



The Oromo of Ethiopia: A History, 1570-1860

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This study deals mainly with the history of the Oromo of the area - the Gibe region. It covers a period of three centuries. The story begins at a time when the medieval Christian kingdom of Abyssinia was rapidly disintegrating and ends shortly before the creation of the modern Ethiopian empire. During this long period, the Oromo led an independent existence as masters of their destiny and makers of their own history. The Oromo of the Gibe region lived as neighbors with, but beyond military control and political influence of, the medieval Christian kingdom of Abyssinia. The latter came to constitute only a small part of what today is Ethiopia. The Oromo developed their own cultural, religious, and political institutions which shaped their history and expressed their world view.

The independent existence of the Oromo was brought to an end abruptly and rudely by the creation of the modern Ethiopian empire during and after the 1880s. The conquest and annexation of their territory not only deprived the Oromo of their sovereignty but also of their history, because the creation of the empire consolidated myths and untruths long held and circulated in the Christian kingdom about the Oromo, who were generally portrayed as people without a history. To set the record straight this introduction considers two themes that are unrelated but each necessary to the understanding of the history of the Oromo. First, the introductory chapter briefly depicts how the Oromo problem is either presented falsely or even ignored in the Ethiopian historiography. The second and larger part of the chapter deals with the Oromo social organization on the eve of their sixteenth-century migration.

During the sixteenth and subsequent centuries much was written on the military conflict between the Oromo were generally described simply as "the enemies of the Amhara" and what was written about them by the Christian chroniclers mainly expressed the intense prejudice which was deeply rooted in Abyssinian society. Even the enlightened historian and great intellectual of his time, Abba Bahrey, who wrote *History of the Galla* in 1593 opens his invaluable work with these words: "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." Since the time of Abba Bahrey the purported brutality of Oromo manners has been magnified and embroidered with grotesque distortions of history, which depicts the Oromo as "barbarian hordes who brought darkness and ignorance in their train." In such writings the Oromo were never credited as creators of an original culture, or as having religious and democratic political institutions which flowered in patterns of their own making and nourished their spiritual and material well-being. On the contrary, unsubstantiated myths and untruths were created and the Oromo were arbitrarily degraded to a lower stage of material culture, as people who needed the "civilizing mission" of their Abyssinian neighbors. Although the Abyssinian society has had a fascinating history, to maintain that its elite members had an historic mission "to civilize the barbarians" is nonsense historically. The Abyssinian elite, especially the Shawan Amhara rulers, who laid the foundation of and created the modern Ethiopian empire, had everything to gain in attributing a "civilizing mission" to themselves - it has been the common cry of colonizers. In fact, the new Ethiopian ruling class, typified by Emperor Menelik, the creator of the modern Ethiopian empire, found it necessary and profitable to denigrate the Oromo people, their culture, and their history in all ways great and small. This ruling class especially perceived the danger of the larger Oromo population to its empire. Consequently, the ruling class systematically depicted the Oromo as people without history, and belittled their way of life, and their religious and political institutions. It is not an exaggeration to say that no people have had their history so distorted or ignored and their achievements and human qualities undervalued as the Oromo have in the Ethiopian historiography. Bogumil Jewsiewicki's observation in his Introduction to the

African Historiographies seems apposite.

Because of its alliance with the state structures, separate from the true needs and concerns of the people, the historiography of the savants is, in Africa as elsewhere, the dominant form by which the past is described. But such an alliance also requires the creation of myths which pretend to be exclusive truths and portray themselves as capable of overcoming all other means of understanding the past.

Until very recently, Oromo history has been either neglected, as M. Abir admits, or it has been totally ignored, or it has been distorted by prejudice. The Ethiopian ruling class even succeeded in elevating its anti-Oromo prejudice to the plane of state ideology, which was uncritically repeated in the name of scholarship.

The Galla had nothing to contribute to the civilization of Ethiopia, they possessed no material or intellectual culture, and their social organization was at a far lower stage of development than of the population among whom they settled.

These words written in 1960, by a well-known scholar of Semitic languages, are a good illustration of such long-held common historical prejudice. A number of other scholars have expressed similar historical prejudice less eloquently.

These biases derive from several sources. The very presence of a vast and readily available corpus of chronicles and texts in the Semitic languages of the northern kingdoms and chiefdoms has fitted in with the biases of European historians and classical linguists towards written sources; however dubious their contents, texts have been rated as more scholarly than oral sources, "proper" history only existing in writing and records. The northern Abyssinian texts, moreover, were written in Semitic languages of the same family as those used by the founders of the great Middle Eastern religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and enshrined in the holy books of those religions. That, in itself, gave them prestige in the eyes of Orientalists. Further, Oromo, by not being a "written language" was not available to European scholars in libraries; not being available meant that it did not exist (Tutschek 1844 is an honorable exception). Amharinya, Tigrinya, and Geez pointed towards the Middle East and Abyssinians stressed myths such as the Solomonic legend (which was taught in schools as historical fact) and they played down their Africanness. Christian and Negro were often cited as opposites, as good and evil. Oromo, or Galla as it was called, derived from Black Africa. Further, the study of the north flourished when European colonial empires were flourishing: Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, and Portugal also saw themselves as having "civilising missions." In a way Menelik and his nobles became honorary, if second-class, bearers of the "white man's burden." Similarly, Christianity, even of the Ethiopian variety, just had to be an indicator of a higher level of civilization than a traditional African religion which did not have a "book": Just as in a society stratified by class, the predatory state was at "simple states" of the Oromo.

Addis Ababa, the capital of the empire, was at the end of the railway line and was the stopping-point for most diplomats and scholars; beyond that was wild bush country populated by wild people and wild game. Certainly foreign travelers, diplomats, and the rare traveling scholar had to set out from the seat of the empire if they wished to penetrate its peripheries. So their own experiences, directed as they were from the center, took on the perceptions of the center, and those perceptions were arrogantly colonialist and Amhara-centered. Such only to destroy the Oromo people's pride in their achievements, but also needed to keep them chained, with no faith in themselves, their history, and national identity.

I believe that a true knowledge of the history of the various Ethiopian peoples will create confidence and trust among the peoples of the country. Therefore, it is with this goal in mind that I have endeavored to write an objective history of the Oromo of the Gibe region, but from an Oromo point of view, though I do not neglect the history of the other people with whom the Oromo interacted. Above all, it is a

history whose unexpressed message stresses the importance of and the need for building bridges of understanding and tolerance between the various peoples of Ethiopia.

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