

# THE SURVIVAL OF OROMO NATIONALISM\*

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## INTRODUCTION

During the last century over a period of about 90 years the status of the Oromo people has gone through drastic transformation. Indeed European travelers and missionaries who encountered Oromos during the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century had high hopes for bright prospects for the Oromo nation in terms of its potential to play some significant roles both regionally and continentally. For example, Dr. J.L. Krapf who lived in the Horn from 1839-1842, wrote, “ I consider them destined by Providence after their conversion to Christianity to attain the importance and fulfill the mission Heaven has pointed out to Germans in Europe”<sup>1</sup>.

D’Abbidie, a French missionary and traveler, also wrote of “les Oromos grande nation Afriacaine1”.<sup>2</sup>These disinterested observers admired the Oromo culture, the relatively large population (about 10 million at the time) of a common stock, bound together by common tongue and basic cultural threads.<sup>3</sup> They were further impressed with the Oromo Democracy and their love for freedom and their willingness to fight for it.<sup>4</sup>

Almost a century later a contemporary German scholar remarked, “The word (Oromo) is the most difficult name to say,” when lamenting about the progressively deteriorated Oromo condition both regionally and internationally. In explaining why he found so many people, particularly in diplomatic circles, having difficulty with the name “Oromo,” he pointed out that (1) the name is fairly new; and (2) it is politically undesirable. This German, who turned into an activists for Oromo’s cause, said that European leaders did not want to hear about Oromos. “Oromos are without friends” in dealing with the current crisis which has been plaguing the Horn of Africa, he added.

The historical forces altered so profoundly the Oromo lot were summarized by Earl Lytton, the author of the Stolen Desert:

Menelik seems to have operated with French technicians, French mapmakers, French advice on the management of a standing army and more French advice as holding captured provinces with permanent garrisons of the conscripted colonial firearms and did much else to organize his campaigns...The Galla (Oromos) were thus conquered by the Habash for the first time in recorded history. Without massive European help the Galla (Oromos) would not have been conquered at all.<sup>5</sup>

Great Britain, Italy and Czarist Russia also participated in this process by providing arms, etc.<sup>6</sup> With that total conquest and encapsulation the Oromo people lost all fundamental rights-language, land, cultural, economic, and political development.<sup>7</sup>This transformation inevitably contributed to the near –eclipse of the Oromo nation from the political landscape of the regional and international during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It should, however, be pointed at this juncture that the Oromos, although defeated, never gave up resistance, nor their national identity (which is the main thesis of this paper) during these years.

This led the currently pervasive and formidable myths among Ethiopians that Menelik's conquest of the Oromos and others brought justice, peace, and stability to the conquered southerners and “unified the country,”<sup>8</sup> leading to the notion of “culturally united Greater Ethiopia.”<sup>9</sup>They further wrote in their literature that the “Ethiopian unity” was solid and (un?) shakable [10]

With the advent of national movements for self-determination in the Horn of Africa during the last two decades, the myth of “United Greater Ethiopia” has been demolished, perhaps permanently; the process of re-writing the history of the region has already commenced.<sup>11</sup>

Rather conspicuously of late, one of the voices of nationalism and self-determination in the Horn of Africa, heard in the outside world, is that of the Oromo people. Africa Confidential, in its July 18th 1984 issue published a detailed report on Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) armed struggle activities under rather an intriguing heading: "Ethiopia: The Oromo Factor".<sup>12</sup> Colin Legum, one of the most knowledgeable Westerners on contemporary African political dynamics and activities, also wrote a lengthy article on the current political situation, incidentally with the same tone regarding the Oromo factor in the future of the Ethiopian Empire, about the same time.<sup>13</sup> Among the dramatic developments, it was reported that OLF captured and held Aselle, the capital of Arsie Province, about 85 miles from Addis Ababa, in broad daylight for 24 hours.

There have been different reactions to the Oromo national movement during recent years. From the Amharas, the reactions have been all shock, dismay, and disbelief. A common commentary has been... (What is that the Galla (Oromo) is lacking, so that he has to establish the Oromo movement as a Narrow Nationalist or Reactionary; the Question has been asked Why Oromo liberation now after the Ethiopian revolution? Where have the Oromos been? The critical question to be raised in here is, Is Oromo nationalism something new? Did the Oromos wake up all of a sudden because they observed Nationalist movements such as the Eritrean liberations in the region during the last two decades? The purpose of this paper is to fill the gap in knowledge about Oromo nationalism. It will be further argued that Oromo nationalism always existed, though in different forms and shades, and the reasons why Oromo nationalism survived during the Abyssinian colonial years will be discussed. The role of educated Oromos in the Oromo nationalism will be presented.

## I. SOME BASIC FACTS ABOUT OROMOS

Since the Oromo nation has been hidden for about a century by structural design and at present time it is not much known to outside world, it may be useful to present some basic facts about the current status of the Oromo people. The following attributes characterize the Oromo society: (1) They Oromos belong to the Cushitic family of Africans in Northeast Africa [14]; (2) The available records with respect to the historical origins of Oromos indicate that they have lived in that region for a millennium or so [15]; (3) They are the largest single nation in the region, approximately 30 million - - they comprise more than a half the population in the contemporary Ethiopia; (4) They are found in all but two of the 14 provinces in Ethiopia; they occupy 10 provinces as the overwhelming majority [16].

## II. NATIONALISM-FRAME OF REFERENCE

“Nationalism is as old as history itself, beginning with the dawn of the {societies whose civilizations were developed}”.<sup>17</sup> It must be acknowledged, however, that the concept of nationalism when it comes to operational definition, is far from being simple since the term nationalism stands for social a social concept and since any social concept takes on its meaning “not only from the social context but from the symbolic and emotional connotations of the use.”[18] The relevant point in here is that since a living society is dynamic and characterized by a fluidity of social relationships, the meaning of any social concept could change depending on the situation.<sup>19</sup> Generally, “Nationalism has been defined as that state of mind in which the political loyalty is felt to be owed the nation.”<sup>20</sup> Munif Al-Razzaz, an Arab scholar, defines nationalism at two stages: (1) Nationalism is a social concept that expresses the

bond existing between individuals of one nation; (2) In the second sense, Nationalism is a creative and powerful force. In the former sense, Nationalism is a relationship; in the latter, a power or a prime mover.

“Should a national bond exist, national power must accompany it. The distinction between them is that between subject and object, between feeling, knowledge and pursuing it, between experiencing and acknowledging something, and having the conviction of that knowledge. In its broadest sense, nationalism is the bond which relates the individual of one nation in a common patrie.”<sup>20a</sup>

It seems that the treatment of the definition of nationalism by Kazzan serves better as a frame of reference. For the analysis of the present subject—The Survival of Oromo Nationalism.

### III. WHY SO LITTLE KNOWLEDGE OF THE ROLE OF THE OROMO NATION IN CONFLICT IN THE HORN OF AFRICA AND WHY SO MUCH MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT OROMO NATIONALISM?

#### Lack of Knowledge About the Oromo Nation

As discussed earlier, the international community is just beginning to witness the appearance of the name “Oromo” and the nation and the experience it stands for. Still, only a very few people speak about it at international level. Thus, the Oromo question is fairly new in the international arena.

Even at the local level (i.e. within the Ethiopian Empire) the Oromo question was not well known until a decade ago. Five reasons can be suggested for this dismal knowledge about such a large population:

- (1) Barriers. European travelers and missionaries who knew about Northeast Africa during the 19<sup>th</sup> century did make contact with the Oromos. The European who knew about the Oromos did begin writing about Oromos and in general about the African nation. After the Oromos

were conquered (1867-1900) and systematically colonized during the subsequent century, the national picture of the Oromos eclipsed into oblivion. Emperor Haile Sellassie I, the successor to Emperor Menelik II who conquered the Oromos, banned writing in Oromo language and burned the literature written during the Italian occupation and the period prior to that.<sup>20b</sup>

Under colonial administration, the Amharas, the colonizing nationality, controlled all aspects of as well as all contacts with the outside world.<sup>21</sup> Foreigners, whether business people, diplomats, missionaries, and even the American Peace Corps were made to relate to the dominant culture and communicate and function in that milieu. If they desired to learn a regional language, they had to learn Amharic, the colonial language. The group contact and frame of reference for the contact was primarily with the urban elites who were mostly Habashas who came to and made their habitation in these urban centers as colonial settlers. It is a well-known fact that these urban dwellers despise the Oromos and their culture; they fear and intensely hate the Oromo people.<sup>22</sup>

## (2) Systematic Suppression as Government Policies

The Amhara successive regimes, being conscious of its minority status and the privileges the colonization of the Oromo nation had brought to the Amhara elites, has found it necessary to suppress all aspects of Oromo life inside the Empire. Such thrust in policies toward the Oromo people and indeed Oromoniam, is contained in a directive issued by Haile Sellassie's Council of Ministers in the 1950s:

In order to preserve the unity and territorial integrity of Ethiopia:

1. Christianity would have to be expanded
2. The Amhara language and culture would have to dominate throughout the Ethiopian Empire, and

3. A means of quickly and effectively Amharanizing the Gallas who constitute more than half of the Ethiopian population would have to be devised before they could develop Galla consciousness and cause problems.

(3) Underdevelopment. The Oromos were systematically exploited and deprived in all fundamental aspects-economic, political, cultural, and linguistic development, and education. Citing specific references along these lines is appropriate. According to one research report that came out in the 1970s, of all nationality groups in the Ethiopian Empire, who participated in secondary college education, the Oromos were represented by 15% only., while the Amharas and Tigreans were represented by 55% and 22% respectively. Such disparity with respect to access to education and modernity still follows the Oromos everywhere. For instance, according to one source, there are over 40,000 “Ethiopians” in the U.S., But Oromos make up less than 1.25 percent of that figure. It is estimated by some source that 95% of Oromos may still be illiterate. These statistics with respect to Oromo participation in the educational process in the Ethiopian Empire must be viewed from the standpoint of that the Oromos are the majority in Ethiopia-more than half of the population. Therefore, they were unable to act and represent their national interest in the local, regional, and international arena.

(3) Academic Bias. The general academic bias against Oromo nationalism(i.e. lack of giving due recognition to the presence and actual dynamics of Oromo nationalism) can be justifiably attributed to various factors.

(a) Ethnocentrism-General: It has become clear that western scholarship lacked the necessary comprehension and appreciation of nationalism in the Third World. By in large, western scholars viewed nationalism in these societies from experience to the west. In their view, nationalism is intimately tied to emergence of towns ,literacy, mass media, and party buildings. It is assumed that the central and indispensable actors in this process are the



western educated elites. To the Marxist scholars, the educated elite are important in the evolution of nationalism for their own class interests. To the non-Marxist scholars (particularly Americans), “the {educated} elite is identified not as a class but as a forward-looking body of the middle-class individuals with modern, cosmopolitan ideas seeking the control of bureaucratic power. It is also assumed that nationalist elite (i.e. western educated) equate nationalism with development, modernization and industrialization. To these categories of scholars there was no credible process unless mediated through the educated elite. The conceptual constructs developed by these scholars could not accommodate the nature of nationalism in the peasant and illiterate societies. In my view, this is one of the reasons why Oromo nationalism as it existed in the larger Oromo society has been ignored by academicians, particularly the Ethiopianists.

(b) The Statist View. The main stream of scholars believe in the notion of “nation-state building” as a direction and process which results in creating a “viable” state; to such scholars, the ultimate well-being of all nationalities in a given state political boundary rests with the vehicle of the state as presently constituted. Related to this presumption is that any examination and emphasis on nationalism (ethno-nationalism) will increase publicity (and consequently lead to disruption).

(c) Ethnocentrism-Specific. It has been well observed that Ethiopianist scholarship has manifested some definite biases against the Oromo society-its civilization, experience-which has its roots in the Cushitic culture, vis-à-vis the Habasha civilization and experience which has its roots in the Mediterranean heritage. Some scholars have even explicitly stated that the Oromos did not make any contribution to the Ethiopian State. Therefore, because the Oromos had nothing to offer, they must be influenced by the new Hamitic cultural groups.

And finally, there are those who seem to go almost on the limb and oppose Oromo nationalism at any cost (i.e. in their writings). They either speak about Oromos disparagingly or understate the colonial oppression visited upon the Oromo people or avoid any reference to Oromos.

I would like to cite two examples, which illustrate the attitudes and behavior of such scholars toward Oromos. The first example is contained in an article published in 1983, "Africa's Economic Squeeze; Poverty, Hunger, and Refugees" in World View. The second example is exhibited in an article entitled "Drought and Development in Ethiopia" in the 1986 World Affairs Journal. It analyzed ethnic conflicts but did not analyze the historical Oromo resistance nor the OLF. It is no wonder that such scholars have earned a distinction in the eyes of some, who call such scholars, "Academic Nafetanas"-(approximate translation- academicians who through scholarship defend the ideology and the interest of colonial settlers), "academic mercenaries".

(4) The Assimilado Oromos. The few Oromos who were educated, through well-planned institutional bending of minds and attitudes, were uprooted from their own culture, language and heritage.<sup>23</sup> The Oromos, although a sizeable majority, remained faceless masses for the urban dwellers and for the outside world as well.

#### IV. THE BASIS OF OROMO NATIONALISM

There are many reasons (factors), which helped the survival of Oromo nationalism.

(1) They had a well-defined sense of territory, which they called Biya Oromo (The Oromo country). In fact, Emperor Menelik II, in some of the treaties with European powers, refers to the Galla (Oromo country).

- (2) They have a common mother tongue
- (3) They have a rich culture
- (4) They had a well-developed system of government known as Gaddaa
- (5) They had a well-developed sense of identity

## V. OROMO NATIONALISM DURING THE COLONIAL YEARS

### A.

- (1) They gallantly fought for their territory, right and nation.
- (2) Since conquest there has been no decade, which has passed without an Oromo uprising.
- (3) They made reflections by telling their lost glory, through folklore and traditional songs. For example, they bitterly lamented about General Gobana Ducche, an Oromo, who played a major role in Oromo defeat
- (4) They even revolted (in the states) when Emperor Menelik removed him from authority as the administrator in Oromo areas.

### B. The Colonial Administration Policies as A source of preserving Oromo Nationalism

The colonial administration policies created a clear-cut dichotomy between the colonizer and the colonized: the Amhara Society vs. the Oromo society.

- (1) The Amharas ruled all aspects of Oromo life
- (2) The Amhara was depicted as civilized, superior; knowledgeable and wise. On the other hand, the Oromo was depicted as inferior and sub-human. The following expressions represent the common references to the Oromo:

- (i) Dirty Galla (Oromo)
- (ii) Stupid Galla (Oromo)
- (iii) Tongue-tied Galla (Oromo)
- (iv) Heathen Galla (Oromo)

(3) The Colonial Masters resided in colonial towns (which evolved from the military garrison towns), but the Oromo, the colonized, mostly lived in the rural areas as the overwhelming majority providing all free manpower and material for the urban dwelling colonizers.

(4) These two societies lived side by side interacting on negative terms for a century.

(i) The Amhara came to the Oromo in rural areas:

- to take land

- to imprison the Oromo

- to collect taxes and some other tribute

- to collect bribes

- to enforce new colonial rules and regulations

- to recruit Oromo laborers for colonial projects such as building towns, houses, roads, etc.

(ii) The Oromo on the other hand, came to town, "the land of the enemy":

- to pay taxes; in the process give out bribe to every individual who handled his case, including the doorkeeper.

- to sell his raw material; there too he was exploited by the Amhara merchants aided by the Amhara police and judges. Since he is illiterate and more importantly he could not speak the

colonial language Amharic, the Oromo position was undoubtedly precarious and was even more vulnerable for abuse and exploitation.

- to the Oromo the town was where he was jailed—far away from home.

-he came to town to visit his jailed relatives.

## VI. THE OROMOS HAD CLEAR AND CATEGORICAL FRAMES OF REFERENCE WITH RESPECT TO THEIR COLONIZERS

They referred to them as Dinna (enemy) in Arsie-Oromo.

-The Fuji-Oromo /Borana called him Qawicha (the gun or the man with the gun)

-In central Oromia, he was known as Sidama (an outsider)

-They fully understood the psychological and social cost of marrying a member of the colonizing national. The Oromo parents universally advised their children (mostly male) not to marry Amhara women.

## VII. OROMO NATIONALISM AMONG EDUCATED OROMO

A. In general, Oromo nationalism came to this segment of Oromo society relatively later. The reason is simple: like any other colonized human group, the educated Oromo had to confront the process of acculturation and the resultant assimilated behavior by the dominated. It should be remembered that colonial aggression takes on two fronts:

- (i) economic/material
- (ii) cultural and psychological<sup>24</sup>

The psychological track which domination pursues is known as “shame and promise ideology.” This process entails the colonized or subjugated groups learning the language, culture, history and adopting the values, and ideologies, of the dominant. The dominated individuals involved in the process disassociate themselves from the history, culture, and heritage of their people. The

premise is that by being like their masters, they will be rewarded both socially and materially.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, according to this well-known script, the educated Oromos were taught Amharic language in schools. They were strongly discouraged from speaking in their own language, even among themselves. They were taught “Ethiopian history”—the history of the Amhara ruling class and general the Amhara view of the world.

In the curriculum, the Oromo history, and culture were depicted as inferior, savage, undesirable. They were taught Emperor Menelik conquered the Oromos to bring them civilization and stability. This psycho-socio-political-ecology created a new generation of Oromos—new type of Oromos.—the Civilized Oromo.

In accordance with the other well-known cases under similar circumstances, the educated Oromo’s personality, and realm of reality was twisted and bent. This created a dichotomy between the overwhelming majority of unschooled Oromos and the few educated Oromos. The latter hated their own and worked against the interest of their own people in collaboration with their colonial masters.

#### VIII. OROMO LIBERATION FRONT (OLF) -1974

By the early 1960s, the Oromos in Bale Province had already taken up arms against the colonial power. With the demise of Metcher Tulama, a sizeable number of Oromo intellectuals, students, and peasants came to the conclusion that they could not achieve any sense of democratic rights through peaceful means.

The Oromo peasants’ rebellion in the eastern and southern provinces made significant contributions toward the 1974 Revolution. By 1974 OLF was born—with the objective of creating an independent Oromia.

A platform for national movement based on nine major points(objectives)

(1) political; (2) economic; (3) educational; (4) health; (5) welfare; (6) labor; (7) women; (8) cultural; (9) defense.

This development put Oromo nationalism and struggle at another level. Since 1976, OLF has had military operations in the provinces of Hararage, Bale, Arsie, and Sidamo. In 1981, OLF started armed struggle in the province of Wellega (western Oromia) bordering the Sudan. It is clear that Oromo Nationalism survived. The Oromos are doing their part. Today, the Oromo people—intelligentsia and peasants—under the leadership of OLF is in a struggle for self-determination. Oromo nationalism is thriving at home and abroad, albeit under very difficult circumstances. The yearly celebration of Oromo national day is a testimony of this. Indeed, the survival of Oromo nationalism in the face of great odds is a living testimony to the strength of the human spirit.

Oromo nationalism, and struggle for self-determination is not some abstract concern. It has to do with the very survival future of a great nation. Oromo concerns and aspirations can be summarized in the following words:

Injustice and oppression have been tried with us during a period of more than two hundred years. Under the whole heaven, you will find no parallel to the wrongs we have endured. We have worked without wages, lived without hope, wept without sympathy, and bled without mercy. Now, in the name of common humanity, we simply ask, the right to bear the responsibility of our own existence.

These eloquent words were not uttered by an Oromo; the person who spoke these words did not even know Oromos for he was born and reared in North America some 120 years ago. But he knew so well the nature of oppression because he himself was a product of such experience and he spent his entire life so tirelessly and ceaselessly for the deliverance of his slaved people. These were the words of Frederick Douglass, the eloquent and great Afro-American, a great liberator

and spokesperson for his people. I have adopted his words to capture the Oromo experience and aspirations. They echo the need of all oppressed people.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH!!!

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> J.L. Krapf, Travels and Research in East Africa (London:1860), pp.72,74.

<sup>2</sup> As in P.T.W. Baxter, "Ethiopia's Unacknowledged Problems: The Oromo." African Affairs, 1978,p.285.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Mohammed Hassan, The Oromo Nation Under Amhara Colonial Administration—Past and Present—and Oromo Resistance to Colonial Oppression, Unpublished paper, 1981.

<sup>5</sup> The Earl Lytton, The Stolen Desert(London , 1967), p.160.

<sup>6</sup> See M.Hassan, The Oromo Nation Under Amhara Colonial Administration,op.cit.,pp.7,15,16.

<sup>7</sup> See Gadaa Melbaa,Oromia : A Brief Introduction(Finfine, Oromia, 1980).pp.47-58.

<sup>8</sup> See Harold S.Marcus, "Imperialism and Expansionism in Ethiopia from 1865 to 1900." In L. Gann and P.Duigaghan(eds.), Colonialism in Africa, 1870-1960 (Cambridge:Mass.,1969).pp.420-461.

<sup>9</sup> Allexandro Triulz, " Competing Views of National Identity In Ethiopia." In I.M.Lewis (ed.) Nationalism-Self – Determination in the Horn of Africa (London: Ithaca Press, 1983),p.110.

<sup>11</sup> Among the major endeavors along this line are some of the recent conferences on the Horn of Africa. Two are worth mentioning: "Social Crisis in the Horn of Africa," hosted by Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, in 1980(the papers have been published in Northeast Africa Journal), and "Nationalism and Self-Determination in the Horn of Africa" held at Oxford University, Great Britain, in 1980(the papers have been published as a book under the same title, edited by I.M.Lewis).

<sup>12</sup> Africa Confidential, Vol. 25, No. 15 (July 15, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Colin Legum, "Ethiopia's Support Among Masses Erodes As State Turns Communist," The Christian Science Monitor, July 13, 1984.

<sup>17</sup> Tootte Hate, Munif Al-Razzas, The Evolution of the .Meaning of Nationalism (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Company, INC., 1963), p.5.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> F.H. Hinsley, Nationalism and International System (Dobbs Ferry, New York: Oceania Publications, Inc., 1973), p.19.



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<sup>20a</sup> M.A. Razzaz, The Evolution of the Meaning of Nationalism, op.cit., p.5

<sup>20b</sup> Gadaa Melbaa, Oromia, op.cit., p.56.

<sup>21</sup> See P.T. Baxter , “Ethiopia’s Unacknowledged Problem: The Oromo,” op.cit.

<sup>22</sup> See Hamdesa Tuso, “‘Minority’ Education in Ethiopia.” Africa (Rome Anno) XXVII No.3 (Sept. 1982):270-293.

<sup>23</sup> I have discussed this process in detail elsewhere. Please see my paper, Dominant-Subordinate Relations: The process of Victimization and Alienation-The Oromo Experience,” presented at the Political Economy of Northeast Africa,” April 21-23,1983,Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan(The paper is currently under revision for publication).

<sup>24</sup> Dominique Manoni, The Psychology of Colonization (Translated by Pamela Powels), New York:Praeger 1964, p.32;Thomas Kana, Evolution and Revolution in Africa(Cambridge :Mass.: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1978), pp.23-27;Albert Memmi, The Colonizer and the Colonized (Boston, Beacon Press, 1965), p. XII; H.Tuso, , “Dominant-Subordinate Relations: The process of Victimization and Alienation-The Oromo Experience,” op.cit.

<sup>25</sup> See V. Smith et al., “Pluralism in Education: Replacing the Melting Pot.” In Alternatives in Education: Freedom to Choose(Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1976), pp.86-88.