
The Impact of Christianity on the Cultural Identity of the Oromo (Horro Guduru Oromo in focus)

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to investigate the impact of Christianity on the cultural identity of the Oromo since its introduction to Oromia (the Oromo land). The paper begins with the brief summing up of the Oromo history and some of the peculiar cultural practices that differentiate them from other nations and nationalities in Ethiopian and the horn. An attempt thereafter has been made to analyze the cultural, social and religious impacts of Christianity (Orthodox and protestant) on the indigenous Oromo in general and Horro Guduru Oromo in focus. The paper ends with a short note on the economic interference of the Orthodox Church by holding the peasant's land which in turn reduced the status of the local peasants in to tenancy, and the systematic approaches that the protestant missionaries used to extend the their new religion at the expense of the indigenous Oromo religion.

Introduction

The Oromo are one of the largest population groups in Ethiopia and the Horn. Linguistically, they are categorized under East Lowland Cushitic sub-family. Together with other Cushitic speaking peoples, they are the native inhabitants of the region since antiquity. The Oromo have been enjoyed a homogeneous culture and share a common language, history and descent (Gadaa Melbaa, 1988; Ayalew Kanno, 2008). They have a single and common language known as *Afaan Oromo* or *Oromiffa*, which is also widely spoken by non-Oromo people of the country. In this regard, except in the north tip, their language is a lingua franca in almost the whole regions of Ethiopia (Lewis, H. S. 1966).

Originally, the Oromo practiced similar social and political system. They developed a single social, religious, and political institution known as *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 (Gadaa Melba, 1988). The Oromo are the numerically largest group among the peoples of Ethiopia occupying an extensive part of the region. It is generally accepted that the Oromo have had a considerable impact on the region at least since the 16th century (Negaso Gidada, 2001). Since the 16th century, the Oromo began to move in mass in to different directions and most of the clans reached and occupied their present habitant within a very short time. There are different views held by different scholars as to the causes of their expansion. But demographic and ecological factors may provide a better explanation. The original Oromo homeland in southern Ethiopia prior to their expansion was very conducive. It was full of rich pastureland and fertile soil. Therefore, it created favorable conditions for the increase in human and livestock population. Thus, the resultant increases in population led to the emergence of different groups in the society and encourage the need to have more land (Yelma Dheresa, 1967; Tesema Ta'a, 1980). Following their expansion, each branch of the Oromo had established their own sub-political center, *Oda* or *Caffe* which for sometimes the laws were formulated at the center. Gradually however, they had enjoyed independent democratic political system having their own

center. Nevertheless, their material as well as spiritual culture was one and the same until the Abyssinian invasion in the late 19th century who have been working day and night to establish monarchical type of government and Churches at the expense of the indigenous republican system and the *Waqeffanna* religion (Samuel Mamo, 1998). It is obvious that culture is a storehouse where the identity, the unity and form of existence of that society are preserved, protected and reflected. Without culture it would be boggling for any society to establish their identity, to orientate themselves, to understand their relationship to their ancestor (John Bonnet, 1983). The Abyssinian leaders who were the ambitious Ethiopian Empire builder engaged themselves without reservation in battering, destructing and eliminating Oromo cultural identity as a prerequisite of bringing the Oromo under the colonial domination of the Ethiopian Empire (Assafa Jalata, 1998), in which they used Orthodox Christianity as an instrumental.

Orthodox-Christianity; many writers realized that Orthodox-Christianity introduced into Ethiopia in the mid-4th century and gained an important role in Abyssinian life by maintaining its glories to date. It was the official religion of Aksumite Empire in AD 330 under the supervision and suzerainty of the Church of Alexandria. Although other churches existed in Ethiopia since early 19th century, Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox remained very powerful up to 1974 perhaps due to its strong relationship with the state (Tolera and Hundessa, 1995; George A. Lipsky, 1962; Assefa Bequele and Eshetu Chole, 1969). Orthodox Christianity deep rooted in Ethiopian history and this religion has become important among some ethnic group in the country (Amhara and Tigre) due to its close links with the imperial rulers, its legal authentication and the ideological attacks imposed up on the indigenous people in the chauvinistic view of the dual alliances of Abyssinian ruling classes and foreign colonialists (Negassie, 1988). These Semitic speaking peoples of the northern Ethiopia (Abyssinia) emphasized Orthodox Christianity as the sole source of all civilizations by mixing secular traditions with religious faith to glorify Ethiopia rejecting the ancient Cushitic civilization in possessing the foremost knowledge and wisdom of the world (Diribi Damissie, 2011; H. Dursilla, 1922). Nevertheless, the introduction of Christianity to the south of Abbay (Horro Guduru) took place at the second half of 19th century by the Gojjame army and priests, and further strengthens during the reign of Menelik II since 1901. During their colonial time the Abyssinian ruling classes specifically used the Orthodox Christianity and exercised it not as religious faith but a tool to eliminate the cultures and identities of ethnic groups in Ethiopia, particularly the Oromo (Emana, 2015). Thus, many of the functionaries of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church found themselves to be busy enough in effecting various policies of the government, rather than preaching the religion. Eventually, they even turned out to be the most oppressive and exploitative forces of the system. With their limitless access to the resources of the region, they also formed the core of the expropriating class of the imperial state of Ethiopia (Mindaye Abebe, 2005).

Before their conquest by Gojjame towards the second half of 19th century, the Horro Guduru Oromo had religious, social, political and economic patterns of their own. Prior to the introduction of Islam and Christianity, the Oromo people in general and Horro Guduru Oromo in particular practiced their own religion which is distinct from the two in its religious aspects as well as ceremonies long before they come in to contact with Abyssinians and the western. They believed in a single supreme being called *Waaqaa*, which approximates to the English word God, but did not have the concept of a devil (*setana*) until the advent of Christianity (Gadaa Melba, 1988; Gilchrist Horace Eric, 2003). Therefore, *Waaqaa* is the creator of universe, source of order and justice, and eternal and the final cause of all things. The Oromo believe that above all things *Waaqaa* stretched out the Earth, and created all other things. The belief in such a powerful creator is called *waqeffannaa*. Thus, the Oromo had the concept of the monotheistic supreme God from time immemorial.

Ayanaa is believed to be the angel of *waaqaa*. An effective communication between the *Ayanaa* and the Oromo community is often maintained by *qaalluu* (male) or *qallitti* (female). During possession the *ayanaa* speaks in the mouth of the *ayanaantuu* (*qaalluu*) with people. According to Oromo religion, all Oromo have their own *ayanaa*, nevertheless, the *ayanaa* which connect Oromo with *waaqaa* is manifested only by some gifted individuals called *qaalluu*. The institution of the *qaalluu* and its connection to *waaqaa* are the central aspects of Oromo religion. It is through the intermediary of the *qaalluu* that a good relationship between the Oromo and the *ayanaa* was kept (Cherri Reni Wemlinger, 2008; Geda Melba, 1988; Wagari Mosisa, 2015). Thus, *qaalluu* is highly respected by the people and can exercise great influence beyond the spiritual sphere in the political and social life of the people (Girma Yadata, 1994).

The Horro Guduru Oromo visit the *qaalluu* ritual place called *Gimbii* or *Galma* once or twice a week for worship usually on Thursday and Saturday nights, commonly known as *Torbii* (weekend). At day time they work on their field and only at night time that they visit and worship. The Oromo build *Galma* (traditional Oromo ritual hall) at a special place. The land around the *Galma* and the natural resources on this land are viewed as sacred and are well protected. The *qaalluu* lives and worships in this place. Prior to the construction of *Gimbis* (*Galmaas*) as a place of worship in Horro Guduru, some important places of admiration or wonderful creations were considered as central places where *ayanaas* were believed to reside, and were selected as places of worship (Wagari Mosisa, 2015). During the *Torbii* (weekend worship), the believers visit the *Galma* taking a bundle of grass called *coqorsaa* in his/her hand to put at a place called *siidaa* and at different gates, and no gift in cash or kind was needed to *Waaqaa*.

With the arrival of Gojjame accompanied by Orthodox Church to the region in the second half of 19th century, the traditional life of the Oromo society was affected and their institutions like *Qaalluu*, *Gadaa* and *Waqqeffanna* which have been interrelated in its function began to decline. They undermined the indigenous people and illegitimate their religion as 'pagan religion' to attack the believers psychologically and to implant their imported religion as quickly as possible for various benefits (Emana Beyene, 2015). They made systematic effort to destroy the institutions of *Qaalluu* and *Gadaa* centers. It was the common objective of Gojjame to build Churches at the expense of the Oromo indigenous traditional religion. They purposefully camped near the *Gadaa* centers and established the Orthodox churches over the Oromo sacred areas (Mohammed Hasen, 1990). *Gadaa* rituals were discouraged in favor of Orthodox Christianity. In reference to this development Donald N. Levine wrote; "Amhara armies were preceded, accompanied and followed by monks and priests who facilitated the imperial expansion by planting the roots of Amhara Christian culture." (Donald, N. Levine, 1974). Since then, the Oromo of the study area have not been lucky to cultivate and develop their cultural practices like their predecessors. Different Orthodox churches were erected at various places and *qaalluu* institution was condemned as paganism and outlawed majority of its activities. Accordingly, the people were obligated to follow the new religion and despised their own (*Gadaa* Melba, 1988). Many peoples were forced to be baptized at Orthodox Church and become Orthodox Christians, took the baptized (Amharic) name at the expense of their original Oromo name and learned Amharic culture. To declare the sole legitimate right of the ownership on these evergreen and prosperous environments of the Oromo, the Abyssinian Orthodox church had gone as far as erasing the Oromo names which is highly interconnected with land and identity (Assafa Jalata, 1993).

Before the introduction of Orthodox Christianity, the Horro Guduru Oromo had good working habits, and the culture of working Monday to Saturday was very common. Thus, the peasants of the area had worked throughout the week except on Sundays, a day for reconciliation for the quarreled persons and visiting sick persons. However, the introduction of Orthodox Christianity affected this working habit while the peasants were prevented from working on numerous

religious days observed by Orthodox Christians in the name of different *Tabots* (arks) even not established in the area (Dessalegn Tolera, 2010). Lands tilled on those holidays were confiscated from peasants and in some cases their oxen were also taken away (Oljira Tujuba, 1994).

On the other hand, the Oromo of Horro Guduru had their own burial places prior to the introduction of the new religion. It was practiced neither churchly nor in mosque. According to the culture of Oromo, burial and sacred areas are quite different in explicit contrast to the mixed style of the Gojjame. These non-churchly and non-mosque burial places of Horro Guduru Oromo are called Tujuba in some areas and Kistaana in other areas of the region or used interchangeably. In most cases, *Kistanaa* was found at selected strategic areas used for a number of villages or clans, whereas *Tujuba* was for a single family on their own land. On the other hand, *Tujuba* was closer to the residence than the *Kistana* was. Thus, each tribe or village or a single family had their own burial place in common that was very near to their homestead (*Qe'ee*). Landless individuals were criticized by insulting words of, *Lafa Awaalchaayyyuu hin qabdu* (Literally means; you have not land even for burial). The insulting word also encouraged everybody to have his own land. Burial areas were covered with trees planted on each grave and not tiled, and named after either the first person buried or the elder member of the family. It was not a norm among the Horro Guduru Oromo to move the dead far distance. Rather the living relatives, neighbors and those who know the dead person or his family moved long distance to participate in the burial ceremony (Wagaw Hayilu, 1980EC; Dessalegn Tolera, 2011).

Nevertheless, the culture was abandoned when the Orthodox Church declared bodies not to be buried under trees and punishment have been imposed on local people for burying the dead outside the church quarter. Eventually, the local people who have been denied their traditional burial places were forced to make a long trip of a day or more to bury the dead and to attend the church ceremonies since only few churches were built in the region (Oljira Tujuba, 1994). Such hardships encouraged the people to develop hatred for the new religion and resistance against the cultural domination continued. There have been conditions when the Oromo of the area buried empty coffin in the quarter of Church and the real dead at their traditional burial places which were close to their village. On the other hand, they buried in the quarter of Church at daytime to be free from punishment and took back at night and reburied at traditional place. Such practice continued secretly until the Gojjame had imported a number of *Tabots* (arks) to the region and constructed Churches over traditional burial sites. As the result, the burial places were destroyed, trees were chopped down and the name being given to the area after the elder family of the Oromo was erased and replaced with the *tabot's* (ark's) name. To mention some examples: in Amuru over the burial places of Jaaqub, Luquumaa, Sammoo, and Kombee, the churches of Michael, Maryam, Takla Haymanot, and Giyorgis have been established respectively (Charinat Waqoyaa, 1995; Ginbar Nagara, 1998).

To build Churches, land was first chosen by priests, and the criteria to select the land were based on its fertility and its proximity to burial place or *Gadaa* center. Thus, the priests put their eyes on the most fertile land by harassing and persuading the local residents even to leave their land for the construction of church, which reduced the status of the local peasants in to tenancy. Land for the Oromo society is beyond the question of economy; it is the question of identity. That is clearly indicated in their culture when they give their land to their sons and their name to their land, so that names of all areas in the Oromia (Ormo country) indicate the Oromo names and ownership. Therefore, for the Oromo people, loss of his land meant loss of his identity, by local saying; "*Dubbiin lafaa dubbii lafeeti.*" Churches were constructed by exploiting the cheap labor of the peasant. There were cases when Churches received more *gashas* of land known as *samon marat* and was cultivated by the peasants for the benefit of those who served the church. Besides, the villagers around the Church were forced to collect annual provision in kind (best crops) called *fire*

gibir for the wellbeing of priests and deacons. This *fire gibir* was collected from every house hold (Wagari Mosisa, 2015; Yasin Mohammed, 2009).

Following the expansion of the Orthodox Churches in the area, punishments for violating of the Orthodox fasting days have been imposed on the local people that restricted them not to eat the food on the way they were accustomed to. An important cultural and favorite food for Horro Guduru Oromo is called *Cumboo*. In the words of the local people: "*Cumboon isa laatu kan kabachiisu, isa nyatu kan gammachiisu nyaata aadaati.*" (Lit: *Cumboo* is cultural food that give respect for the one who host, and satisfaction for the consumer). This cultural food is never free from dairy products (melted butter and sour milk), and there is no food restriction among the society throughout the year. However, all the Oromo of the region were ordered by decree to be baptized and to ban their cultural practices and forced to fast two days every week and long fasting days, which varied from fifteen days to two months (Jabessa Ejjeta, 1995). And they kept down any opposition at infant stages by employing the so called *Nisaha Abbat* (confession father) as emissary to whom all the individual Oromo advised to consult their entire secrete including what they were contemplating so that they would inherit "heaven in the soul" and graveyard in cadaver.

Protestant; Protestant religion came and penetrated into Ethiopia at the mid of 19th century. Thus, the Evangelical Church Missionary Society (ECMS) of England started its activities in Ethiopia since 1820s (Chapple, 1985). Nevertheless, it was only after the Emperor invited protestant missionaries to proselytize in Ethiopia that the first missionary stations were opened in Horro Guduru. The emperor invited the missionaries in to his domain after the defeat of the Italians in 1942. Although many missionary groups have been established contacts with the Oromo in different parts of Oromo land, it was the CMF (Christian missionary followers) missionary group that started to work in Horro Guduru. Sources tell us the CMF started to work in Ethiopia by chance rather than by actual design. The group first sent missionaries to Japan and Brazil in the 1950; they attempted to obtain visas in 1963 to start a mission in India but they were not successful. Then they chose Ethiopia because of Haile Selassie's friendly policy toward missionary groups. Thus, Mont Smith successfully petitioned Haile Selassie on 22 May 1963 to allow the CMF to establish a mission in the country with twelve to fifteen families, and between 1965 and 1967 the society founded four mission outposts in the Horro Guduru (Horace Eric, 2003). They founded these outposts at the villages of KIRAMU in May 1965, at Haro in November 1966, at Tosse and Akkayu in January 1967 followed by the foundation of several stations called preaching points (Horace Eric, 2003).

Since 1956 there was zeal and efforts to spread protestant Christianity in different parts of Horro Guduru. The CMF in Horro Guduru provided social services as a means of evangelism. CMF personnel were medically trained and licensed physicians which helped them to establish health centers to provide health care as another means of evangelism. In fact, the lack of vital social services such as schools and medical facilities in the Oromo region did not motivate the CMF missionaries; rather, it was a desire to spread their religious beliefs that drove them to work in Ethiopia (Horace Eric, 2003; Interview; Abdisa Amenu and Waaqoo Jaalata). Nevertheless, they had built schools and clinics in order to attain their religious goals and to win the Orthodox Christianity, which was not yet deep-rooted among the Oromo society of the region due to their oppressive relations with the local people. Thus, the CMF established primary schools and clinics at all of their mission stations to bring medical facilities and education to an area that had had none prior to their arrival and affected the Oromo of the region positively (Emana Beyene, 2015).

The protestant missionaries had played greater role devising the method of approach publishing and distributing religious books using local language and systematically converting the local

people. Moreover, protestant missionaries were more successful as compared with Orthodox; firstly, there was a strong relationship between protestant missionaries and *Waaqeffanna* religion in terms of their religion concepts and their philosophy. Secondly, the Oromo have strong hatred towards the ideological war imposed by Orthodox Christianity, which was the right hand of the state. George A. Lipsky; further stated as 'The church is like a sword, and the government is like an arm; therefore the sword cannot cut by itself without the use of the arm.' (Emana Beyene, 2015; George A. Lipsky, 1962).

The main goal of various forms of evangelical missionaries in Oromia (Oromo land) was preaching the European and American oriented religion and its faith systems to eradicate the indigenous tradition of the Oromo. Therefore, they had mobilized towards preaching the Bible and the Gospel with courage, and determination to harass Oromo indigenous traditions. By doing so, they replaced or assimilated Oromo institutions like *Gadaa*, *Waaqeffanna* and *Qaalluu* with the European protestant religion mode of thought. The analysis of their preaching affirms that the knowledge of the white people about the God is more powerful than the knowledge of indigenous Oromo people. For them *Waaqeffanna* of Oromo is something evil, and the *Qaalluu* spirit of intermediary between *Waaqaa* (God) and the human beings, is the work of devil (*setan*). (Talila B. and Marsa B, 2008). They also attacked all material culture pertaining to Oromo traditional religion as 'idols' and discredited the cumulative Oromo knowledge, wisdom and their creativity of the ritual objects like *kallacha*, *callee* etc and the *Gadaa* heritage that the Oromo rely on to provide the meaning of life, state their cosmological knowledge and satisfy their needs (Emana, 2015). Protestant religion advocates deliberately constructed their ritual sites nearer to /parallel with *qaalluu* institution ritual center (*Galmaa* or *Gimbii*) to attack and persistently harass *Waaqeffanna* and *Gadaa* rituals practices.

To sum up, the introduction of Orthodox Christianity in to the Oromo land had negatively affected the people of region. One positive thing that the local people particularly the local chiefs gained from the introduction and expansion of Orthodox Church was the establishment of village schools in a few centers. With the coming of priests and deacons to the area, church education was started which was of course the base for the latter expansion of formal education. Before the establishment of formal education, a few individuals learn church education and Amharic alphabets by priests. But these church schools were few in number and only taught their own sons and the sons of local chiefs how to read and write (Daniel Ayana, 1984; Assefa Bequele and Eshetu Chole, 1969). The priests took 4 *qunas* of grain as a salary from each learner. Nevertheless, beginning from the conquest and subjugation of Horro Guduru, there were threats of confiscation of land tilled on holidays, burying the dead outside the Church quarters, prison service for the violation of fasting regulations. To facilitate the expansion of Christianity, *Gada* rituals were discouraged and *Qaalluu* institutions were destroyed, while the Christian Amhara culture was propagated instead. Two parallel dramas were unfolding; the preaching of the superiority of the Amhara-Christian culture on one hand and the blemishing of many of the Oromo cultural values (such as *gadaa*, *qaalluu*, *ateetee* and other rituals as backward) on the other. Of course, the intension was to bring about two parallel outcomes- the consolidation of the Amhara domination on one hand and the destruction of Oromo identity on the other (Mindaye Abebe, 2005). Above all peoples were baptized and gained the baptized name; the peasants were lost their land and reduced to the status of serfs for which both of them are systematic erasing of the Oromo identity.

It is beyond doubt that the Protestant religion played a significant part in the demise of the *gadaa* system, *qaalluu* institution and other indigenous Oromo material cultures. It is more dangerous in affecting and erasing the Oromo religion and culture while preaching the bible in Oromo language and easily attracts the local people to the new religion.

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