

Islam as an Ideology of Resistance among the Oromo of Ethiopia

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Abstract

Before I embark on the main subject, three caveats are in order. First, this article deals with two themes that are indirectly related, but necessary, to understanding why the Oromo, who have had contact with Islam since at least the fourteenth century, embraced it mainly during the nineteenth century. Notwithstanding their recent conversion, today the Oromo are the single largest Muslim community in Ethiopia. The article will explore their rapid conversion during the second half of the nineteenth century in conjunction with Emperor Menilek II's conquest and occupation of their land and its impact upon every aspect of their existence. Second, in this paper I have heavily drawn on a paper I presented at a conference held at the University of Edinburgh in 1999¹ and another one published in 1992.² Third, the paper is divided into seven unequal parts, preceded by a short introduction.

Introduction

Islam as a resistance ideology among the Oromo is a fascinating thesis as well as a controversial subject – fascinating because the thesis is a radical departure from established historical wisdom, which asserts that (1) the Oromo did not have a long period of contact with Islam and (2) that Islam did not provide an institutional expression and ideological framework for unity that transcend ethnic and cultural barriers for Ethiopian Muslims. It is controversial because the paper's main argument is that the Oromo had a long period of contact with Islam, which provided and institutional expression and ideolog-

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ical framework for unity, at least for the Oromo in Wallo. Even more important, I assert that Islam enabled most of the Oromo to survive the shock of violent defeat; the destruction of their political, cultural, and religious institutions; the loss of land; political subjugation; and economic exploitation. The evidence in support of this argument is not based on new data, but rather is a new interpretation of existing data, which is revealing both in what has been overlooked or unconsciously ignored in the past.

Although the Oromo constitute Ethiopia's single largest Muslim community, until recently the common theme running through the extremely limited literature on Islam among them is based on the assumption and perception that they came into contact with Islam as a religion and culture only during and after the sixteenth century. Historical evidence clearly indicates, however, that contact had been made with both the Muslim and Christian communities in the central region of Shawa and southern Ethiopia during the fourteenth century, if not earlier.³ In other words, some elements of Oromo society lived among Christian and Muslim populations in several Muslim states, including Ifat, Fatagar, Waji, Hadiyya, Dawaro, and Bali. Such a discussion is, however, beyond the scope of this short paper. Instead, let me briefly discuss their early history in order to make the point that the Oromo are among Ethiopia's original inhabitants.

The Oromo, who constitute probably 40 percent of the national population, are the single largest national group in Ethiopia. Probably a little more than 60 percent of them are Muslim, more than 30 percent are Christian, and less than 3 percent still follow the traditional religion, which is rapidly losing ground to both Islam and Christianity. They belong to the Cushitic language-speaking family of peoples, who are known to have lived in the Ethiopian region for thousands of years. We do not know when the Oromo evolved their separate national identity and language, but we do know that they are one of the country's most indigenous peoples, having lived in its southern highlands for most of their history.⁴ In fact, the Muslim state of Bali⁵ (the northern part of the administrative region of Bale⁶) is believed to be the original home of the agro-pastoralist Oromo communities.⁷

Interestingly, the oral traditions of all Oromo, whether they live in Kenya or Ethiopia, consistently claim that their pastoral ancestors came from the highlands of southern Ethiopia, especially around Madda Waallaabu, where the Oromo *gada* system (viz., their religious and cultural institutions) developed. Oromo oral tradition recognizes the area around Madda Waallaabu as the most sacred ground, the birthplace of the nation, and the center of the traditional religion: "It is the land where cattle yielded so much milk and meat that men neither ploughed nor sowed."⁸ It was in this ideal land of peace,

plenty, and fertility that the Abbaa Muudaa, the traditional religion's spiritual leader, lived. Pilgrims came from far and near to receive his blessings and anointment, after which they were called *jila* and considered "saints" – the link between the spiritual father and the nation.⁹ In short, the extant literature reveals the Oromos' emotional attachment to the hills and mountains, rivers and valleys of Madda Waallaabu (the land of Abbaa Muudaa), and the feeling is preserved in their oral traditions and religious songs.

Christian-Muslim Conflicts and the Oromo Migration

From the first quarter of the fourteenth to the first quarter of the sixteenth century, the region's Christians and Muslims engaged in intermittent struggles that set in motion a process that radically altered southern Ethiopia's pattern of ethnic configuration. During this period, the Christian Amhara flew a conquering flag in southern Ethiopia.¹⁰ However, in the long term the Christian victories failed to achieve the desired end – the Christianization of the bulk of the conquered population. In other words, the Amhara leaders created the medieval Christian kingdom of Abyssinia but failed to lay a proper foundation for creating a nation. In no concrete manner was there a creative marriage of cultures, a strong passage of ideas, and an equal sharing of wealth. For the Christians, victory meant enrichment and political domination; for the Muslims, defeat meant destruction, plunder of property, humiliation, and subjugation.

Such realities produced among the latter a deep-rooted eagerness for revenge that kept their spirit of resistance alive for two centuries. The ensuing struggle's ideological crux can be summed up as follows: Each wanted to control the fertile region of southern Ethiopia in the name of their God and for their followers. Each condemned the other as "infidels" and invoked the help of their God for their "just cause." Both sides believed that God was on their side, and both attributed their victory to His kindness and their defeat to their sin and His lesson to repent.¹¹ This bitter conflict was looked upon from the point of view of religions domination, in which it found its purest expression as the struggle between Islam and Christianity.

As the source of injustice and oppression, it was the Muslims' religious duty to fight the Christians. The mantle of leadership fell upon Imam Ahmed (1527-43), who was better known by the Amharic appellation "Ahmad Gran" (the left-handed) for his practice of using the sword with that hand. As the Muslims' spiritual, political, and military leader, he vowed to replace the Christian cross with the Muslim crescent in the Horn of Africa. For this

ambitious task, he developed a ruthlessly efficient striking force that almost succeeded in uprooting Christianity from the region. Between 1529-43, at the cost of incredible human losses on both sides, Imam Ahmad created an empire that included most of present-day Ethiopia, Eritrea, and northern Somalia. This was the first forced unification of the Horn of Africa¹²; the second was the fascist Italian East African Empire of 1936-41.

A major consequence of this jihad was that both sides devastated each other. Along with the appalling massacres and destruction on both sides went the fall and destruction of their defense systems. During the jihad, Christian military colonists in the southern region were broken up and most of the men were killed, sold into slavery, or fled the region. After the collapse of his jihadic gamble, the Muslim soldiers either met the same fate or fled to Harar. The collapse of both defense systems cleared the way for a massive pastoral migration by the Oromo.¹³

At this juncture, let me state clearly that the historical wisdom that the Oromo arrived in the medieval Christian kingdom only during the sixteenth century is untenable on three grounds. First, it is based on an inaccurate historical premise that seeks to establish their homeland outside of Ethiopia's present boundaries, thus making the Oromo newcomers to the country of which they are, in reality, one of the most original inhabitants. Second, it is based on the assertion that all Oromo were nomads before and during the sixteenth century. However, we now know that some of them were sedentary farmers while the majority was made up of pastoralists. Third, it is based on the assertion that all Oromo lived in one place before this migration. In reality, pastoral groups lived in what are today the administrative regions of Bale, Sidamo, and Gamu Gofa. Furthermore, some sedentary communities lived in Muslim states located in southern Ethiopia.¹⁴

On the whole, the sedentary agricultural Oromo groups living in the Christian and Muslim areas lost their identity during the jihad. Hence, according to the historians' general view, none of them participated in the sixteenth-century jihad. And yet the monumental book of Arab Faqih, a historian of the jihad, makes it clear that some sections of the Oromo who lived in the hotly contested areas suffered from this war.¹⁵ Faqih makes several references to Oromo groups, from which eight propositions may be deduced: (1) some Oromo groups were established in Dawaro (northern Bale and western Hararghie) and in Ifat and Waj,¹⁶ both located in what is today the Shawa region; (2) they lived under a Christian administration and (3) fought on both sides during the jihad, depending at first on their location and subsequently on the exigencies of the situation. In this, they resembled the area's other populations; (4) these sedentary groups were separate from the sixteenth-century

pastoral Oromo who lived in the Valley of the River Gannale and in Sidamo; (5) these pastoral groups lived beyond the boundaries and the control of the medieval Christian kingdom (6) and were not affected by the ensuing devastation because they lived on the periphery of the zone of conflict; (7) these pastoral groups launched the massive migration that changed Oromo history and radically altered the political landscape of the Ethiopian region; and (8) before the Christian kingdom fully recuperated and reestablished its strong military garrisons in the southern provinces, the migrating pastoralists dislodged what was left after the jihad and thwarted new attempts at settlement. Regions that had been sparsely populated before the jihad were left empty by the shifting population during the jihad. This explains why the Oromo easily overran huge areas in a relatively short time.¹⁷

Islam as an Ideology of Resistance for the Oromo of Wallo, ca. 1700-1900

This section draws heavily on my 1992 article on the same topic.¹⁸ During the last quarter of the sixteenth century, the pastoral Oromo groups migrated to and settled in the region of Wallo. Among these various groups, the two most dominant were the Yajju and the Wallo. The former settled in the northern part of Amhara province and formed their own Muslim dynasty, which dominated Abyssinia's political landscape from 1756-1853; the latter group, however, gave its name to the region and formed a remarkable dynasty that used Islam as an ideology of resistance.

In Wallo, the Oromo settled among a large sedentary Christian and Muslim population whose agricultural practices had a considerable influence upon them. Here, for the first time, the Oromo pastoralists embarked upon a mixed economy, embraced Islam in large numbers, and formed their own states based on Islamic ideology. They abandoned their *gada* system and its ideological foundation and traditional religion in favor of Islam for two reasons: First, the Oromo adhered to their traditional religion as long as their *gada* system and religious institutions remained intact and were militarily powerful enough to maintain their independence from their Christian neighbors. By the second half of the seventeenth century, however, their mode of production was transformed from pastoralism to sedentary agriculture combined with cattle-keeping. Coupled with the growth of trade, the material basis for a class society was created.

In other words, when social stratification based on wealth, privilege, and differences in status corresponding to the distribution of power and authority broke up the *gada* system, Islam not only provided an ideology for the

new nobility (whose wealth was based on land, cattle, money, and slaves), but also served as a focus of tribal loyalty. Christianity probably would have served the same purpose had it not been the religion of the Abyssinians (i.e., the Amhara and Tigrayan people), who were putting military pressure on the Oromo in Wallo. This means that the Oromo in Wallo did not reject Christianity as a religion, but rather the Abyssinian domination that preceded and followed its spread.

This brings me to the second reason why Wallo's Oromo embraced Islam: they seemed to have perceived Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity as an ideological arm of Abyssinian domination and pillar of Abyssinian unity and strength. They wanted to counter this unity and strength by making Islam a major unifying factor among themselves, a part of their cultural life, and a mark of their independence.

Trimingham's observation that the Oromo in Wallo "reinforced their independence by the adoption of Islam" is accurate. He goes on to argue that they accepted Islam "as bulwark against being swamped by Abyssinian nationalism."¹⁹ Indeed, Islam served as a powerful symbol of identity, a reliable fortress against Abyssinian domination, and helped them weather the Abyssinian military offensive. In turn, the Oromo played a crucial role in spreading and consolidating Islam in the Abyssinian heartland itself. According to Hussein Ahmed, who has done extensive work on Islam in Wallo,²⁰

Their early Islamization, and their active role in the subsequent consolidation and expansion of Islam not only within their own cultural environment, but also in other areas under their domination such as Bagemder served to extend the reach of Islam. They helped to change the status of Islam from that of a religion of disparate communities to that of a dynastic ideology relevant to the entire region.²¹

In short, the pressure from the neighboring Christian kingdom turned Islam into a dynastic ideology that was adopted in all of Wallo's six Oromo states. In the process, Islam solidly established itself among the Oromo in Wallo and beyond and has remained an important part of their cultural life.

Muslim Oromo scholars in Wallo used both the Arabic and Ethiopic alphabets to produce significant religious literature,²² thus creating a literary tradition that became the basis for Muslim education there. Wallo gradually became northern Ethiopia's main center of learning not only for the Oromo, but also for its Amharic and Tigrinya-speaking populations. In this it paralleled the role of Harar, which served as the center of Islamic diffusion to southern and southwestern Ethiopia.²³ Muslim scholars not only indigenized

Islam in Wallo, but also started an original form of Islamic poetry known as *ajam* (oral or written non-Arab religious literature in local languages), which “forms an important body [of] literature.”²⁴ Short enough for people to learn by heart and chant during the *manzuma* (a Muslim religious prayer either in Arabic or local languages) prayers, it allowed Muslim scholars to inject the Oromo into the world of Islam and make its early history intelligible to them.

Of the region’s six Oromo dynasties (viz., the Arreloch, Warra Himano, Yajju, Qallu, House of the Gattiroch, and the Borana),²⁵ it was the Warra Himano dynasty that used Islam as a resistance ideology with vigor, creative dynamism, and ingenuity in order to resist Christian territorial expansion and cultural encroachment. This dynasty (ca. 1700-1916) was the second Muslim Oromo dynasty to be established in Wallo, the first to declare jihad in the name and interest of Islam, the first to adopt the prestigious title of “imam,” and the longest surviving one. It reached the zenith of its power under Muhammad Ali (1771-85), a far-sighted leader, resourceful politician, and fervent Muslim who not only made the Shari’ah the basis of the prevailing legal system, but who also “used Islam as a basis for consolidating his power by seeking and obtaining the support and the sanction of the Muslim scholars and jurists.”²⁶ His successor, his son Batto (1785-90), was defeated by the Christian emperor Takla Gigorgis and forced to embrace Christianity. This was a major setback for Islam and the dynasty that championed it.

And yet this setback was short-lived, for Batto’s successor Amade (1790-1803) avenged his predecessor’s forced conversion by occupying the imperial city of Gondar in 1798, putting his own puppet on the Christian throne, and having “the call to the Muslim prayer announced from the tower of one of the castles in Gondar, as a symbolic gesture of his triumphal entry into the city, and perhaps to emphasize his religious zeal.”²⁷ Under Imam Amade II (1815-38), Wallo became the most active center of Muslim teaching in East Africa. Amade II is even reported to have asked Muhammed Ali (1805-48) of Egypt to help him conquer and convert northern Ethiopia and its peoples.²⁸ The Egyptian leader’s response to this ambitious task is not known. What is known for certain is that Amade II “was considered by many the most important Muslim ruler if not the leader of all the Muslims of Ethiopia.”²⁹ By then, Wallo “had become a veritable Islamic state within the heartland of Ethiopia.”³⁰ The rise of Muslim Oromo power in Wallo was probably instrumental in the revival of Christian nationalism in historic Abyssinia.

Tewodros (1855-68) expressed and represented this revival. Calling himself “the slave of Christ,”³¹ he considered it his religious duty to destroy the

Oromo leaders and Islam in Wallo. Considering that “Christianity and Abyssinia were synonymous,”³² as were Wallo and Islam, he set three interrelated goals for himself: to break these leaders’ power, make a frontal assault on Islam, and convert or expel the Muslims. He fleetingly united historical Abyssinia on clearly stated anti-Oromo and anti-Islamic policies that were

supported by the contemporary Protestant missionaries for three reasons: Firstly, because they hoped that the subjugation of Wallo could inaugurate a period of tranquility; secondly, because they saw the struggle in terms of confrontation between Christianity and Islam; and thirdly, because they believed that Wallo was the spearhead of the Muslim drive to take over Ethiopia.³³

Shortly after his coronation in 1855, Tewodros marched into Wallo and fought against three rival Oromo leaders, killing one, capturing the second, and defeating the third. Over a period of more than ten years he invaded Wallo several times, devastating, burning, looting, and massacring its people. Although violent terrorism characterized his reign, he could not crush the Muslims’ resistance because their leaders “perceived Tewodros’ objectives and activities as being directed not only to destroying them as a ruling class, but also to undermining the social, economic, and cultural foundation of the Muslim communities themselves.”³⁴

United by danger and animated by Islam, they bravely resisted Tewodros before he was overwhelmed by crises and destroyed. Hence:

As far as his stated aim of forcing Muslim Oromo into either accept[ing] Christianity or leaving his kingdom, he utterly failed. He, not they, gave in. It is not an exaggeration to say that Tewodros committed suicide in 1868, not only because he hated to fall into British hands as a captive king, but also because he was already virtually an Oromo prisoner in the mountain fortress of Magdala. Escape was well nigh impossible.³⁵

His policy of physically destroying Muslim leaders became the working model for his successor, Emperor Yohannes (1879-89), based as it was upon eliminating or converting the Oromo leaders, destroying mosques, and completely subjugating the Muslims to Christian political, economic, cultural, and social domination. The two rival Christian princes, Emperor Yohannes of Tigre and King Menilek of Shawa (1865-89), met at Boru Meda in Wallo in May 1878 and issued a most ominous edict: all Muslims had to convert to Christianity within two years.

After this council, the two rival princes of the Warro Himano dynasty, Imam Muhammed Ali and Imam Abba Wataw, were converted to Christian-

ity. The former took the baptismal name Mekael and his godfather was Yohannes; the latter became Hayla Maryam and his godfather was Menilek.³⁶ The northern part of Wallo came under the control of Yohannes, while the southern part came under the control of Menilek. Despite these events, however, Muslim resistance continued. In fact, the princes' conversion actually marked a turning point in the long history of Wallo's resistance to the imperial policy of subjugation led by the region's hereditary chiefs, for the opposition was subsequently led mainly by militant Muslim clerics.³⁷

Emperor Yohannes, who was determined to obtain unity in northern Ethiopia, used a religious guise³⁸ to officially ban Islam in 1879. Lasting for a decade, this ban was characterized by a tremendous loss of life and the wanton destruction of property. All over Wallo, Muslim schools were closed and mosques were turned into churches. Such outrages may have galvanized the Muslim clerics into spontaneous resistance, and many died with weapons in their hands rather than witness the destruction of their heritage.

Of the many Muslim religious leaders who led the armed opposition against both Yohannes and Menilek, the most celebrated was Shaykh Talhah, who had been born around 1850 to a family noted for its Islamic education. He received his religious training in Dawwey and Qallu, Wallo's two most famous centers of learning, and became a distinguished teacher, capable organizer, highly gifted speaker, and resourceful leader. He declared jihad in 1884 against both rulers and initially achieved spectacular success by inflicting devastating losses on Yohannes's forces.³⁹ Outnumbered and outgunned, however, he was forced to flee to the Sudan, where he established political and military alliances with the leaders of the Mahdist state. Later, he returned to Wallo and registered a proud heritage of resistance.⁴⁰

Due to the Christians' military superiority, Shaykh Talhah's jihad failed. Yet his resistance did achieve some success in four areas: (1) Muslim resistance minimized the likelihood of a thorough conversion to Christianity; (2) influenced the policy of Yohannes's successor, Emperor Menilek (1889-1913), who restored the freedom of worship in 1889⁴¹; (3) made a remarkable contribution to spreading Islam among the Oromo in southern Ethiopia (see below); and (4) appears to have inspired a jihadic movement in the Gibe region.

Islam among the Oromo in the Gibe Region

The Oromo in the Gibe region had a long contact with Islam and Muslim communities. They met with Muslim traders and preachers in the markets, along caravan routes, and, most importantly, when they were selling and

buying from Muslim traders, most of whom were Muslim Oromo from Shawa and Wallo. This last factor minimized the problem of communication. What is more, the Islam that these traders brought was already adapted to the Oromo cultural values and view of the universe. Another element that facilitated the spread of Islam there was the decline of the *gada* leaders' power and the rise of war leaders.⁴² (All of the five Gibe states were created by war leaders.⁴³) It only remained for these leaders to discover that it was both simpler and more politically sound to enlist the support of the Muslim traders (*jabarti*) in their capitals, together with their religion, its literacy and unifying ideology, its followers' skills, knowledge, and wide connections. All Gibe kings protected and encouraged the Muslim traders to settle in their capital cities, where they intermarried with the Oromo nobility and assumed the responsibility of educating their children, thereby cultivating the minds of the region's future Oromo leaders.

Islam spread in two stages. During the first one, which lasted until the 1840s, Islam was mainly the religion of the kings and the nobility. It seems that the nobility was drawn to Islam not so much because of its members' dissatisfaction with the traditional religion or because Islam's future was at stake, but because of the interests that it represented. A marriage of convenience between the nobility and the traders and preachers sealed Islam's success. The kings not only supported its spread, but also continually enlarged and regenerated the ranks of Muslim preachers and teachers by welcoming Islamic scholars and giving them land and other material support. They encouraged Muslim teachers to establish schools, teach the children, and lead the people in prayer. In the end Islam succeeded mainly because it enjoyed the state's full support, whereas the traditional religion lacked a literate class, organized preachers, and ideological strength. It would be mistaken, however, to assume that the traditional religion disappeared once Islam consolidated itself, for in reality no more of the traditional religion was given up than was necessary, and Islam was colored by its background.⁴⁴

The second stage occurred during the 1860s and 1870s, which were characterized by a thorough-going Islamization and militancy, the latter being a response to the threat from the neighboring Christians. Muslim resistance in Wallo made a remarkable contribution to the development of Muslim institutions of higher learning in Gibe. How did it do this? The Wallo Oromo's enforced conversion to Christianity led to the exodus of a large number of people, including the *ulama* and jurists, many of whom settled in the Kingdom of Jimma in the Gibe region. According to Abba Jobir, the last king of Jimma: "Wallo was the land of Muslim saints, who were the mountain of knowledge."⁴⁵ Certainly, Wallo's refugee scholars increased the number of

teachers in Jimma, for shortly after their arrival Jimma could boast of having sixty *madrās* (schools of higher education).⁴⁶ If this claim is true, it is an amazing achievement for Jimma and a unique contribution by these refugee scholars to the flowering of Muslim education there. This explains why Jimma became the second most famous center of Islamic learning in the Horn of Africa. These scholars appear to have brought the spirit of resistance to Gibe, thus giving impetus to a jihadic movement that was slowly simmering in the region. Menilek's conquest and subsequent colonization in the early 1880s only crystallized the region's jihadic movement.

Of the heads of the five Oromo states, only King Abba Jobir of Gumma died while resisting the invaders. His kingdom's resistance, which lasted for some years, was inspired, organized, and led by Firrisa, the heir apparent. In addition to his desire to fight, Firrisa wanted to revenge himself on Ras Tasama, Gumma's first Amhara governor, who had executed his father Abba Foggi, the last king of Gumma, and converted and married his daughter Genne Alema.⁴⁷ Inflamed by the jihadic idea, he went to Makkah and Madinah and then to Sudan, where he organized an army and proclaimed himself king of Gumma, independent of the Amhara. Although he had plenty of support, his resistance was crushed after three years (1899-1902) of unequal struggle in which Ras Tasama had both numerical and military superiority. Firrisa was captured and condemned to death. Contemporary oral literature suggests that his martyrdom has been enshrined in the Oromo's collective memory.

Firrisa demanded to be executed holding the Koran in his hands, and before the hanging he cried out that he would be buried outside Ethiopia. ... The tragic death of the last prince of Gumma made a great and painful impression on the [Oromo]. Even today, all the [Muslims] of these lands consider Firrisa a saint [Wali].⁴⁸

Menilek's Conquest and the Arsi Oromo

In 1879, Menilek embarked on "his most sustained and the most bloody Arsi campaign."⁴⁹ These campaigns not only provided him with a huge booty of cattle, slaves, and other goods, but also broke the backbone of Arsi Oromo resistance, thereby paving the way for Hararge's conquest: "Menilek personally participated in many of the battles in Arsi. In one of them in December 1883, he barely managed to escape with his life."⁵⁰ These campaigns were devastating to the region's people, and the resulting plunder paid for his imported European weapons.

Despite the huge toll they suffered, the Arsi Oromo created a truly proud heritage of resistance against Menilek, whom they prevented from occupying their land for seven years. Interestingly, Menilek began this campaign in 1879, when the Arsi Oromo had no modern firepower and only defeated them in 1886, by which time he had amassed fifty thousand guns and many artillery pieces. In the final decisive battle, it is estimated that Menilek conquered the Arsi Oromo only after killing thousands of their warriors. His soldiers slaughtered, systematically mutilated, and sold the survivors into slavery.⁵¹ The same fate awaited the Oromo of Hararghie.

According to Abbas Haji, the Arsi Oromo were conquered mainly because of two interrelated factors: they lacked modern firepower and Menilek's soldiers used their superiority in modern European weapons of destruction to mutilate and castrate those who fell under their control. Both policies were part of Menilek's strategy to break their stubborn resistance.⁵² According to Mekuria Bulcha, massive mutilation was used to psychologically destroy the people's resistance.⁵³ The worst mutilation took place in September 1886 at Azule and Anole. At Azule, Ras Darge (Menilek's uncle) massacred 12,000 Arsi Oromo, while at Anole

thousands of mutilated hands and breasts were tied around the necks of victims who were sent back to their villages. Other mutilated hands were hung on a tree under which the Shoan [Shawan] soldiers sang and danced in celebration of this exploit.⁵⁴

This horrible mutilation remains in the Arsi Oromo's collective memories even today as the *bara harka fi harma muraa Anole* (the year of hand and breast cutting [or mutilation] at Anole). Even the way in which the conquests were conducted has had long-lasting effects. An English traveler who passed through this land four years later had this to say:

Now was the time for the terrible [Oromo] to appear. Where was the country teeming with lusty war-like people? Certainly not here! What we found as we progressed was only a few poor villages of a hundred huts each and the native presenting the most abject appearance imaginable. Only four years ago they must have been a fine race of men. They loved to tell us of their former glory; their eyes would light up, and they would forget for the instant their present condition. Now the Abyssinians are the masters and these poor people are only a remnant of a great tribe. ... The Arussa [Arsi Oromo], here as elsewhere, were regarded as slaves and were even sold in the market as such.⁵⁵

Up to the 1880s only a few Oromo, who lived around the shrine of Shaykh Hussein, had converted to Islam. Most Arsi Oromo were reluctant to accept Islam before Menilek's conquest. During the conquest, thousands of men and women were mutilated, harvests and homes were consigned to the flames, cattle were looted, and property was destroyed. During this dark hour, they called upon the shaykh's spiritual protection. According to Haji, who has done extensive work on the Arsi Oromo, this period of conquest was the single most important factor in causing them to enter Islam *en masse*.

Beyond the ensuing emotional and psychological traumas, perhaps the most important factors encouraging the Islamization of the Arsi Oromo was the destruction of Oromo sociopolitical institutions. This forced them to find a new cultural identity, one different from that of their rulers, an identity that would help them maintain their social cohesion. Thus Islam became a rival to Orthodox Christianity, gave the Arsi Oromo a choice, and provided them with a much-needed rallying point.⁵⁶ According to Haji, this massive conversion took place between 1900 and 1935, when about 75 percent of them became Muslim.⁵⁷

Islam among the Oromo in Hararghie

In Hararghie, eastern Ethiopia, the Oromo lived as neighbors with the Muslim city of Harar up until the 1850s. In 1856, Richard Burton described Harar, one of sub-Saharan Africa's oldest urban centers, as the "Timbuktu of East Africa," famous for its educational, cultural, religious, political, economic, and social institutions as well as a unique Semitic language and its dynamic Harari (or Adare) people. The recent works of Sidney Waldron, Ewald Wagner, and Camilla Gibb have added a great deal to our knowledge of its history and brilliant urban civilization. All of this, however, is beyond the scope of paper.⁵⁸ Suffice it to say that Harar flourished for centuries under its own independent Harari dynasty.

Amir Muhammad (1856-75) broke with that tradition and established Oromo political supremacy within the city itself. An Oromo who was born, brought up, and educated in Harar, where he distinguished himself as a capable military leader, in 1856 he rebelled against the reigning amir and seized power with Oromo support.⁵⁹ He then initiated a policy of integrating the Hararis, the Oromo, and the Somalis through Islam, trade, and intermarriage. For this purpose, he embarked on a peaceful but sustained Islamization program among the Oromo. Several mosques and schools were built in Oromo country, and Muslim teachers, preachers, and traders intensified their trading and proselytization activities among them. Egypt's invasion of Harar

in October 1875 disrupted these peaceful proselytization activities. Although Amir Muhammad accepted the Egyptian protectorate, Colonel Rauf Pasha, commander of the Egyptian force, executed him and established direct Egyptian colonial administration.

News of the execution stirred up the Oromo, who soon surrounded the city on all sides. Rauf Pasha invited their leaders to come to the city for “peaceful negotiations” and “rich rewards.” Not suspecting any trap, several non-Muslim Oromo leaders came to the city only to find themselves disarmed and imprisoned. Rauf Pasha then demanded that they convert to Islam and submit to Egyptian administration. When they refused to do so, all of them were killed.⁶⁰ After this, the Oromo saw Islam as an ideological arm of Egyptian civilization and fiercely resisted accepting it. In reality, what they rejected was the Egyptian colonialism that had been imposed upon them in the name of Islam. The Oromo continued to resist Egyptian rule, and by 1884 the over 8,000-man Egyptian force was besieged within the city wall of Harar itself. Unable to maintain law and order and collect taxes from the Oromo, and due to their fear of Oromo attacks on the city, the expenses of maintaining a besieged force in Harar, and the successful Mahdist revolution in Sudan, the Egyptians withdrew in 1885.

Shortly after this event, Menilek invaded Harar and defeated the Muslim force on 7 January 1887. With a single victory, he gained a rich and vast region of Hararghie⁶¹ that brought him closer to the sea, from where he imported the weapons that made his famous 1896 Adwa victory possible. With this conquest, Menilek managed to create the modern Ethiopian empire, which boasted the largest armed force in Black Africa.⁶²

The heavy yoke of supporting Menilek’s large army fell on the conquered peasantry. His unpaid soldiery, known as *neftanya* (gun bearers), raided the conquered people for cattle and slaves on the slightest pretext:

Atrocities occurred as ... troops slayed adult men and women and dispatched their children into slavery. ... Herded into groups by their captors, enchained survivors marched with other prisoners toward Harar. The soldiers sold their surplus slaves in markets in and around the city.⁶³

After the conquest and occupation, Menilek distributed two-thirds of the conquered land among the armed settlers, the church, and the crown, “while he allowed one-third for the indigenous people on condition they supply forced labour for the settlers and various taxes, dues and tithes for his court and the church.”⁶⁴

In their own land, the Oromo and other conquered people became landless *gabar* (serfs) who had no legal protection against the excesses of their

haughty masters “because emperor Menilek, while protecting the conquered lands as the property of the crown, gave *gabars* to his unsalaried officers and soldiers as material property to be owned and used as personal property.”⁶⁵ Burdensome and exhausting obligations were put on the Oromo *gabar* who, according to one scholar,

had to surrender a portion of the produce of the land to the landlord as tribute. The amount varied between a quarter and a third, but it was usually more as the legal ceiling was that it should not be more than three quarters! Besides, he paid a tenth of his total produce for the tithe. He was also expected to provide his landlord with honey, meat and firewood, dried grass and sundry other items. Labor service was an added burden, he had to grind the landlord’s share of the grain, transport it to his residence, build his house, maintain his fences, care for his animals, and act as a porter, an escort or a messenger. There was an obligation to present gifts on religious holidays and other social occasions. The multiple exactions imposed on the Oromo *gabars* meant the loss of a considerable portion of the [*gabars*] production, onerous labor service and manifold other impositions.⁶⁶

Following their conquest, the Oromo institutions of self-government were destroyed, their leadership liquidated or coopted, their territory occupied, their social cohesion disrupted, their cultural institutions destroyed, their property plundered, their traditional religion interfered with, and their population decimated through a combination of factors including brutal warfare and the accompanying natural calamities.⁶⁷ Oromo culture and national identity were assaulted, and cultural and religious centers were replaced by those of Christian settlers. By 1900 Menilek had even banned the famous Oromo pilgrimage to the land of Abbaa Muudaa in southern Ethiopia.⁶⁸ Abbaa Muudaa was the spiritual leader who served as the focal point of their unity.⁶⁹ By banning the pilgrimage, Menilek was destroying the symbol of traditional Oromo religion. He even banned the Chafe (parliament) assembly⁷⁰:

Held ... under the life giving shade of the oda (“the holy sycamore tree”), which traditionally was believed to be the most “respected” and the most “sacred” of trees, the shade of which was the source of peace and the center of religion. The shade of the oda was not only the “office of the government,” the meeting ground for the elders ... but also the sacred place for the religious duties. Hence, all the sacrifices undertaken by the *gada* class were performed at this spot.⁷¹

In short, the Chafe assembly dealt with matters of highest importance in Oromo society – the peaceful settlement of disputes, making laws, declaring war and concluding peace. Once Menilek abolished election to the political

offices and the gathering of the Chafe assembly, the *gada* system lost its *raison d'être*. Thus stripped of its political significance, only a folk memory of it continued to exist after 1900 in Hararghie.

Deprived of their religious and political institutions and reduced to landless *gabars* in their own land, Hararghie's Oromo had no choice but to look for alternative religious and cultural institutions that would enable them to survive the ensuing shock of defeat, dehumanization, political subjugation, and economic exploitation. Such realities appear to have turned them to Islam *en masse*, the very religion they had resisted during Egypt's colonial rule. They embraced Islam as a form of rejecting the colonial order created by Emperor Menilek.

Furthermore, the Christian Amhara clergy do not appear to have helped the cause of the Ethiopian Orthodox church, for they wanted converted Oromo to observe the Orthodox Christians' "food prohibitions on milk, butter, and meat which are in force during fasting season. ... The clergy were ... surprised to learn that all the converts had abandoned their new-found Christian faith soon after the mass baptism."⁷² Converted Oromo chiefs were despised by their Amhara superiors, envied and spied upon by their Amhara subordinates, stigmatized as "uncivilized Oromo," and ridiculed by the Amhara clergy. Not surprisingly, they found themselves in a predicament.⁷³ It is probably because of this situation that Asma Giyorgis, a liberal Amhara Catholic missionary, indicts the Ethiopian Orthodox clergy in saying that they not only failed to spread Christianity among the Oromo, but also prevented others from doing so. Writing in Harar around 1900, he states:

The [Oromo] prefer to be Muslim rather than Christian, because they hate the Amara [Amhara]. The Amara priests, the bishops and the clergy do not like the [Oromo]. They believe that Christianity cannot be understood by those whose ancestors were not Christian. Therefore, they do not teach them.⁷⁴

Even when they taught the Oromo, the Amhara clergy taught them in Geez, a totally unknown language and a heavy yoke upon them. According to Mekuria Bulcha, a leading authority on Oromo studies, Amhara priests did not come to Oromoland as "the messengers of God and Peace," but rather as:

conquerors with Menelik's generals, "blessing" the massacres that the latter and their soldiers inflicted upon the Oromo people. The Orthodox Church and its priests were the main beneficiaries of the conquest. They shared with the emperor, his generals and soldiers, booties plundered from the Oromo. The clergy were given land that was confiscated from Oromo peasants and became landlords; they owned Oromo peasants as

gabbars (serfs) and thrived upon their labour. ... They never worked among the Oromo as missionaries to spread the word of God. They used military force to baptize them *en masse*. They introduced no education or medical knowledge to their converts, and hence contributed nothing to Oromo welfare.⁷⁵

One particular area in which the Ethiopian Orthodox Church failed to capture the hearts and minds of the Oromo masses was its refusal to use the Oromo language for its missionary works. Only in 1993 would it, for the first time, use the Oromo language in its service!

Until recently, the clergy was interested mainly in converting Oromo chiefs and, through them, collectively baptizing and bestowing Christian names upon the Oromo. Although this system worked among the Oromo mainly in the Shawa region, it utterly failed among those in Hararghie. For reasons unclear to me, the Amhara clergy could not convert a single Oromo chief in Hararghie. It is not surprising, then, that out of all the country's Oromo population, it is the Oromo of Hararghie who appear to have totally rejected Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. Of course they did not reject Christianity itself, as some became Protestants while others became Catholics. It appears to me that Hararghie's Oromos saw the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as an integral part of Menilek's colonial order, which had robbed them of their sovereignty, human dignity, and self-respect.

In Ethiopia up until 1974, there was no state without church and no church without state. This meant that church and state were one in Ethiopia. However, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church did not use its considerable power to spread Christianity among the Oromo in southern and southeastern Ethiopia. On the contrary, not only did it fail to convert the Oromo of Hararghie, Bale Arsi, and Sidamo, but it also used the state's power to prevent or restrict the activities of other non-Orthodox missionaries. In so doing, it inadvertently left the vast region wide open for the spread of Islam.

Islam during the Italian Occupation

During Fascist Italy's short-lived occupation of Ethiopia (1936-41), a pro-Oromo policy was followed. According to Alberto Sbacchi, more than thirty thousand Muslim Oromo fought for and contributed to Italy's victory: "Muslims were granted full freedom of religion; the *cadi* (Muslim judge) replaced the Amhara judge."⁷⁶ The Italians abolished the *gabar* system and gave many Oromo full rights to own their own land: "Oromo oppression under Amhara domination became the central theme of Italian propaganda and of de-Amharization campaigns. Amharic was displaced as the legal language."⁷⁷

The Oromo language was taught in schools in all Oromo areas. The Italian administration adopted religious policies that favored Islam,⁷⁸ built mosques in many Oromo cities, and actually completed the Islamization of the Arsi Oromo. During these years a handful of Arsi, with Italian encouragement, made hajj for the first time. This gave them a direct link with the wider Islamic world and paved the way for students (*shaykhs*) to further their Islamic studies.⁷⁹ The Italians also subsidized the pilgrimages of the Muslim Oromo to Makkah and financed prominent Oromo leaders' visits to Egypt and other Arab countries.⁸⁰ Among those who availed themselves of such largesse were Sultan Abba Jobir Abba Dula (the last king of Jimma), Mohammed Said of Bale, and Imam Rahity Nuh Dadi of Arsi.⁸¹

Islam and the Bale Oromo Resistance Movement

The Bale Oromo rebellion of 1963-70 used Islam as a resistance ideology. Although the actual causes of the rebellion were land alienation, heavy taxation, maladministration,⁸² and hostility to Amhara domination, among others, the movement's leaders mobilized the people and united the Oromo with the Somalis under the banner of Islam to fight the Ethiopian state. In the following statement, General Wako Gutu, the leader of the rebellion, connects Oromo historical grievances with political discrimination:

Notice that when the Amhara occupied our country with the help of European imperialists in 1885-1891, many of our people were massacred. Then the survivors were allotted like slaves to the settlers, who also partitioned our lands amongst themselves. ... Remember that they plundered and distorted our historical legacy that is widely known, that they have violated our dignity, calling us filthy Galla. Do you realize how many times you have been denied justice in their court of law? You Muslims, your religion has been denigrated and you do not share equality with Christians.⁸³

According to Gebru Tareke, who has written extensively on peasant protest in Ethiopia, the "Bale rebellion is the longest peasant struggle in contemporary Ethiopian history, and its longevity was as much due to the resolve and competence of the insurgents [as to Islam] that served as the ideological matrix of organization and mobilization."⁸⁴ Just as scholars did in the Muslim Oromo resistance in Wallo in the 1870s and 1880s, Muslim religious leaders provided ideological fuel for the Bale rebellion of the 1960s.

They proclaimed the inevitable end of Christian settler domination and reminded the faithful of their obligation to support the uprising for a new order. They even raised the specter of a jihad (holy war), obliging their faithful followers to take up arms against "the infidel and debased rulers."

Whereas non-participants were condemned to *jehanem* (hell), martyrs were guaranteed a place in heaven. Through the combined threat of eternal damnation and promise of salvation, the spiritual heads helped the insurgents to form a regional movement by surmounting clan and ethnic divisions and loyalties.⁸⁵

By 1967 the insurgents had liberated more than 75 percent of the vast region of Bale and encircled Goba, the provincial capital. Only with the support of American and Israeli military experts, coupled with Emperor Haile Selassie's policy of making deals with the movement's leaders, was the Bale rebellion ended in 1970.

In the 1970s General Siad Barre, president of Somalia from 1969-91, capitalized on Oromo Islamic sentiment and created the so-called Somali-Abo Liberation Front (whose fighters were all Oromo), with which he planned to realize the dream of Greater Somalia. Thousands of Muslim Oromo fought and died unconsciously for the realization of this dream, which would have ended up placing up to ten million Oromo under a Somali regime that was just as harsh, cruel, and crude as the Ethiopian regime that all of them hated. Worse still, Barre "hoped to Somalize the Oromo of Hararghie, Bale, Arsi and Sidamo through a crash programme,"⁸⁶ which would have involved imposing Somali language, culture, political, and economic domination upon the Oromo. The failure of the Greater Somalia dream saved the Oromo from becoming non-ethnic raw material waiting to be turned into Somalis.⁸⁷

At the beginning of military rule in Ethiopia in 1974:

Islam acquired a ceremonial status of parity with Christianity, and Ethiopian Muslims enjoyed a sense of equality as full citizens, not as subjects of the country. There was a greater degree of participation in national affairs than was permissible or even conceivable in the past.⁸⁸

Ironically, in the same year secular Oromo nationalism started competing with Islam as a resistance ideology. With the formation of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in 1974, Islam was no longer the sole resistance ideology among Hararghie's Oromo. This generated internal tension within the camp and eventually led to the formation of the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia (IFLO). While the OLF based its appeal on secular Oromo nationalism, the IFLO appealed to Oromo Islamic sentiment, especially in Hararghie. As a result, during the 1980s the two organizations probably fought more with each other than against the Ethiopian military regime in Hararghie. The Ethiopian "military regime's policies of resettle-

ment, villagization and collectivization were undertaken mainly for the purpose of containing Oromo nationalism and isolating the OLF from its mass base.”⁸⁹ Since the regime’s fall in May 1991, “Islam has made substantial gains and benefitted from the policy of political democratization and economic liberalization and the recognition of ethnic and cultural identities.”⁹⁰

During this same time Oromo nationalism was also being transformed from an elite movement into mass movement all over Oromia. This intensified the IFLO-OLF rivalry. Taking advantage of such divisions, in 1992 the ruling Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) militarily defeated both groups. The OLF recovered and continues to operate today on small scale in Sidamo, Bale, Hararghie, Wallaga, and even Shawa and Wallo. The influence of IFLO, which never recovered from its defeats of the early 1990s, is limited to Hararghie. With its uncompromising Islamic ideology, IFLO has not yet articulated its vision for Oromia’s future. Despite its weakness, however, the OLF has a clear vision for the future of the Oromo and the country’s other peoples – it supports the establishment of a democratic federal system. I think such a vision holds better prospects for the all people’s future. As I stated in 1996:

I sincerely believe that in a truly democratic federated Ethiopia, the Oromo will lose nothing but they will have a great deal to gain. What is needed is to decolonize Oromia and democratize Ethiopia. I consider that the decolonization of Oromia is fundamental to the self-determination of the Oromo and one cannot be achieved with the other. In short, the decolonization of Oromia will ensure self-determination for the Oromo, while democratization will create a necessary political climate in the country in which conflict will be resolved through dialogue, genuine searches for mutual benefit characterized by the spirit of tolerance, consensus and compromise. The creation of a self-governing Oromo states is a necessary condition for the establishment of a federated democratic Ethiopia. Because of their numbers, geographical position and [the] rich natural resources of Oromia, the Oromo are destined to play an important role in the future of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.⁹¹

In conclusion, in this necessarily incomplete presentation I have tried to show that the Oromo of Wallo used Islam as a resistance ideology. Islam also enabled the Oromo of Arsi, Bale, Hararghie, and Sidamo to survive the shock of conquest, loss of land, and attack on their political, religious, and cultural institutions. Since the 1960s, Islam has served as an ideology of resistance for the Oromo in the above-mentioned regions.

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