

The history of the oromo people history essay



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The following summary information was adopted from the book by Gadaa Melbaa, *Oromia: An Introduction to the History of the Oromo People*, 1999. 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 neighboring 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.

Culture

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, Alaga 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 Galia 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 sorts 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 neighborhood who are closely related to the Oromo are Konso, Afar, Sidama, Kambata, Darassa, Agaw, Saho, Baja and other groups.

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.

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 center 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 favorable 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 neighboring areas. Specifically, Kafa and Limmu are considered centers 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 favorable 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 programs. At the time of colonization 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 neighboring 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.