a language, technically known as phonemes. Languages vary “in the number of these basic sounds, from approximately 20 for Hawaiian and Japanese, to about 40 for English, and over 60 for several languages spoken by a branch of the Southeast Asian people variously known as Hmong or Miao or Meo. The White Meo language has so fewer than 80 phonemes—57 consonants, 15 vowels, and 8 tones.”<sup>7</sup>

Afaan Oromoo, excluding those represented by p,v,z, has 34 basic sounds (10 vowels and 24 consonants). One possibility is to invent 34 signs corresponding to each of these 34 sounds, as impractical and unnecessary effort. Instead, it was decided that the Latin alphabet be adopted. This decision is historic because the alphabet is “the most highly developed and the most convenient system of writing . . . readily adaptable to almost any language.”<sup>8</sup>

### Pedagogic Reasons

These 37 characters (or 52 if the capital letters<sup>9</sup> are considered important) can be learned in less than a month. In fact, only 32 symbols (minus the 5 double vowels) a,b,c,ch, d dh, e,f,g,h,i,j,k,l,m,n,ny,o,p,ph,q,r,s,sh,t,u,v,w,x,y,z,and ? need to be recognized the memorized For an Oromo learning these signs and sounds they represent, the task is even much easier. It may take a non-Oromo a little longer because producing the sounds—especially those not found in his/her language—takes time.

In addition to these 32 symbols a learner of the Oromo writing system will need to be taught the following principles:

1. two vowels in succession indicate that the vowel is long, e.g. bitaa (left) ; as is the case with many languages in Africa and Asia which have developed an orthography based on the Latin alphabet.
2. Gemination (a doubling of a consonant) is phonemic in Oromo, e.g. damee (branch), dammee (sweet potato);
3. h is not geminated;
4. the same word can have two forms(short or long vowels) depending on its context, e.g. nama kadhu (ask people) namaa kadhu (ask for people);
5. when it occurs word finally, the single “a” is pronounced schwa ə whereas it is pronounced ʌ elsewhere; and that
6. understandably, instead of diacritic signs, the combined Latin letters ch, dh ny, ph, and sh\*\*\* are used so as to align them with typewriter characters.

The learner needs to have only this much information at an early stge of his/her lesson. After such a simple, uncomplicated explanation, the learners are asked to read passages written in qube afaan Oromoo. Example:

UUmata Oromoo/Ormaan hinsaamsiu  
Dache Oromiyaa/alagaa hindhiichisu  
Aaddaa abbaa kooti/diinaan hinbookessu

Nama bishaan dhabe/?annan hinobaasu  
 Afaan koo baleesse lammii ko hinboossisu  
 Garaa dhaan bitamee/uummata ko hincabsiisu  
 Saba abbaa gadaa/garbicha hintaasisu  
 Sirna demokraasi/of jalaa hinballeessu  
 Utuun lubbuun jiruu/Oromoo hintamsaasu

### KUMSAA BURAAYYUU

#### Practical Reasons

The Latin alphabet was adapted to many languages such as the following:

- a. Germanic languages—English, German, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Dutch;
- b. Romance languages—Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian;
- c. Slavonic languages—Polish, Czech, Croatian, Slovene;
- d. Finno-Ugrian languages—Finnish, Hungarian;
- e. Baltic languages—Lithuanian, Lettish;
- f. Quoc-ngu—Vietnamese; and
- g. it was adapted to Somali, Swahili and others

Qube Afaan Oromoo also aligned itself with so many countries that use Latin script. One obvious advantage of this is that an Oromo child who has learned his own alphabet can learn, for example, the form of the English script in a relatively short period of time. Another practical reason is its alphabetic writing's adaptability to computer technology which gives it "an edge over even the simplest of syllabic writing"<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of this paper is not to rate writing systems. Any can serve the specific language for which it is designed and used. No one can deny the fact that writing "can never be considered an exact counterpart of the spoken language."<sup>11</sup>

In the present Oromo writing system, one letter corresponds to one sound. But, unless accompanied by a well-planned reading instruction, even such a relatively refined alphabet can be almost valueless. As stated, the Sabeen syllabary may be very good for the purpose of writing the Semitic language such as Tigre, and Tigrinya. Definitely, it is not so useful for writing afaan Oromoo, a Cushitic language.

It is hoped that this paper has acquainted those who are genuinely interested in the development of afaan Oromoo with some of the major reasons for adopting the Latin Alphabet. The decision was made after taking linguistic, pedagogic, and practical factors into accounts. In other words:

Global functional considerations suggest putting the Latin Alphabet at the top of the list. If familiarity with it is and emotional attachment are taken into consideration, it is likely that all conventional orthography would be ranked first by the people who use them.<sup>12</sup>

The struggle the Oromo have made for self-determination has started to pay off. They have adapted the Latin alphabet to their language without fear of incrimination. It is now high time they began writing and producing useful reading materials for their schools and the public. The Oromo people have a highly developed oral tradition which, the writer believes, has contributed to the sharpening of their powers of memorization. In addition, they need to acquire a taste for reading and writing.

**Table 1. Qube Oromo—The Oromo Alphabet**

No.	Vowel	As in Oromo	Gloss	Equiv. in English Sound	Comments
1	a	<u>ba</u> ra	year	<u>mu</u> ch	when occurs word finally the single "a" is always pronounced as schwa sound in the English word "ago." Elsewhere in a word, the single "a" is pronounced as the "o" in <u>some</u> .
2	aa	<u>ba</u> ala	leaf	<u>ba</u> r	long vowel
3	e	<u>be</u> dee	pen	<u>me</u> t	short vowel
4	ee	<u>be</u> ela	hunger	<u>ma</u> te	long vowel
5	i	<u>bi</u> tuu	buy	<u>bi</u> t	short vowel
6	ii	<u>dhi</u> iga	blood	<u>fe</u> et	long vowel
7	o	<u>bo</u> na	dry	<u>to</u> p	short vowel; BBC English
8	oo	<u>bo</u> naa	proud	<u>ro</u> am	long vowel; VOA English
9	u	<u>bu</u> na	coffee	<u>pu</u> t	short vowel
10	uu	<u>su</u> uta	slowly	<u>mo</u> on	long vowel
Consonants					
11	b	<u>ba</u> root	good	<u>bu</u> s	
12	c	<u>ca</u> akan	forest	—	glottalized palatal
13	ch	<u>dac</u> he	soil	<u>chu</u> rch	
14	d	<u>da</u> mma	honey	<u>da</u> y	
15	dh	<u>dh</u> adaa	butter	—	glottalized dental
16	f	<u>fa</u> rda	horse	<u>fa</u> ce	
17	g	<u>ga</u> ma	yonder	<u>ga</u> te	
18	h	<u>ha</u> ttuu	thief	<u>ha</u> t	
19	j	<u>ja</u> haa	strong	<u>ju</u> mp	
20	k	<u>ka</u> na	this	<u>co</u> ok	
21	l	<u>la</u> ma	two	<u>la</u> mp	
22	m	<u>ma</u> rگا	grass	<u>ma</u> d	
23	n	<u>ni</u> iti	wife	<u>no</u>	
24	ny	<u>ny</u> aachu	to eat	<u>sign</u> ora (Italian)	
25	p	<u>pa</u> arti	party	<u>pe</u> n	occurs in loan word usually occurs in medial or final positions of a word glottalized, velar stop
26	ph	<u>ha</u> rphi	thin	—	
27	q	<u>qu</u> be	alphabet	—	
28	r	<u>re</u> eti	goat	<u>re</u> st	
29	s	<u>so</u> ba	a lie	<u>so</u> me	
30	sh	<u>bi</u> shan	water	<u>sh</u> ip	
31	t	<u>tu</u> fuu	spit	<u>to</u>	
32	v	<u>TV</u>	TV	<u>ve</u> ry	occurs in some loan words
33	w	<u>wa</u> yyaa	clothes	<u>wa</u> it	
34	x	<u>xa</u> xuu	entangle	—	glottalized; dental stop
35	y	<u>ya</u> roo	time	<u>ye</u> s	
36	z	<u>ze</u> ero	zero	<u>zo</u> o	usually occurs in word of Semitic origin; sometimes "s" is used instead of "z"
37	?	<u>ba</u> l?aa	wide	—	glottalized stop

\*e.g. sum?ii (poison), mal?attoo (sign), many?ee (nest), mar?achuu (bleat), raaw?achuu (be completed).

## End Notes

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\*\*The relative height of pitch that is a phoneme of a language. Being a phoneme, a tone distinguishes meaning.

\*\*\*These combined letters look awkward when and if geminated! Example: haph phee-gum.

1. Bates, D. *The Abyssinian Difficulty*, 1979; p.7
2. Afaan Oromo, Hausa, and Arabic are the top 3 of the 30 languages in Africa with 1 or million native speakers
3. Joseph Greenberg has classified Afro-Asiatic (also called Hamito-semitic) languages into five branches: a. Chushitic—e.g. Afaan Oromo, Somali, . . . b. Semitic—e.g. Arabic, Amharic, c. Berber languages in Northern Africa—e.g. Kabyle of Algeria, Tuareg of the Sahara, d. Ancient Egyptian and its daughter language Coptic, now extinct, e. Chadic, spoken in Chad, Cameroon, and Northern Nigeria, although Hausa is used throughout much of Western Africa.
4. Kush or Cush is one of the descendants of Ham, Sheme's brother, according to the Biblical account in Genesis.
5. Exactly by whom, when and where writing was invented is not clear. However, it is generally agreed that "all existing alphabets as well as those no longer used, derived from one original alphabet—the North Semitic" which probably originated about the 18th Century B.C. in the region of Palestine and Syria. "(Encyclopedia Americana, Vol. 29, p.561. See note 8 for other details.)
6. Cerulli, E. *The Folk-Literature of the Galla of Southern Abyssinia*, 1922 p. 15
7. DeFrancis, J. *The Visible Oneness of Writing Systems*, 1989, p.9
8. "Writing" *Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol. 29, 1990
9. Double counting has to be avoided. The components of the combined letters ch, dh, ny, ph, and sh are already counted once
10. DeFrancis, op. cit. p.268.
11. Gelb, I. *A Study of Writing*, 1963, p. 15
12. DeFrancis, op. cit. p. 268

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## Book Reviews

**THE INVENTION OF ETHIOPIA: The Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa.** (Trenton: NJ; The Red Sea Press, Inc , 1990), pp 450, paperback, price \$18.95. Sisai Ibssa and Bonnie Holcomb by Asfaw Kumssa

Ethiopia is a pre-capitalist, multinational state created at the end of the 19th century through colonization and annexation of the independent peripheral people of the Oromo, Sidama, Walayita, etc. This was accomplished by Emperor Menelik II with the full support and assistance of imperialist powers. *The Ethiopian state* was created through the forced grouping of different nations/nationalities without a common historical background or identity under one state presumed to represent a unitary nation, but which was in fact only dominated by one nation that subordinated all others. This, of course, entailed conflicts and national liberation wars, various groups fighting for national self-determination

*THE INVENTION OF ETHIOPIA* is a book written to address the dynamics of state formation in Ethiopia and the genesis of the national conflict there. As the authors stated, the main objective of the study is to address the factors "that shaped the Empire" and have "generated the political and economic relations found there and which account for the conflict currently raging within the Empire" (p. xiii).

The book is divided into ten chapters varying in length and scope. The first chapter is introductory, and sets out the theoretical and methodological framework of the study. Chapter two analyses the changing world economy in historical perspectives as well as the development of capitalism from free-market economy to monopoly capitalism. Chapter three discusses the role of imperialism in Northeast Africa, and how it created a "dependent" colonial state in Ethiopia. Chapters four and five address the issue of power struggle that was going on within the ruling class of Ethiopia, and how the power struggle was finally won by Haile Selassie who consolidated the dependent colonial state. Chapter six examines the process through which the Haile Selassie government integrated the Ethiopian state into a capitalist economy that has been dominated by finance capital. Chapter seven and eight are a brief account of the national liberation movements and other political organizations in the country. Chapter nine is devoted to the political and national problems under the "Marxist" regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam. *The final chapter is summary and conclusion*

To explain the conflicts and the national problems in Ethiopia Ibssa and Holcomb scrutinize its past political history. Their argument for doing this rests on their conviction that the present political and national problems are embedded in the historical evolution of the Ethiopian state itself.

To clarify the issue under discussion the authors pose the following three important questions and discuss them in a prudent and sober manner.

1. how the fundamental economic relations which characterize the empire came to be established?
2. how they have been maintained and by what means the structure of the Ethiopian state has been supported up to the present day?
3. why many widely-held beliefs about this empire and the historical account do not correspond? (p. 3)

By discussing these questions, the authors have redressed the myths and taboos surrounding the official version of the "Ethiopian history" and provided an excellent historical background to the evolution of the Ethiopian state. They challenged the traditional Ethiopian history which is based on various elements of Ethiopian mythology and the bible to legitimize the rule of the Abyssinians over the Oromos, Sidamas, Walayitas, etc.

What makes the book more interesting is its analysis of the formation of the Ethiopian state within the dynamics of the global capitalist system. The authors have identified the influence of external powers on the social and political formation of the Ethiopian state. Using Marxist political economy concepts, Ibssa and Holcomb have convincingly argued that Ethiopia is a "dependent" colonial state like Belgium, Spain and Portugal which accomplished its colonial ambitions not by its "own power alone but by the position" it "held in relation to the balance of power that existed in Europe" (p. 34).

The authors define dependent colonialism as "a system of assisted occupation which extended the objectives of monopoly colonial control through weaker countries who then became partners in the process" (p. 24). Ibssa and Holcomb argue that dependent colonialism is an historical phenomenon which emerged during the era of imperialism "as a means of managing or containing conflict between monopoly capitalist powers" (p. 24). The creation of dependent colonial states was required "out of desperate need of monopoly powers who were very nationalistic to secure access and some form of control over disputed regions without destroying each other" (p. 25).

According to the authors, the Ethiopian state was created by imperial powers and the Abyssinians in order to achieve their respective hidden agendas. The imperialist powers struck an alliance with the Abyssinians and created the Ethiopian state in order to get access and indirect control over the inner parts of the Horn of Africa. The Abyssinians, as junior partners in the scramble for colonies, wanted the alliance to strength their military and political position to conquer and exploit the rich natural resources and labor of the Southern people. Ibssa and Holcomb claim that it was this alliance that enabled the Abyssinians to colonize the peripheral people: the Oromo, Sidama, Walayita, etc.

To substantiate this, the authors present a case study of the Oromo people. They chose the case of the Oromos because, as they put it, "the Oromo issue is central historically, structurally, geographically, numerically and theoretically to any consideration of the nature of the Ethiopian state and the political economy of the region" (p. 3).

The Oromo, who constitute about 40% of the Ethiopian people, are the largest national group on the Horn of Africa. Before they were forcefully incorporated into the domain of the Abyssinian empire, they were living independently under a unique social, political and spiritual institution known as "Gada." Gada was a well-organized and democratic institution of its time which controlled the whole sociopolitical and cultural activities of the Oromo people. The system was based on age-groups to run the political, social and cultural affairs of the Oromo society. The democratic nature of Gada was evidenced in its election of political leaders, every eight years, in free and democratic procedure. Under the Gada system, political office or leadership was held not on the basis of kinship or descent, but instead it was achieved through election.

Before colonization, most of the Oromos were pastoralists while those who lived in the highlands were engaged in agricultural activities. In the late 19th century, Oromia—the land of the Oromos—was conquered by Menelik, the king of Abyssinia, who later became Emperor of Ethiopia. He struck an alliance with imperialist powers and conquered the Oromo people one after another.

After colonization "a new colonial superstructure was imposed on the Oromos, one that exhibited components of the Abyssinian procapitalist system and features derived from the European capitalist system. The synthesis of these elements formed the new Ethiopian dependent colonial superstructure" (p. 114).

According to the authors, once the Ethiopian dependent colonial state imposed its sociopolitical institutions on the Oromo people, the tradition, culture and values of the Oromo people were destroyed. Thus, for instance "Gada was dismantled and replaced. Nationwide features of the Oromo polity became merely local expressions and what had powerful political and economic implications was often reduced to ritual" (p. 115).

Ibssa and Holcomb also argue that colonization resulted in the evolution of new socioeconomic relations where the Oromos "were subjugated and reduced to serving the new neftegna as



gebbers (tenants) on their own land. Those of the conquering group who became settlers acquired rights in the Oromo lands by virtue of their relation to the new state and were installed by that colonial state into the positions of landlord and administrator" (p.115).

The authors strongly believe that the colonization was motivated by the quest to control the natural resources of Oromia, which the Abyssinian king needed to generate foreign exchange with which he could acquire modern weapons. In pursuit of these valuable resources, "Oromia and other nations of the South were occupied by the forces of Abyssinians aided by technical and strategic help from the European capitalist class interested in seeing this part of Africa play a role in their master plans for the development of the continent" (p.107).

Indeed, as the authors probe with clarity, the colonization of Oromia was mainly motivated by economic factors. The Abyssinians were attracted by the rich natural resources (such as coffee, gold, ivory, etc.) of the South. Also, as noted by one Ethiopianist "for the majority of Northerners seeking economic returns, the South possessed adequate fertile land and labor."

Ibssa and Holcomb have clearly defined colonialism and highlighted the difference between imperialist colonialism and "internal colonialism." Supported by Lenin's theory of Imperialism which argued that "colonial policy existed even before imperialism," the authors have refuted the notion that Ethiopia could not possibly be a colonial state because it was not an imperialist country. They have convincingly argued that colonial policy existed even before imperialism and Ethiopia, though not an imperialist country, had practiced colonial policy with the help of imperialist powers.

Addressing the issue of the 1974 Revolution, the authors argue that Ethiopia never experienced a revolution or any other kind of sociopolitical and economic transformation because all institutions, including the "neftegna-gebar" system which is at the heart of Ethiopian colonialism, are still intact.

No revolution took place they say, because the fundamental relations of production in the country were not transformed. As the authors put it themselves, "was there a revolution led by low-ranking members of the military, representing the proletariat, in which the fundamental relations of production in the Empire were changed as many claimed? No, there was no revolution" (p. 330). The uprising was just a coup staged by the middle-ranking officers to save the Empire which was at the brink of disintegration. The armed forces took power from the Haile Selassie government because "they were afraid that the Empire might be lost to the resistance forces of the liberation fronts if the old guard were allowed to stay in power" (p. 339). Therefore, the Derg stepped-in and took-over power to preserve and strengthen the dependent colonial state.

The authors have also clearly discussed the difference between what they call "external" and "internal" opposition to the dependent state. External opposition refers to the various national liberation organizations which have been struggling "to break the power of the settlers and dismantle the Empire" (p. 340) while internal opposition refers to the Abyssinian political organizations which are "defending the continued existence of the Ethiopian Empire" (p. 344-355). According to the authors, the conflict between the various Abyssinian organizations is over "(1) whether or not to reform the Empire, and if so, how, and (2) the question of who should assume state power" (p. 340).

In this interesting book, Ibssa and Holcomb, have squarely discussed the causes and effect of the national conflict in Ethiopia. They have convincingly argued that the national problem in Ethiopia is the logical outcome of the process of state formation.

The authors conclude that if peace and tranquility are to be attained in Ethiopia, the colonial relations that exist in the empire state should be dismantled and the principle of self-determination be recognized and implemented. Yet, this fascinating book fails to fully explore the pivotal question of self-determination. The authors could have made the book more comprehensive and interesting, if they had spared some space to address the principles of self-determination and its practical applicability in the Horn of Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular. Also, the book has some editing problems. For instance, the last paragraph on page 354 is repeated again on the next page.

Notwithstanding these drawbacks, the book is a very interesting and provocative work. It adds an important dimension to our understanding of state formation and the genesis of the national conflict in Ethiopia. It is a book which should be read not only by individuals interested in Ethiopian politics and history, but also by scholars who are interested in Third World politics and political economy.

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**GUJI OROMO CULTURE IN SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA: Religious Capabilities in Rituals and Songs.** (Berlin: Dietrich Reimar Verlag, 1991), pp. 376 pp., photos, fig., tab., maps. (Collectanea Instituti Anthropos, 39) Price: DM78- Van de Loo by Mohammed Hassen

This is truly an excellent book and a most timely addition to the growing literature on the Oromo people. The book depicts the richness, depth, beauty, and the vitality of the Guji culture, and by extension that of the Oromo nation to which the Guji belong. The Oromo, who constitute a good half of Ethiopia's estimated fifty million people, are the single largest national group in the Horn of Africa. They are also one of the major African peoples who are united by language, culture, custom, way of life, historical experience, and a common worldview underpinned by the Gada System (the treasure house of traditional Oromodemocracy) and traditional Oromo religion (the hallmark of the Oromo spiritual universe) both of which are ably discussed in this book.

The author of this first rate, balanced, authoritative, and comprehensive study on the Guji culture is an elderly wise man of wide experience. He was born in Belgium carried out pastoral work and linguistic research in Zaire for many years before he arrived in Ethiopia in 1982. It was the good fortune of the students of Oromo culture and all Oromo nationals who are thirsty for knowledge about their own society and culture that Joseph Van de Loo volunteered for a humanitarian mission in Guji land. His linguistic skill enabled him not only to study Oromo language but also to discover the riches of Guji songs and oral literature. His respect for the Guji and their culture won him the friendship of men like Bilow Kola, his devoted assistant and collaborator in this worthy project. The author's knowledge of the Oromo language is very impressive and his respect for the Guji culture vividly appears throughout this book. I suspect Van de Loo's respect and love for the Guji must have been reciprocated by the people who may have embraced him as one of their brothers. The author approached the Guji people and their culture with an open mind. With sincere desire to listen to learn, to know, and to drink from the fountain of their wisdom. The result is this monumental book, a pathbreaking work in the area of Guji culture. It is one of the very best and most fascinating, ludic, and beautiful written books on the Oromo culture.

Guji Oromo Culture in Southern Ethiopia has five chapters interspersed with numerous songs, a long glossary, and many photographs, which depict the changing scene of Guji land, their cultural and religious objects, and their political and religious figures.

Chapter One discusses the Gada system of the Guji, an integral part of the traditional Oromo democratic political institution. Under this system political leaders were elected every eight years. The criteria for leadership, election among others, included oratory, knowledge of history, tradition and law, and past military achievements with recognizable potential for future leadership. According to Van de Loo, the candidate for the highest office in Guji election, "Must be a father of healthy sons and a mature person who excels in inner strength and gracefulness . . . knowledge of tradition, . . . moderation and sense of harmony . . . and peacefulness."

Traditionally, the highest officer among the elected leaders was the Abba Gada ("the father

of Gada in power") or the president of the chafe assembly ("meadow assembly") traditional Oromo parliament, which dealt with matters of highest importance, the declaration of war, the conclusion of peace, the making of laws, the settlement of disputes within the Oromo society and between the Oromo and their neighbors. The election of political leaders was preceded by extensive election campaigns and accompanied by a transfer of power ceremony, from the out-going to the in-coming leaders, who served only for an eight-year period and then refrained from active political duty. Smooth transfer of power every eight years from one set of leaders to the next was the hallmark of Oromo democracy. However, among the Guji today, a single Abba Gada has been in office for the past twenty years, a clear indication of the dramatic decline of the Gada system among the Guji people. The author attributes, and rightly, the root cause of the decline to the cataclysms of famine and cattle diseases, which united to devastate the Guji and the cattle (1888-1892 accompanied by Emperor Menilek's brutal conquest of the region in 1894 and the imposition of harsh, crude, oppressive Amhara rule which robbed the Guji of their rights, cattle, and land, all of which "may have provoked deep changes in the Gada system."

Menilek's conquest and what followed in its train had similar, if not identical, consequences in Arsi and Haraghe as well.

Chapter Two deals with kinship, marriage celebration, childbirth, burial rites, rites of peacemaking, and many other ceremonies among the Guji. Interestingly, like the rest of the Oromo people, barley, sheep, coffee, blood, milk, butter, and numerous Guji ceremonies and religious sacrifices.

Chapter Three discusses time and ayaana. This is the most fascinating part of this wonderful book. The author ably and eloquently describes ayaana, an Oromo concept which defies a simple and single definition. It is one of the "key words" of the Oromo language which expresses Oromo cultural value, which cannot be understood unless one is thoroughly acquainted with the Oromo society itself. To the speaker of the Oromo language, ayaana has many meanings, and its meaning becomes clear only when the context in which it has been used is taken into account. Ayaana is one of those Oromo concepts that cannot be translated into English. It can only be explained by description. Van de Loo describes ayaana in two remarkable ways, and his description is the best I have seen so far. First, ayaana is a "particular makeup or innate qualities which emanate from Waaqa (traditional Oromo God) and are conferred on the person . . . within a given family and life-world. . . . It makes up . . . the individual's destiny, prosperity, or good fortune<sup>6</sup>" Secondly, ayaana is "an individual's particular grace, his or her gifts of skills, beauty, genius as perceived by others, and in sum, his or her ability to relate to and to share with his or her fellows" I believe the author's description of ayaana demonstrates his knowledge of the Oromo language, culture, and worldview.

Chapter Four deals with division of labour within the Guji society while the final chapter discusses religious songs, and traditional values. Among others, two important Oromo concepts, saffu and nagea (Nagaya) are adesequately discussed in the final chapter. Like ayaana, saffu is a concept which defies a single definition. In fact, until I encountered it in Van de Loo's splendid book, I assumed that saffu was a concept known by and limited to only the Matcha Oromo who lived in western Shawa, Wallaga, and Kaffa administrative regions in south-western Ethiopia. Among the Matcha Oromo, saffu embodies a concept similar to the Marxist dialectical law of unity of the opposites. But it differs from this law in that the opposites do not struggle in unity. They live in harmony with each other so as to maintain the stability, peace, and the smooth running of the social order. In short, saffu is the concept that expresses the Matcha Oromo view of the universe.

The author's study clearly demonstrates that saffu is not limited only to the Matcha Oromo. Among the Guji, saffu "relates to the individual's imaginative sense for well-tempered interrelation with cattle and the living environment. With fellow persons, and with Waaqa-deity" "It is through saffu that a person may assure for him or herself Waaqa's blessing by respecting the

divine covenant, that is, the world order as something given from above. This covenant is marked both by grace, ayaana, and by untenable opposition and differentiation” Nagea (nagaya) is another important concept which is easy to describe. Nagea means peace in its broadest sense of the term, which includes safety and well-being of an individual. It is inner peace, peace of the body, mind, and soul. Nagea is peace with oneself, with Waaqa, with the community, and with the environment. Nagea is a peace that unites an individual with the community, the community with the environment, and unites all into a single whole, that depends on each other and must live with each other in harmony and balance. “The ideal of peace, nagea, is a corollary of the notion of ayaana in that peace allows the full expression of one’s gifts and gracefulness. A peaceful temperament appreciates and respects the talents and gracefulness of fellow-persons and so leads to inner peace. In their greeting, Guji always wish one another peace, nagea. By and large this salutation means: “may you be healthy.”

Finally, what emerges from this great book is not only the richness and beauty of Guji Oromo songs and Oromo cultural unity but also the deep hold that traditional religion exerts on all Oromo, whether they are Christians or Muslims. The traditional Oromo religion is centered around Waaqa, the creator of the universe and the sustainer of all life on earth. In all their ceremonies, the Oromo pray to Waaqa, whom they trust and to whom they turn in their moments of joy and distress. “To trust Waaqa is an indication of the fundamental belief Waaqa, who is the source and origin of all that exists, also cares for creation by protecting it and bestowing it with fertility, abundance, and peace.

The students of Oromo culture, history, and language, or anyone who is interested in traditional African religion and oral literature will find rich food for thought in “Guji Oromo Culture in Southern Ethiopia.” The book is well written. It is a great joy to read and very captivating at the end. It will remain an indispensable reference for years to come. Joseph Van de Loo has added a great deal to the knowledge bank of Oromo culture.

The author is “well aware of the limitations of the present study. He hopes, however, that it will give the Guji and other Oromo the pleasure and pride of committing to future generations a part of their culture and encourage them to reflect on their symbols and system of values.” The educated Oromo for which the above words have been written must drink from the stream of “Guji Oromo Culture in Southern Ethiopia” so as to add their share to the growth of the river of Oromo culture all over Ethiopia.

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# THE Oromo Commentary

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## Aims:

The OC attempts to provide a forum for the expression and dissemination of various views regarding the political and economic crises affecting the Horn of Africa. It publishes critical comments and analytical papers on current issues, book reviews, etc. pertinent to the Horn in general and Ethiopia in particular. It aims to serve as a means of communication not only among the Oromo themselves, but also between the Oromo, other Horn Africans and the international public. It, therefore, provides a platform for debate and dialogue concerning the important issues of democracy, justice, human rights and peaceful resolution of conflicts, and social and economic development in the Horn of Africa.

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## 1993 OROMO STUDIES CONFERENCE

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## A new book on the Oromo

*Oromia and Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868-1992*, by Asafa Jalata, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, 1993

This original work traces the cultural and political history of the Oromo, their incorporation into the the modern state of Ethiopia, and their long struggle against colonization.

Focusing on the development of the class and nation-class contradictions manifested in the continuing crisis of the Ethiopian state, Jalata explores why the reorganization of the state in the 1970s and again in the early 1990s failed to change the nature of Ethiopian colonialism. He challenges the assumptions of many modernization and mainstream Marxist theoreticians that colonized peoples like the Oromo would disappear through a process of assimilation. To the contrary, the Oromo case serves as an apt demonstration that imperialism has not been successful in destroying the cultural identity of colonized peoples, nor their desire for self determination.

Lynne Rienner Publishers offer Oromo Studies Association (OSA) the opportunity to purchase *Oromia and Ethiopia* at a special 20% discount off the regular price of \$45. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1800 30th St., Suite 314, Boulder, CO 80301-1032, USA tel 303 444 6684, Fax 303 444-0824

