

## INFORMATION

### Oromia and the Oromo people

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#### Summary Information

People: Oromo

Country: Oromia (also phonetically spelled as Oromiyaa)

Area: 600,000 sq.km approx.

Capital: Finfinnee (also called Addis Ababa)

Population: 30 million (1995 estimate)

Language: Oromo, also called Afan Oromo or Oromiffa

Economy: Mainly agriculture (coffee, several crops, spices, vegetables) and Animal Husbandry; Mining industry; Tourism trade; Medium and small-scale industries (textiles, refineries, meat packaging, etc)

Religion: Waaqqefata (the traditional belief in Waaqa or God), Islam, and Christian (Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant)

#### Overview

The Oromo make up a significant portion of the population occupying the Horn of Africa. In the Ethiopian Empire alone, Oromo constitute about 30 million of the 55 million inhabitants of the Ethiopian Empire. In fact, Oromo is one of the most numerous nations in Africa which enjoys a

homogeneous culture and shares a common language, history and descent and once shared common political, religious and legal institutions. During their long history, the Oromo developed their own cultural, social and political system known as the Gadaa system. It is a uniquely democratic political and social institution that governed the life of every individual in the society from birth to death.

Ecologically and agriculturally Oromia (Oromo country) is the richest region in the Horn of Africa. Livestock products, coffee, oil seeds, spices, mineral resources and wild life are all diverse and abundant. In spite of all these advantages, a century of colonisation by Abyssinia (Ethiopia), a backward nation itself, has meant that the Oromo people have endured a stagnant existence where ignorance and famine have been coupled with ruthless oppression, subjugation, exploitation and above all, extermination. Thus for the last one hundred years under the Ethiopian rule, the Oromo have gained very little, if anything, in the way of political, social and economic progress.

The Oromo were colonised during the last quarter of the nineteenth century by a black African nation - Abyssinia - with the help of the European colonial powers of the day. During the same period, of course, the Somalis, Kenyans, Sudanese and others were colonised by European powers. The fact that the Oromo were colonised by black African nation makes their case quite special.

During the process of colonisation, between 1870 and 1900, the Oromo population was reduced from ten to five millions. This period coincides with the occupation of Oromo land by the Abyssinian emperors Yohannes and Menilek. After colonisation, these emperors and their successors continued to treat Oromo with utmost cruelty. Many were killed by the colonial army and settlers, others died of famine and epidemics of various diseases or were sold off as slaves. Those who remained on the land were reduced to the status of gabbar (a peasant from whom labour and produce is exacted and is a crude form of serfdom).

Haile Selassie consolidated Yohannes and Meniiek's gains and with the use of violence, obstructed the process of natural and historical development of the Oromo society - political, economic and social. In all spheres of life, discrimination, subjugation, repression and exploitation of all forms were applied. Everything possible was done to destroy Oromo identity - culture, language, custom, tradition, name and origin. In short Haile Selassie maintained the general policy of genocide against the Oromo.

The 1974 revolution was brought about by the relentless struggle over several years by, among others, the Oromo peasants. The military junta, headed by Mengistu Haile-Mariam, usurped power and took over the revolution. This regime has continued on the path of emperors Yohannes, Menilek and Haile Selassie in the oppression, subjugation and exploitation of Oromo, the settlement of Abyssinians on Oromo land and the policy of genocide.

Forced to fight against Eritreans, the Somalis and others, many Oromo have fallen in battle. Many others have died on the streets of cities and towns during the so-called "Red Terror" period and in a similar programme that has been expanded in the countryside since then. Massacres in towns and villages coupled with bombing and search and destroy programmes have caused the destruction of human lives, crops, animals and property, have driven Oromo from their land and forced them to seek refuge in

neighbouring countries. Not surprisingly, this ruthless oppression and persecution of peoples has resulted in the largest flight of refugees in Africa. A very large proportion of the refugees in the Horn of Africa are Oromo.

In its attempt to oppress and eliminate the essential elements of Oromo culture, the present regime has used cover-up words such as 'development, relief, settlement, villagization and literacy campaign' to mislead the world. In fact most of these programmes and projects have been aimed at displacing Oromo people and denying them freedom, justice, human dignity and peace, thereby hastening the process of Amharization or de-Oromization.

The struggle of the Oromo people, then, is nothing more than an attempt to affirm their own place in history. It seeks equality, human dignity, democracy, freedom and peace. It is not directed against the masses of a particular nation or nationality, nor against individuals, but rather against Ethiopian colonialism led by the Amhara ruling class and the naftanyas (Amhara colonial settlers) and against feudalism and imperialism. Thus it is the Ethiopian colonial system and not the Amhara masses or individuals which is under critical consideration.

Today when nearly all of the African peoples have won independence, the Oromo continue to suffer under the most backward and savage Ethiopian settler colonialism. All genuinely democratic and progressive individuals and groups, including members of the oppressor nation, Amhara, who believe in peace, human dignity and liberty should support the Oromo struggle for liberation.

Although the Oromo nation is one of the largest in Africa, it is forgotten by or still unknown to the majority of the world today. Unfortunately even the name Oromo is unknown to many, and this should not be allowed to continue.

The main purpose of this summary is to introduce readers briefly to the Oromo people, their land, and culture. For detailed treatment of the experiences of Oromo under Ethiopian colonial rule as well as their struggle for freedom, democracy and economic and social justice, please refer to the book from which this summary is extracted. Please do note the author's introductory message in this book: "... it is not the intention of this book to write a definitive Oromo history. This task is left to the historians, a work they have unjustly treated or unjustifiably ignored in the past. In fact the little that has been written about Oromo has almost always been from Abyssinians and Europeans point of view".

### The Oromo People

The Oromo are one of the Cushitic speaking groups of people with variations in colour and physical characteristics ranging from Hamitic to Nilotic. A brief look at the early history of some of the peoples who have occupied north-eastern Africa sheds some light on the ethnic origin of Oromo. The Cushitic speakers have inhabited north-eastern and eastern Africa for as long as recorded history. The land of Cush, Nubia or the ancient Ethiopia in middle and lower Nile is the home of the Cushitic speakers. It was most probably from there that they subsequently dispersed and became differentiated into separate linguistic and cultural groups. The various Cushitic nations inhabiting north-east and east Africa today are the result of this dispersion and differentiation. The Oromo form one of those groups which spread

southwards and then east and west occupying large part of the Horn of Africa. Their physical features, culture, language and other evidences unequivocally point to the fact that they are indigenous to this part of Africa. Available information clearly indicates that the Oromo existed as a community of people for thousands of years in East Africa (Prouty et al, 1981). Bates (1979) contends, "The Gallas (Oromo) were a very ancient race, the indigenous stock, perhaps, on which most other peoples in this part of eastern Africa have been grafted".

In spite of the fact that there are several indications and evidences that Oromo are indigenous to this part of Africa, Abyssinian rulers, court historians and monks contend that Oromo were new comers to the region and did not belong here. For instance the Abyssinian court historian, Alaqa Taye (1955), alleged that in the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries the Oromo migrated from Asia and Madagascar, entered Africa via Mombasa and spread north and eastwards. Others have advocated that during the same period the Oromo crossed the Red Sea via Bab el Mandab and spread westwards. Abyssinian clergies even contended that Oromo emerged from water. On this issue, based on the points made in *The Oromo's Voice Against Tyranny*, Baxter (1985) remarked, "... the contention that the first Oromo had actually emerged from water and therefore, had not evolved to the same level of humanity as the Amhara (i.e. treating a myth of origin as a historical fact); or, more seriously, that Oromo were late comers to Ethiopia and hence, by implication, intruders and not so entitled to be there as the Amhara."

The history of the arrival of the Oromo people in the sixteenth century in East Africa from outside is a fabrication and denial of historical facts. It is a myth created by Abyssinian court historians and monks, sustained by their European supporters and which the Ethiopian rulers used to lay claim on Oromo territory and justify their colonization of the Oromo people. Several authorities have indicated that the Oromo were in fact in the North-eastern part of the continent even before the arrival of the Habasha. According to Perham (1948): "the emigrant Semites landed in a continent of which the North-East appears to have been inhabited by the eastern groups of Hamites, often called Kushites, who also include the Gallas." Paulitschke (1889) indicated that Oromo were in East Africa during the Aksumite period. As recorded by Greenfield (1965), Oromo reject the view that they were late arrivals, "... old men amongst the Azebu and Rayya Galla dismiss talk of their being comparative newcomers..... Their own (Abyssinians) oral history and legends attest to the fact that Oromo have been living in Rayya for a long time. Beke (cited by Pankurst, 1985-86) quoted the following Lasta legend: "Meniiek, the son of Solomon, ... entered Abyssinia from the East, beyond the country of the Rayya or Azebo Gallas There are also evidence (Greenfield et al, 1980) that at least by the ninth and tenth centuries that there were Oromo communities around Shawa and by about the fourteenth century settlements were reported around Lake Tana. The recent discovery, (Lynch and Robbins, 1978), in northern Kenya of the pillars that Oromo used in the invention of their calendar system, dated around 300 B.C., is another indication that Oromo have a long history of presence as a community of people, in this part of Africa.

The so called "Galla invasion of Ethiopia" is also a tale. It was first written around 1590 by a monk called Bahrey and henceforth European historians and others almost invariably accepted this story as a fact. From his writing, it is evident that he was biased against Oromo. The following quotation from Bahrey, (in Beckingham et al, 1954), vividly illustrates typical Abyssinian cultural, religious and racial biases against Oromo. He began his book "The History of the Galla": "I have begun to write the history of the Galla in order to make known the number of their tribes, their readiness to kill people, and the

brutality of their manners. If anyone should say of my subject, 'Why has he written a history of a bad people, just as one would write a history of good people', I would answer by saying 'Search in the books, and you will find that the history of Mohamed and the Moslem kings has been written, and they are our enemies in religion. In fact it appears that the main purpose of his writing was to encourage Abyssinians against Oromo. Bahrey, Atseme, Harris, Haberiand and others description of what they called the 'Galla invasion of Ethiopia' as an avalanche, a sudden overwhelming human wave which could be likened to a flood or swarms of migratory locust is unrealistic and difficult to imagine to say the least.

The Oromo's Voice Against Tyranny argued that: "... the so-called Galla invasion of the sixteenth century was neither an invasion nor a migration. It was rather a national movement of the Oromo people ... with the specific goal of liberating themselves and their territories from colonial occupation. It was nothing more or less than a war of national liberation." In fact the last 2000 years were occupied with a gradual expansion of Abyssinians from north to south. This expansion had been checked throughout by Oromo. It was only with the arrival of Europeans and their firearms that Abyssinians succeeded in their southward expansion mainly in the middle of last century.

Abyssinian and European historians alleged that there was a sudden population explosion in the Oromo community in the sixteenth century that enabled it to invade Ethiopia. The claim lacks a scientific base. During that time no significant, if at all any, technological development such as discoveries or introductions of medicines, new and improved tools for food production, etc. took place in the Oromo community that could have been the cause for the sudden population explosion. The Oromo community had no advantages of these sort over neighbouring communities.

Different areas have been indicated as place where the Oromo developed or differentiated into its own unique community of people or ethnic group (Braukamper, 1980). According to some ethnologists and historians, the Oromo country of origin was the south-eastern part of Oromia, in the fertile valley of Madda Walaabu in the present Baale region. This conclusion was reached mainly on the basis of Oromo oral tradition. Based on scanty anthropological evidence, others have also pointed to the coastal area of the Horn of Africa, particularly the eastern part of the Somali peninsula, as the most probable place of Oromo origin. Bruce, an English traveller, indicated that Sennar in Sudan was the Oromo country of origin and that they expanded from there. It should be noted here that many European travellers have suggested the origin of peoples, including Oromo, to be where they met some for the first time, which in most cases happened to be peripheral areas.

There are several groups of people in East Africa very closely related to the Oromo. For instance, the Somalis are very similar in appearance and culture. The fact that the Somali and Oromo languages share between 30 percent and 40 percent of their vocabulary could be an indication that these two groups of people became differentiated very recently. Other Cushitic-speaking groups living in the same neighbourhood who are closely related to the Oromo are Konso, Afar, Sidama, Kambata, Darassa, Agaw, Saho, Baja and other groups.

The Oromo are also known by another name, Galla. The people neither call themselves or like to be called by this name. They always called themselves Oromoo or Oromoota (plural). It is not known for

certain when the name Galla was given to them. It has been said that it was given to them by neighbouring peoples, particularly Amhara, and various origins of the word have been suggested. Some say it originated from the Oromo word 'gaiaana' meaning river in Oromiffa. Others indicate that it came from an Arabic word 'qaala laa'. There are other similar suggestions as to the origin of the word. The Abyssinians attach a derogatory connotation to the Galla, namely 'pagan, savage, uncivilized, uncultured, enemy, slave or inherently inferior". The term seems to be aimed at generating an inferiority complex in the Oromo.

Oromo have several clans (gosa, qomoo). The Oromo are said to be of two major groups or moieties descended from the two 'houses' (wives) of the person Oromo represented by Borana and Barentu (Barenttuma). Borana was senior (angafa) and Barentu junior (qutisu). Such a dichotomy is quite common in Oromo society and serves some aspects of their political and social life. The descendants of Borana and Barentu form the major Oromo clans and sub-clans. They include Borana, Macha, Tuuiama, Wallo, Garrii, Gurraa, Arsi, Karrayyu, Itu, Ala, Qaiioo, Anniyya, Tummugga or Marawa, Orma, Akkichuu, Liban, Jile, Gofa, Sidamo, Sooddo, Galaan, Gujii and many others. However, in reality there is extensive overlap in the area they occupy and their community groups. And since marriage among Oromo occurs only between different clans there was high degree of homogeneity.

### Population

The Oromo make up over 30 million out of the present 55 million population of the Ethiopian Empire. They are found in all the regions of the Ethiopian Empire except for Gondar. They make up a large proportion of the population of Ilubbabor, Arsi, Baale, Shawa, Hararge, Wallo, Wallagga, Sidamo and Kafa. They are also found in neighbouring countries such as Kenya and Somalia. Out of the 50 nations of Africa only four have larger population than Oromia.

### Language

The Oromo nation has a single common mother tongue and basic common culture. The Oromo language, afaan Oromoo or Oromiffa, belongs to the eastern Kushitic group of languages and is the most extensive of the forty or so Kushitic languages. The Oromo language is very closely related to Konso, with more than fifty percent of the words in common, closely related to Somali and distantly related to Afar and Saho.

Oromiffa is considered one of the five most widely spoken languages from among the approximately 1000 languages of Africa, (Gragg, 1982). Taking into consideration the number of speakers and the geographic area it covers, Oromiffa, most probably rates second among the African indigenous languages. It is the third most widely spoken language in Africa, after Arabic and Hausa. It is the mother tongue of about 30 million Oromo people living in the Ethiopian Empire and neighbouring countries. Perhaps not less than two million non-Oromo speak Oromiffa as a second language.

In fact Oromiffa is a lingua franca in the whole of Ethiopian Empire except for the northern part. It is a language spoken in common by several members of many of the nationalities like Harari, Anuak, Barta, Sidama, Gurage, etc., who are neighbours to Oromo.

Before colonization, the Oromo people had their own social, political and legal system. Trade and various kinds of skills such as wood and metal works, weaving, pottery and tannery flourished.

Pastoralism and agriculture were well developed. Oromo have an extraordinarily rich heritage of proverbs, stories, songs and riddles. They have very comprehensive plant and animal names. The various customs pertaining to marriage, paternity, dress, etc. have elaborate descriptions. All these activities and experiences have enriched Oromiffa.

Much has been written about Oromiffa by foreigners who visited or lived in Oromia, particularly European missionaries. Several works have been written in Oromiffa using Roman, Sabeian and Arabic scripts. Printed material in Oromiffa include the Bible, religious and non-religious songs, dictionaries, short stories, proverbs, poems, school books, grammar, etc. The Bible itself was translated into Oromiffa in Sabeian script about a century ago by an Oromo slave called Onesimos Nasib, alias Hiikaa, (Gustave, 1978).

Roman, Arabic and Sabeian scripts are all foreign to Oromiffa. None of them fit well the peculiar features of the sounds (phonology), in Oromiffa. The main deficiency of the Arabic script is the problem of vowel differentiation. The Sabeian script does not differentiate gemination of consonants and glottal stops. Moreover, it has seven vowels against ten for Oromiffa. Hence, the Roman script is relatively best suited for transcription of Oromiffa. An Italian scholar, Cerulli (1922), who attempted to write in Oromiffa using both Sabeian and Roman, expressed the shortcomings of the Sabeian script as follows: to express the sounds of Galla language with letters of the Ethiopic (Sabeian) alphabet, which express very imperfectly even the sounds of the Ethiopian language, is very near impossible ... reading Galla language written in Ethiopic alphabet is very like deciphering a secret writing." As a result several Oromo political, cultural groups and linguists have strongly advocated the use of the Roman script with the necessary modifications. It has thus been adopted by the Oromo Liberation Front some years ago.

A number of Oromo scholars in the past attempted to discover scripts suited for writing Oromiffa. The work of Sheikh Bakri Saphalo is one such attempt. His scripts were different in form but followed the symbol-sounds forming patterns of the Sabeian system. Ever. though his scripts had serious shortcomings and could not be considered for writing Oromiffa now, it had gained popularity in some parts of eastern Oromia in the 1950s, before it was discovered by the colonial authorities and suppressed.

Oromiffa has been not only completely neglected but ruthlessly suppressed by the Ethiopian authorities. a determined effort for almost a century to destroy and replace it with the Amharic language has been mostly ineffectual. Thus, the Amharization and the destruction of the Oromo national identity has partially failed.

## Culture

Oromo have a very rich culture, fostered by the size of the population and large land areas with diverse climatic conditions. One highly developed self-sufficient system which has influenced every aspect of Oromo life is the Gadaa system. It is a system that organizes the Oromo society into groups or sets (about 7-11 ) that assume different responsibilities in the society every eight years. It has guided the religious, social, political and economic life of Oromo for many years, and also their philosophy, art, history and method of time-keeping.

The activities and life of each and every member of the society are guided by Gadaa. It is the law of the

society, a system by which Oromo administer, defend their territory and rights, maintain and guard their economy and through which all their aspirations are fulfilled.

The Gadaa system has served as the basis of democratic and egalitarian political system. Under it the power to administer the affairs of the nation and the power to make laws belong to the people. Every male member of the society who is of age and of Gadaa grade has full rights to elect and to be elected. All the people have the right to air their views in any public gathering without fear.

There follows a brief description of how the Gadaa system works: there are two well-defined ways of classifying male members of the society, that is the hiriyya (members of an age-set all born within the period of one Gadaa rule of eight years) and Gadaa grade. The Gadaa grades (stages of development through which a Gadaa class passes) differ in number (7-11) and name in different parts of Oromia although the functions are the same. The following are the Gadaa grades:-

1. Dabballee (0-8 years of age)
2. Folle or Gamme Titiqaa (8-16 years of age)
3. Qondaia or Gamme Gurgudaa (16-24 years of age)
4. Kuusa (24-32 years of age)
5. Raaba Doorii (32-40 years of age)
6. Gadaa (40-48 years of age)
7. Yuba I (48-56 years of age)
8. Yuba II (56-64 years of age)
9. Yuba III (64-72 years of age)
10. Gadamojjii (72-80 years of age)
11. Jaarsa (80 and above years of age)

We will briefly describe the duties of a Gadaa class as it passes through the above grades.

The Dabballee are sons of the Gadaa class who are in power, the Luba. They are boys up to 8 years of age. Thus this is a stage of childhood. Upon reaching their eighth year, they enter the Folle grade. At this age they are allowed to go further away from their villages and to perform light work.

At 16 years old, they enter the Qondaala. They may now go long distances to hunt and perform heavy work. Three years before the Qondaala ends, those of the Gadaa class come together and nominate the future group leaders (hayyu council) who eventually will constitute its presidium and thereby the executive, judicial and ritual authorities. The final election is preceded by an often lengthy campaign of negotiations. After nomination, the candidates tour the region accompanied by their supporters to win the backing of the people before election. The individuals will be elected on the basis of wisdom, bravery, health and physical fitness.

In the Kuusa grade, the previously elected leaders are formally installed in office, although they do not yet assume full authority except in their own group. This is one of the most important events in the life of the individual and the Gadaa system over all.

In the next grade, Raaba Doorii, members are allowed to marry. This and the Kuusa grade constitute a period of preparation for the assumption of full authority. At the end of this period the class members enter Luba or Gadaa, the most important class of the whole system, attain full status, and take up their position as the ruling Gadaa class. At this stage the system comes to a stop momentarily and all men move to the proceeding class vacating the last class which is the immediately occupied by a new class of youth who thus begin their ascent of the system's ladder.

The former ruling class, the Luba, now becomes Yuba. The Yubas, after passing through three separate eight-year periods, are transferred to the Gadamojjii class. Then they enter the final grade called Jaarsa and retire completely.

As described briefly above, when the Oromo man passes from one stage to the next, his duties and way of life in society change. For instance, during the grades of Qondaala, Kuusa and Raaba Doorii, the individuals learn war tactics, Oromo history, politics, ritual, law and administration over a period of 24 years. When they enter the Gadaa class or Luba at the age of about 40 years, they have already acquired all the necessary knowledge to handle the responsibility of administering the country and the celebration of rituals. It ends with partial retirement of the whole, group of elders to an advisory and judiciary capacity.

The following are the Gadaa officials and their duties according to the Tuuilama Gadaa practice:

1. Abbaa Bokku - President
2. Abbaa Bokku - First Vice-President
3. Abbaa Bokku - Second Vice-President
4. Abbaa Chaffe - Chairman of the Assembly (Chaffe)
5. Abbaa Dubbi - Speaker who presents the decision of the presidium to the Assembly
6. Abbaa Seera - Memoriser of the laws and the results of the Assembly's deliberations.
7. Abbaa Alanga - Judge who executes the decision
8. Abbaa Duula - In charge of the army
9. Abbaa Sa'a - In charge of the economy

Thus, the entire presidium consists of nine members, called "Saigan Yaa'ii Borana" (nine of the Borana assembly). The Abbaa Bokkus are the chief officials. (Bokku is a wooden or metal sceptre, a sign of authority kept by the Abbaa Bokku, the president). The Abbaa Bokkus have counsellors and assistants called Hayyus who are delegated from the lower assemblies.

There are three level of assembly - interclan, clan and local chaffes, chaffe being the Oromo version of parliament. The chaffe assembly was held in the open air in a meadow under the oada (sycamore) tree. The chaffe made and declared common laws and was source of the accumulated legal knowledge and customs. In the hierarchy of Gadaa chaffes, the assembly of the entire presidium of the ruling- Gadaa Class is the highest body whose decision is final. It, is the assembly at which'representatives of the entire population come together, at predetermined times, to evaluate among other things, the work of

those in power. If those in power have failed to accomplish what is expected of them the assembly has the power to replace them by another group elected from among the same Gadaa class or Luba. And this was one of the methods of checking and balancing political power in the Oromo society. The second highest Gadaa assembly is the clan chaffe. It is from these assemblies that special delegates to the higher assembly are elected. The lowest Gadaa chaffe is the local chaffe. This is made up of local members of the Luba from among whom representatives to clan chaffes are elected.

The holders of these responsible posts can remain in office for eight years only, in normal times, and are then replaced by a new group of officers. The power is handed over at a special ceremony at a special place and time. The office-holders conduct government - political, economic, social, ritual and military - affairs of the entire nation for this period. During war time all capable men fight under the leadership of the group in office. During the eight year period the officials live together in a village (yaa'aa village) and when necessary travel together.

There are five Gadaas in a cycle of 40 years. If a man enters office (becomes Luba) now, his sons will become Luba 40 years from now. The five Gadaa (some times called Buttaa) in the cycle have names, which vary slightly from region to region. Among some Oromo communities the sets of five Gadaa names used by the sons are different from those of the fathers. Whereas among other communities the same set of Gadaa names are used for both fathers and sons. For instance the Gadaa practised in the Borana community uses the following different sets of names for the five Gadaa. (Could be likened to five parties who take power in turns).

#### Fathers Sons

1. Birmajii Aldada
2. Melba Horota
3. Muudana Bifoole
4. Roobale Sabaqa
5. Duuiioo Kiloolee

In this manner a given name repeats itself every 80 years. This is in fact the complete Gadaa cycle divided into two semi-cycles of 40 years each. The first 40 years is the Gadaa of the fathers and the second is the Gadaa of the sons.

Although it is not known with any degree of certainty where and when the Gadaa system started, it is known and documented that the Oromo have been practising it for well over 500 years. However, according to oral Oromo historians, the Gadaa system has been in practice for several centuries. "Their (Borana Oromo) noted historian, Arero Rammata, was able to recount, in 1969, an oral history covering four thousand years", (Prouty et al, 1981). Today Gadaa experts easily recall fifty-seven Abbaa Gadaas with important events. Of course, this highly sophisticated system cannot have appeared without having been based on something earlier. Therefore further study and analysis is required to know more about its origin and development.

Social scientists of diverse backgrounds at different times have studied the Gadaa system. Many of them have testified that it is uniquely democratic. Among those authorities, Plowden (1868), stated, "among republican systems, Gadaa is superior". Asmarom Legesse (1973) described the Gadaa system: "one of the most astonishing and instructive turns the evolution of human society has taken". Indeed it is one of the most fascinating sociopolitical structure of Africa that even influenced the lives of other peoples. Several neighbouring peoples have practised a sort of the Gadaa. Among these are Sidama, Walayita, Konso, Darasa, Nyika, Nabdi, Maasai, etc., (Beckingham et al, 1954).

Like living organism, cultures undergo evolution in order to adapt to changing conditions. The Gadaa system has thus been undergoing evolutionary changes since its inception so as to serve better a continually developing society. However, the fundamental that occurred in the Gadaa system, starting around the end of the eighteenth century, were brought about mainly by events set in motion from outside the Oromo society. Therefore it was not fully a normal or natural development.

In most communities suddenly and in a few cases gradually, the usefulness of the Gadaa system declined. Among the factors that had contributed to this decline were firstly, the protracted wars that preceded the onset of colonization. The end of the eighteenth century was marked by constant wars and skirmishes, particularly in the north and north-eastern Oromia against the encroachment of the Abyssinians. Because of the insecurity imposed by such wars coupled with the distances involved to go to the Gadaa ceremonies to change the leadership, the Abbaa Duuias (fathers of war) stayed on their post for much longer period than required by the Gadaa rules. This gave these war leaders a mandatory power, because they were forced or encouraged by the society and existing circumstances, such as the continuous wars, to hang on to power. This weakened one of the outstanding features of the Gadaa system, the built in checks and balances mechanism of political power. This in turn weakened the ideology by which the Oromo nation was successfully led for several centuries.

In addition to the protracted wars, the passing of major trade routes through the area and the subsequent expansion of trade gained the war leaders more wealth. Thus the wealth, fame and power they gradually gained enabled them to command a larger number of followers in the area they were defending. Thus they usurped the political power that belonged to the Gadaa officials and the people and finally some of them declared themselves "mootii" (kings).

The second important factor that contributed to this decline was the coming of new beliefs and religions. The politico-religious aggression that took place in the expansion of Islam and Christianity have affected the culture of the Oromo people very much. The invasion of Oromo land by Muslims in the east and south and by Christians in the north have left their mark on the Oromo culture.

Thirdly, the changes in the mode of living of several Oromo communities was probably one of the important factors that led to the decline of Gadaa. As the Oromo society developed there was a gradual change in the social, economic and political life of the people. For instance, in many parts of Oromia a settled agrarian mode of life developed fast and the people practised both mixed agriculture - raised crops and animals - and nomadic pastoralism. The latter was the dominant mode of life before this time, although Oromo have practised cultivation for a long time and have made significant contribution to

agriculture by domesticating plants and rearing rare varieties of crop plants. The introduction and expansion of trade had significant contribution also. These and other related factors led to the emergence of a new social system, which created a significant pressure on the Gadaa system and brought about a modification or change in the Gadaa practices.

Finally, the onset of colonization had tremendously reduced the political and usefulness of Gadaa system as the administrative affairs and management of the national economy were taken over by the colonisers except in remote regions. Atseme noted, "Menilek outlawed the major chaffe meetings in the Oromo areas he conquered". Bartels (1983) also noted, "Gadaa ... was gradually deprived by Amharas of most of its political and judicial powers and reduced to merely ritual institution". Even the social aspects, that is the ritual and ceremonial aspects, have not been left to the people. The observance of Gadaa ceremonies has been prohibited by proclamation.

The Oromo people also have a rich folklore, oral tradition, music and art. For example it is believed that the Oromo are responsible for the invention and use of phallic stones (Wainwright, 1949 and Greenfield, 1965). Decorations of stone bowls from Zimbabwe include pictures of cattle with long "lyre-shaped" horns such as raised by Oromo. According to these scholars, this and the phallic stones found in Zimbabwe are traced directly to Oromo and linked to their early settlements there and to the Zimbabwe civilization. Wainwright (1949) argued that these were founded by the Oromo. He wrote: "Waqlimi and his people came from Galia land and its neighbourhood, and were already installed in southern Rhodesia before A.D. 900". (Waqimi is an Oromo name). This date coincides with the date of the erection of some of the famous buildings there which Wainwright says were built by "Galia". This appears to be part of the spread of Kushitic civilization.

Although much of this culture and these traditions have survived harsh suppression, much has been forgotten and lost, artifacts have been destroyed and Oromo are discouraged from developing their culture and art.

## Oromo Calendar

Time is a very important concept in Gadaa and therefore in Oromo life. Gadaa itself can be narrowly defined as a given set of time (period) which groups of individuals perform specific duties in a society. Gadaa could also mean age. The lives of individuals, rituals, ceremonies, political and economic activities are scheduled rather precisely. For this purpose, the Oromo have a calendar. The calendar is also used for weather forecasting and divination purposes.

The Oromo calendar is based on astronomical observations of the moon in conjunction with seven or eight particular stars or star groups (Legesse, 1973 and Bassi, 1988) called Urji Dhaha (guiding stars). According to this calendar system, there are approximately 30 days in a month and 12 months in a year. The first day of a month is the day the new moon appears. A day (24 hours) starts and ends at sunrise.

In the Oromo calendar each day of the month and each month of the year has a name. Instead of the expected 29 or 30 names for days of a month, there are only 27 names. These 27 days of the month are

permuted through the twelve months, in such a way that the beginning of each month moves forward by 2 or 3 days. The loss per month is then the difference between the 27-day month and the 30-day month, (Legesse, 1973). One interesting observation is that, as illustrated in the computing of time like in the Oromo calendar, Oromos visualization of events is cyclical just as many events in nature are cyclical.

Since each day (called ayyaana) of a month has a name, the Oromo traditionally had no use for names of the days of a week. Perhaps it is because of this that today in different parts of Oromia different names are in use for the days of a week.

Each of the 27 days (ayyaana) of the month have special meaning and connotation to the Oromo time-keeping experts, called ayyaantu. Ayyaantu can tell the day, the month, the year and the Gadaa period by keeping track of time astronomically. They are experts, in astronomy and supplement their memory of things by examining the relative position of eight stars or star groups, (Bassi, 1988) and the moon to determine the day (ayyaana) and the month. On the basis of astronomical observations, they make an adjustment in the day name every two or three months.

The pillars found a few years ago in north-western Kenya by Lynch and Robbins (1978) has been suggested to represent a site used to develop the Oromo calendar system. According to these researchers, it is the first archaeo-astronomical evidence in subSaharan Africa. Doyle (1986) has suggested 300 B.C. as the approximate date of its invention.

According to Asmarom Legesse (1973), "The Oromo calendar is a great and unique invention and has been recorded only in a very few cultures in history of mankind." The only other known cultures with this type of time-keeping are the Chinese, Mayans and Hindus. Legesse states that the Oromo are unusual in that they seem to be the only people with a reasonably accurate calendar which ignore the sun.

## Religion

There are three main religions in Oromia: traditional Oromo religion, Islam and Christianity. Before the introduction of Christianity and Islam, the Oromo people practised their own religion. They believed in one Waaqayoo which approximates to the English word God. They never worshipped false gods or carved statues as substitutes. M. de Aimeida (1628-46) had the following to say: "the Gallas (Oromo) are neither Christians, moors nor heathens, for they have no idols to worship." The Oromo Waaqa is one and the same for all. He is the creator of everything, source of all life, omnipresent, infinite, incomprehensible, he can do and undo anything, he is pure, intolerant of injustice, crime, sin and all falsehood. Waaqayoo is often called Waaqa for short.

There are many saint-like divinities called ayyaana, each seen as manifestation of the one Waaqa or of the same divine reality. An effective relationship is often maintained between ayyaana and Oromo by Qaafu (male) and/or Qaafitti (female). A Qaaiuu is like a Bishop in the Christian world and an Imam in the Muslim world. He is a religious and ritual expert who has a special relationship with one of the ayyaana, which possesses him at regular intervals.

Although the office of Qaaiuu is hereditary, in principle it is open to anyone who can provide sufficient

proof of the special direct personal contact with an ayyaaria. In the Oromo society a Qaaiiu is regarded as the most senior person in his lineage and clan and the most respected in the society. He is considered pure and clean. He must respect traditional taboos (safuu) and ritual observances in all situations and in all his dealings and must follow the truth and avoid sin.

The Qaaliu institution is one of the most important in the Oromo culture and society and is believed to have existed since mythical times. It is a very important preserver and protector of Oromo culture, more or less in the same way the Abyssinian Orthodox Church is the preserver of Abyssinian culture.

The Qaaiiu institution has political importance, even though the Qaaiiu himself does not possess political power as such and religion is distinctly separated from politics. The Qaailu village is the spiritual centre, where political debates are organized for the candidates for the Gadaa offices. Thus he plays both a spiritual and political role in the Gadaa system. For instance, during the fifth year of the Gadaa period, the Gadaa class in power honours the Qaaliu by taking gifts and making their pledges of reverence. This is the Muuda or annointment ceremony. As the head of the council of electors, the Qaaliu organizes and oversees the election of Gadaa leaders.

The Qaallu institution was once a repository of important ceremonial articles (collective symbols) in the Buttaa (Gadaa) ceremony, such as the bokku (sceptre), the national flag, etc. The national flag is made in the colours of the Qaallu turban (surri ruufa). The national flag had three colours - black at the top, red in the centre and white at the bottom. In the Gadaa, the three colours, black, red and white, represented those yet to enter active life, those in active life (Luba) and those who had passed through active live, respectively. The use of these symbols is prohibited by the colonial government.

The Oromo Qaallu must not be confused with the Amhara Qaailicha, who has a very different, much lower, social status. He is a vagabond who resorts to conjuring and black magic for his own benefit, (Knutsson, 1967). He is notorious for extracting remuneration by threats or other means. On the other hand, it is beneath the dignity of an Oromo Qaallu to ask his ritual clients for gifts or payment. The Abyssinian ruling class has confused the terms, thus disparaging the Qaallu socially and religiously by using the term depreciatingly.

The place of worship of Qaaliu ritual house is called the Galma. Each ayyaana has its own Galma and its own special ceremonies. The Galma is usually located on a hill top, hill side or in a grove of large trees. Many of these sites are now taken up by Abyssinian Orthodox Church buildings or Mosques. Places of worship also include under trees, beside large bodies of water, by the side of big mountains, hills, stones, etc. This has been misrepresented by outsiders claiming that the Oromo worship trees, rivers, etc.

The believers visit the Galma for worship once or twice a week, usually on Thursday and Saturday nights. At this time the followers dance, sing and beat drums to perform a ritual called dalaga in order to achieve a state of ecstasy, which often culminates in possession. It is at the height of this that the possessing ayyaana speaks through the Qaallu's mouth and can answer prayers and predict the future.

Religious Oromo often made Muuda-piigrimages to some of the great Qaaiius and religious centres such

as Arsi's Abbaa Muuda (father of anointment). Among the Borana Oromo Muuda pilgrimages are still common. Muuda pilgrimage is very holy and the pilgrims walk to the place of Abbaa Muuda with a stick in one hand and carrying myrrh (qumbii). All Oromo through whose village the pilgrims pass are obliged to give them hospitality. As the Mecca pilgrims are called Haj among Muslims, these Muuda pilgrims are called Jiia.

The Qaaiuu institution was weakened with the advent of colonialism to Oromia, which reduced contacts between various Oromo groups. The pilgrimage was prohibited. It became the policy to discourage and destroy Oromo cultural institutions and values. The Qaaiuu institution has suffered more during the last 14 years than it suffered during the previous 100 years. At this stage it faces complete eradication and Orthodox Church buildings are fast replacing Gaimas.

Just before the beginning of the harvest season every year, the Oromo have a prayer ceremony (thanksgiving festival) called irreessa. It once took place in river meadows where now the Abyssinian Orthodox Church takes its holy Tabot (tablets) for special yearly festivals, the 'timqat'. The Irreessa has become illegal and anybody who attempts to practise it is now likely to be imprisoned.

The Oromo believe that after death individuals exist in the form of a spirit called the 'ekeraa'. They do not believe in suffering after death as in Christianity and Islam. If one commits sin he/she is punished while still alive. The ekeraa is believed to stay near the place where the person once lived. One is obliged to pray to and to give offering by slaughtering an animal every so often to ones parents' ekeraa. The offerings take place near the family or clan cemetery, which is usually in a village.

Oromo people have been in constant contact with other religions like Islam and Christianity for almost the last 1000 years. For instance, the Islamic religion was reported to have been in eastern Shawa about 900 A.D. and Christianity even before that. However, in favour and defence of their own traditional religion, the Oromo have resisted these religions for quite a long time.

However, today the majority of the Oromo people are followers of Islam and Christianity, while the remaining few are still followers of the original Oromo religion. It is said that the Islamic religion spread in Oromia as a reaction to the Ethiopian colonization. The Oromo accepted Islam and non-Orthodox Christianity en-masse because they identified Abyssinian Orthodox Christianity with the oppressor and also to assert their identity visaa-vis Abyssinians. The Amhara spy monk, Atseme wrote: "The Galia became Muslim for his hatred of Amhara priests." Bereket (1980) also noted, "... Oromos in Arsi province accepted Islam in large number as a demonstration of anti-Amhara sentiment and a rejection of all values associated with imperial conquerors." A somewhat similar situation in the west was the acceptance of Islam by many Afro-Americans in 1950s and 1960s, as a reaction to the racial discrimination and oppression they faced from the white community and in search of an identity different from that of the oppressor group.

There are many Oromo who are followers of Islam or Christianity and yet still practise the original Oromo religion. Bartels (1983) expressed this reality as follows: 'Whether they (Oromo) became Christians or Muslims, the Oromo's traditional modes of experiencing the divine have continued almost

unaffected, in spite of the fact that several rituals and social institutions in which it was expressed, have been very diminished or apparently submerged in new ritual cloaks." Many used to visit, until very recently, the Galma and pay due respect to their clan Qaaiu. This is more true in regions where Abyssinian Orthodox Christianity prevails.

## The Land

The country of the Oromo is called Biyya-Oromo (Oromo country) or Oromia (Oromiya). Oromia is a name given by the Oromo Liberation Front to Oromoland, now part of the Ethiopian Empire. Krapf (1860) proposed the term Ormania to designate the nationality or the country of the Oromo people. This, most probably, originated from his reference to the people as Orma or Oroma. Oromia was one of the free nations in the Horn of Africa until its colonization and occupation by Abyssinia at the end of the nineteenth century. It is approximately located between 2 degree and 12 degree N and between 34 degree and 44 degree E. It is bordered in the East by Somali and Afar lands and Djibouti, in the West by the Sudan, in the South by Somalia, Kenya and others and in the North by Amhara and Tigre land or Abyssinia proper. The land area is about 600 000 square kilometres. Out of the 50 or so African countries it is exceeded in size by only 17 countries. It is larger than France, and if Cuba, Bulgaria and Britain were put together, they would be approximately equal to Oromia in size.

The physical geography of Oromia is quite varied. It varies from rugged mountain ranges in the centre and north to flat grassland in most of the lowlands of the west, east and south. Among the many mountain ranges are the Karra in Arsi (4340 m), Baatu in Baaie (4307 m), Enkelo in Arsi (4300 m), Mui'ataa in Hararge (3392m) and Baddaa Roggee in Shawa (3350 m).

Similarly, there are many rivers and lakes in Oromia. Many of the rivers flow westwards into either the Blue Nile or the White Nile, and others flow eastwards to Somalia and Afar land. Among the large rivers are the Abbaya (the Nile), Hawas (Awash), Gannaaiee, Waabee, Dhidheessa, Gibe and Baaroo.

For the peoples of Egypt, the Sudan and Somalia, life would be impossible without these rivers. They carry millions of tons of rich soil to Egypt, the Sudan and Somalia every year. Somalia depends heavily on the Gannaaiee (Juba) and Waabee (Shaballe) rivers which come from Oromia. In fact Oromia supplies almost 100 per cent of the fresh water for Somalia, Djibouti and Afars. At present the Ethiopian government depends heavily on Hawas (Awash) water as a source of electric power for its industries and irrigation water to grow sugar cane, cotton and fruits. The Wanji and Matahara sugar estates are good examples. There is a great potential in all these rivers for the production of electric power and for irrigation. Qoqaa, Fincha, Malkaa Waakkenne, Gibee Tiqqaa dams are examples of where hydro-electric power is already being produced or in the process of being harnessed.

Among the Oromo lakes are Abbaya, Hora, Bishofitu, Qoqaa, Langanno and Shaalaa. Many of these lakes possess a great variety of fish and birds on their islands and shores.

The climate is as varied as the physical geography, although close to the equator (to the north of it), because of the mountain ranges, high altitudes and vegetation, the climate is very mild and favourable

for habitation. Snow can be found on the mountains such as Baatu and Karra. In the medium altitudes (1800-2500 m) the climate is very mild throughout the year and one of the best. Up to 80 per cent of the population lives at this altitude and agriculture flourishes.

The low altitude areas (below 1500 m) in west, south and central part are relatively warm and humid with lush tropical vegetation, and although few live there permanently most graze their cattle and tend their beehives there. Although there is little agriculture at this altitude at present, it has great potential for the future. As the highland areas are already eroded and over populated, people are gradually moving to the lowlands. The low altitude areas in the east and south-east are mostly semi-arid and used by pastoralists seasonally.

The vegetation of Oromia ranges from savanna grassland and tropical forest to alpine vegetation on the mountaintops. The forests contain a variety of excellent and valuable timbers. Oromia is known for its unique native vegetation as well as for being, the centre of diversity for many different species. For instance, crops like coffee, anchote (root crop), okra, etc. are indigenous to this area.

### The Economy

Potentially, Oromia is one of the richest countries in Africa. Agriculture is the backbone of its economy. Still employing archaic methods, subsistence agriculture is the means of livelihood for more than 90 per cent of the population. There are a variety of farm animals and crop plants. Farm animals include cattle, sheep, goats, donkeys, mules, horses, camels and chicken. The Cushitic speaking communities of this region perhaps Nubians, are credited with the domestication of donkey and were the first to breed mules, (a result of a cross between a donkey and a mare). The Oromo are expert in animal husbandry through their long tradition as herdsman. For some, cattle-rearing (pastoralism) is still the main occupation. Because of Oromia's favourable climate and rich soil, many types of crops are cultivated and normally there is little need for irrigation. Normally one and sometimes two crops can be harvested annually from the same field. Among the major food crops are cereals (wheat, barley, tef, sorghum, corn, millet, etc.), fibre crops (cotton), root crops (potato, sweet potato, yam, inset, anchote, etc.), pulses (peas, beans, chick-peas, lentils, etc.), oil crops (nugi, flax, etc.), fruit trees (orange, mango, avocado, banana, lemon, pineapple, peach, etc.), spices (onion, garlic, coriander, ginger, etc. - coriander and ginger also grow wild) and a variety of vegetables like okra which is indigenous to Oromia.

Many varieties of these important crops occur naturally in Oromia. These diverse crop plants are very valuable natural resources. Oromo farmers have contributed to world agriculture by cultivating and developing some of the world's crop plants and in this way have discovered new domesticated varieties. The main cash crops are coffee and chat (a stimulant shrub). Coffee, a major cash earner for many countries, has its origin in the forests of Oromia and neighbouring areas. Specifically, Kafa and Limmu are considered centres of origin for coffee. It is from here that coffee spread to other parts of the globe. Coffee was one of the export items of the Gibe states. Wallagga and Ilubbabor regions of Oromia exported coffee to the Sudan through the inland port of Gambelia on the Baro river and border towns of Kurmuk, Gissan, etc. Hararge, because of its favourable location for communication with the outside markets through the Red Sea, has been producing one of the finest coffees for export. Coffee has remained the chief export item, representing more than 60 per cent of the foreign earnings of successive

Ethiopian colonial regimes.

The country is also rich in wild animals and plants. Many different species are found in the waters and forests of Oromia: different kinds of fish, hippopotami, and crocodiles. Land animals include lion, leopard, rhinoceros, buffalo, giraffe, wild ass, zebra, columbus monkey and elephant. There are a number of wild animals that are found solely in Oromia, such as nyaaia, bush-buck (special type), fox (from Baale), etc.

Various types of birds, many of them unique, are found around lakes and elsewhere. These creatures are a source of attraction for tourists and natural scientists alike.

The forests of Oromia are a source of excellent timber. Although the major portion of the forests has been destroyed since its occupation, some still remain in the south and west. However, this is threatened by mismanagement, particularly through the fast the expanding state farms and resettlement programmes. At the time of colonisation a large part of Oromia was covered with forest. This has been reduced to the present 5-7 per cent. In addition to timber trees, medicinal plants and trees producing different kinds of gums, grow in abundance. Myrrh, frankincense and gum Arabic are gathered from the wild trees. Forests, besides being a source of timber, medicine and gum, are useful in the conservation of water and soil, and as shelter for wildlife. They also have an important aesthetic value.

Oromia has important mineral deposits. The gold mines at Adola and Laga Dambi in the Sidamo and around Nejjo, Asosa and Birbir river valley in Wallagga regions which were the major sources of revenue for Meniiek and Haile Selassie are being exploited using modern machinery. Other important minerals found in Oromia are platinum, sulphur, iron-ore, silver and salt.

As early as 1900 Meniiek granted concessions to a Swiss company to mine gold, silver and other minerals in Nejjo, Wallagga region. Later the Germans took over. English, Russian and Italian companies extracted gold and platinum at Yubdo and neighbouring areas in the same region. After some 60 years, the Soviet Union is continuing this business today in the same areas. It is known that large deposits of natural gas and oil exist in Baafe and Hararge regions. The Ethiopian government announced as 1986 the discovery of a new deposit of natural gas in Baale.

The hundreds of hot springs scattered over Oromia are also of economic importance. Thousands of people, including foreigners, visit these springs for their medicinal and recreational value. They are a great potential source of thermal energy. Rivers, streams and springs are plentiful. The rivers have many falls that could be used to generate electric power with little effort. The extent of this electric power could easily satisfy the power needs of Oromia and several neighbouring countries.

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