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Abbas Haji Gnamo

Islam, the Orthodox Church and Oromo Nationalism (Ethiopia)

The Oromo constitute the largest single national group in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. Many of them were converted to Islam, some have embraced Christianity, whereas there are still some that remain faithful to their indigenous religion. Most conversions to the two monotheist religions took place after the conquest of Abyssinia, although there are some groups whose conversion antedates this encounter, as a reaction to imperial subjugation. Yet, despite some particularism and cultural changes resulting from Islamization/evangelization and cultural contacts, the Oromo share common language, belief in common ancestry, common history and memory, social institutions, etc., defining their peoplehood/nationhood and in which their nationalism is rooted. The resistance against what is perceived to be an alien and oppressive state serves as a rallying point for their nationalism/nationalist aspiration.

The question this paper asks is then: where do Christianity and Islam stand vis-à-vis the developing Oromo nationalism? It will be argued that the roots of Oromo nationalism are not in Christianity and Islam—often reputed, in the Ethiopian context, to be the establishment religion and the anti-establishment religion respectively. Neither the driving force nor the future political agenda can be based on religious dogma. Muslims, Christians and traditional believers fully share the core idea of Oromo nationalism. This would entail that the path of Oromo nationalism is founded on twin policies: secularism and tolerance. Strict respect in religious matters does not only aim to maintain the harmony of the Oromo but also to define their national identity in an open and inclusive way due to religious differences among the Oromo themselves. Religious tolerance or accommodation of differences is not new to Oromo world view/cosmology. Despite this, there are some individuals who try, from within or without, to divide the Oromo, along religious/confessional lines or politicize religion.

This paper is an attempt to address the relationship between religions and Oromo nationalist aspiration from a sociological and historical perspective. Particular emphasis will be placed on Islam, which has been misunderstood by some foreign observers and misused by governing elites for

political purposes. Through historical and ethnographic examples, the paper will demonstrate why the concept of political Islam/fundamentalism among the Oromo is irrelevant or a mere intellectual construct of clichés borrowed from other geographic areas and socio-cultural realities.

In writing this paper, my initial objective was to treat Islam and most particularly its ideological aspect, in order to understand if it has an influence on Oromo political thought and nationalism. But rather I found it more appropriate to see the relationship of both universalistic religions, Christianity and Islam, may have on the Oromo national movement, national consciousness and the formation of national identity. Religion, often, appears to be the easiest way either to divide or to unify people. Some commentators on the Oromo tend to have recourse, deliberately or not, to religion as a divisive mechanism. Thus some groups are labeled as moderates whereas others are branded as radicals. For its part, the Ethiopian government tries to use religion not only to divide the Oromo but also, under the name of "containment of Fundamental Islam" or "Islamic Peril" in order to receive the support of Liberal Democracies.

Currently, some Oromo seem to create controversies, particularly on Internet postings, about religion and politics. Religious issues are often sensitive and, as such should better be addressed at a proper forum. The only responsible and appropriate position in a multi-confessional society would be secularism and tolerance—i.e. separating religious spheres from political spheres. Secularism in the context of this paper, does not mean either to make priests and Chaikhs nor believers secular neither to propagate communist style of atheism[1]. Above all, secularism should not be interpreted either in the framework of the legacy of social sciences rooted in the European enlightenment and the consequent modernization theory nor by lineal evolutionist paradigms (Hadden & Shupe 1989). Both have considered religions as based on ignorance, superstition and unscientific ideas which will disappear in the face of continuous processes of modernization. In other words, such premise stipulates, "as societies industrialize, urbanize and are led by secular leaders, religion will increasingly appear as an anachronism, as a remnant from the past, doomed to privatization and even, ultimately, disappearance" (Haynes 1994: 18). But, religions have not disappeared, and continue to be important even central, in many peoples' life for now and for the foreseeable future[2].

Moreover, neither does secularism mean introducing a debate on secular culture versus confessional culture in the Oromo national movement; but to emphasize that the secular ideology of nationalism as a more unifying

1. For the analysis of the debate on secularism see Alexander FLORES (1997: 83-94).
2. Developmentalists and evolutionists considered that modernization and the spread of scientific ideas would eradicate religion and ethnicity. However, the reality of the contemporary world shows that how their prophecy has not been proved. On the contrary, modernization and Westernization contributed to Islamic resurgence in the Arab World and religious revivalism in other parts of the globe.

factor than religious based consciousness. The majority of the Oromo nationalists believe that they will build their future on their common heritage, history, memory and what unite them rather than a minor particularism that separate and the hope and destiny they share for the present and the future. This is generally what makes a nation as a French scholar, Ernest Renan (1934: 88), defined in his famous lecture of 1882 at the Sorbonne:

"A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle... A nation is a great solidarity, created by the sentiment of the sacrifices, which have been made, and of those which one is disposed to make in the future. It presupposes a past; but resumes itself in the present by a tangible fact: the consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue life in common."

It is true that among the Oromo, as elsewhere, we have cases where a religion was imposed through force, or resulted from sociological imposition, or introduced through peaceful expansion such as trade and missionary activities. The study of the methods of expansion and consolidation of a religion may have historical and scholarly interests, but should not have an impact with respect to one's freedom to live his faith fully. All Oromo are conscious about their religious differences, and, at the same time, they do not believe that religious diversity can be an obstacle to their unity and harmony or to live with people of different religions. It is not necessary to share the same religion to be a nation. Nor does shared religion ensure national solidarity—example, Somalia.

Philosophically speaking, the Oromo worldview is more prone to particularism than universalism. They believe that the religions, institutions, including *Gadaa* and *Qaallu,* etc., which define their ethnographic character, have been uniquely theirs, given to their ancestors (Legesse 2000; Abbas Haji Gnamo: 1997; Mohammed Hassen 1990). These should not be imposed on others who do not have the same ethnography/culture. For instance, they never tried to impose *Gadaa* on the neighbouring peoples and those who lived among them. Only those who became Oromo, through adoption, marriage and other forms of cultural contacts (Baxter *et al.* 1996), and adhered to the core values of their culture were allowed to practice the *Gadaa* system and to make pilgrimage to Abba *Muuda* every eight years[3]. Oromo's communal religion was not based on a sectarian view and certitude about life after death—there is no an Oromo word for heaven and hell (Abbas Haji Gnamo 1997). Conversely, Muslims and Christians have engaged in a numerous controversies about "true" and "false" religions,

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3. For instance when the Arsi Oromo arrived and settled in their current habitat, they never forced the Hadya to be abided by the Gadaa and Oromo laws. Hadyias who moved to the North did not adopt it whereas others who intermingled and fully became Oromo through different mechanisms have been included in the Oromo socio-political culture.

where each considered theirs as the only true religion. This, though that was not the only reason, often led to many bloody wars and crusades throughout the Middle Ages[4].

Christianity and Islam vis-à-vis Oromo Nationalism

To develop my arguments on the relationship between Islam, Christianity, traditional religion and nationalism my working hypotheses are the following:
— first, Nationalism as an ideology or a movement is "backward looking and forward looking". In order for any form of nationalism to exist there must be a pre-existing culture. While nationalism is based on and/or inspired by the past, it should have a project for the present and for the future as the past can not be fully replicated; above all, it aims to satisfy the political, economic and social aspirations of the contemporary society it claims to represent. Nationalism must have a core idea, a grand design, or clearly defined objective and strategies to attain it. As Hayes (1960: 15-16) argued: "Nationalism relates man to his nation's historic past and identifies him and his descendants with the future life of the nation. And its goal is the assurance of freedom and individuality and autonomy, if not to the person, at least to man's nationality and national state."
— second, Nationalism or the politics of nationalism, as John Breuilly (1985: 371) puts it, is used as a means of contesting the legitimacy of the state or imposing the legitimacy of the state.
      The pre-existing culture in the Oromo context was neither Islam nor Christianity although contemporary Oromo culture is influenced by these religions and has undergone some transformations following conversion. Firstly, the preexisting Oromo culture is of African heritage largely and essentially rooted in the Oromo language, historical traditions, socio-political institutions, the myth of common origins, common territory, common memory and history, etc., and, above all, harsh colonial experiences undergone under Abyssinian rule (Mekuria Bulcha 1996; Baxter 1994). Although Oromos were converted to Islam and Christianity in large numbers over the last 150 years or so, these religions do not appear to be a rallying point or a source inspiration in the development of nationalism in the political meaning of the term.

The ideological Role of the Orthodox Church

If Christianity has a long history in Abyssinia, going back to the first half of 4th Century, so too does Islam have a venerable history going back to

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4.   The Oromo do have centuries-long culture of tolerance and, as evidence, one
      can say that the Oromo do not have pejorative terms as *aramane* (heathens) to
      qualify others.

the time of the prophet Mohammed since it was first introduced in this part of the Horn of Africa in the early 7th Century. Yet, many including in the Islamic world, do not know that almost half of the Ethiopian population are Muslims. Christianity became the state religion and an established church (Taddesse Tamrat 1972; Kaplan 1988). It furnished unqualified ideological support for the monarchy, state power and for its conquests. Eventually it provided the legitimizing ideology for the empire-state. For this reason Ethiopia was seen as "an Island of Christianity in an Ocean of Pagans". The monarchy was inseparable from the Church and the two institutions fully supported each other until the collapse of the former and the consequent disestablishment of the Church in 1974. The historical and ideological role of the Church in the Abyssinian society was underlined by Gebru Tareke (1991: 15) in the following terms:

"By extolling the virtue of social hierarchy, the Orthodox Church helped to stabilize the Abyssinian social formation; it was the continuing edge of relations of exploitation... Central to the Church's code of morality was the belief in divine omnipotence, the sanctity of royal authority, the justness of overlordship. Supported by a tradition of awesome antiquity, enjoying direct access to land and the product of the peasants, and exercising a virtual monopoly in education, the Church affected every facet of rural life."

Beyond this traditional role in the Abyssinian polity, the Church justified imperial conquest and alienation of the subject peoples including its own followers whom it plundered and reduced to serfdom—the Church was allocated up to 30% of the land in the country most of which was expropriated from the newly incorporated Oromo regions. "Christianity was one aspect of the civilizing mission which the Amhara saw as their imperial duty" (Sorenson 1993: 13). Instead of preaching universal humanistic messages such as peace and justice, equality and solidarity, the priests usually followed imperial campaigns and justified the massacre and mutilation of the expanding army against those whose refused to submit by referring to the old Abyssinian royal guide such as *Feteha Nagest* as they did in Arsi Oromo country in the 1880s (Abbas Haji Gnamo 1999). The *Feteha Nagest,* used by the Abyssinian kings with respect to the treatment of enemies or "unruly people" stated:

"When you reach a city or country to fight against its inhabitants offer them terms of peace. If they accept you and open their gates the men who are there shall become your subjects and shall give you tributes. But if they refuse the term of peace and after the battle fight against you, go forward to assault and oppress them since the Lord your God will give them to you" (Strauss 1966: 274).

Consequently, the expansion of the state and the consequent incorporation of more human and material resources were in the best interests of the clergy and the feudal order. The interdependence of the Church and the

state in the newly conquered territory was consolidated more than ever before:

"This [the role of the Church] was recognized and promoted by emperor Menelik II, who had priests carry the *tabot* into newly incorporated Oromo, Sidamo, and other Pagan and Semi-Muslim areas of the empire, giving his military conquest the character of a crusade. Churches were built in the these areas, guarded by troops of occupation, made permanent by feudal grants under which the local population made the *Gabbar* (serf) was permitted to remain on the land as sharecroppers and peon of the feudal Church" (Messing 1985: 180).

It is striking, however, that some foreign scholars appear to have assumed that such Abyssinian royal guides based on legends *Kebra Nagast* (the glory of kings) and *Feteha Nagast* solved the question of legitimacy and laid a foundation for the formation of national identity. For instance Levine (1974: 118) wrote: "[...] The *Kebra Nagest* not only resolved the conflicts among the Cushitic and diverse Semitic components of Tigrean, it also chartered a mission for a national identity." However, this is no more than a simple wish or a deliberate scholarly apology for imperial politics that has been refuted by the praxis; the questions of legitimacy and identity have been the root causes for political conflict in Ethiopia. Equally, those who play up Abyssinian state nationalism rooted in these ancient traditions or elements of the past try to downplay the significance for Oromo nationalism rooted in the Oromo's past and socio-cultural institutions. For example, they dismiss reference to the *Gadaa* by Oromo nationalists to define their identity and nationhood as a manipulation. At the same time, they continue to refer to *Kebra Nagast,* which no one understood except the clergy and the ruling elites, Abyssinian Christian populations, as the basis for modern nationhood and identity (Sorenson 1993: 60-74).

Even after the Revolution of 1974, which led to official separation between the state and the Church, the latter has been considered as the mainstay or custodian of imperial ideology. This may be understood from the following passage, which reflects Oromo perception of the Ethiopian Church:

"The Orthodox Church can hardly be proud of its past relations with the Oromo people. Abyssinian priests never came to Oromia as the messengers of God and peace. They (priests) came as conquerors with Menelik's generals, 'blessing' the massacre that the latter and their soldiers inflicted upon the Oromo People. They shared with the emperor, his generals and soldiers booties plundered from the Oromo. The clergy were given land that was confiscated from the Oromo peasants and became landlords; they owned Oromo peasants as *Gabbars* (serfs) and thrived upon their labor" (Mekuria Bulcha 1994: 8-11).

From the perspective of the newly conquered people, the Ethiopian Church has always incarnated "reactionary nationalism" unacceptable not only to Muslims but also to other Christian Oromo. Ideologically speaking

the Church has been an embodiment of imperial legitimacy and official nationalism in its feudal or revolutionary and post-revolutionary regimes. Anderson (1983: 124) clearly stated the salient feature of official nationalism as follows:

"'Official nationalism' was from the start a conscious, self-protective policy, intimately linked to the preservation of imperial dynastic interests... The one persistent feature of this style of nationalism, was, and is, that it is official—i.e., something emanating from the state, and serving the interests of the state first and foremost."

Consequently, in a multinational state or in a situation where the nation and the state are not congruent (Gellner 1983: 1) the composing units do not necessarily share official nationalism promoted by the dominant group but fight against it. This is the case of Oromo nationalism. Oromo nationalism, shared by Muslims, Orthodox Christians[5] and traditional believers, is opposed to the Ethiopian State nationalism. From a nationalist perspective, the Ethiopian state has been "owned" by the two ethnic groups, Amhara-Tigreans, or "ethnic core", as some prefer to call them. The state, whatever the sources of its ideological legitimization might have been, imperial, revolutionary, democratic, according to the prevailing circumstances, has remained the expression of the Abyssinians, and, as such, has largely incarnated their vested political, economic, political and cultural interests.

It is important to note that, regardless of the autocratic/authoritarian penchant, nepotism and corruption of African rulers, nowhere in the contemporary Africa have one or two ethnic groups controlled the state as it has been in Ethiopia. The Oromo, along with other southern peoples, were conquered and incorporated during the last century, were not more than the second class citizens. Some scholars maintain, unconvincingly, the participation of non-Amhara-Tigreans in the exercise of state power in the different governments to downplay the power was shared between various elites. However, what is considered as participation is nothing more than co-optation. Markakis (1987: 259) demystifies the famous Oromo role in Ethiopia:

"The hallmark of this group was modern education, assimilation into the Amhara culture and society, and complete personal dependence on their patron, the emperor. Most of them came from Shoa in the center, where the process of assimilation had gone farthest, and also from the western Oromo region, where European missionaries had been active. They were retainers in the pure sense of the term, and in no way did they represent Oromo political participation in the ancien régime,

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5. It has to be emphasized that not all Oromos are the followers of the Orthodox Church. Although many of them were converted to Christianity under the influence of the Ethiopian Empire, there are many that were evangelized by the branches of the Christian Churches, Protestant and Roman Catholic and other Christian denominations.

for they represented no none but themselves and served only the interest of their patron."

Despite the discourse of national integration, historic Abyssinia was not successfully transformed from old statehood to modern nationhood in which the foundation of citizenship could be laid; it remains essentially traditional which John Breuilly (1985: 309) defined as "one which limits political participation to traditionally privileged groups". The speed with which the Tigreans, probably not more than 5-6% of the Ethiopian population, took state power and imposed their hegemony, has proved more than ever before that the Ethiopian state is ethnocratic or a monopoly of a single ethnic group[6]. The TPLF has co-opted the non-Tigreans people in the Tigrean dominated state structure through a surrogate party, the EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front).

Thus, as a nation, the Oromo feel that they have been excluded from power though individuals were co-opted into the structure of state to better control and govern the empire since Menelik's period right down to the current government. Needless to say that the co-opted individuals, over a century represented no one but themselves, as there was no meaningful political arrangements to encourage power sharing and participation based on equality guaranteed by a legal framework or constitution. Consequently, Oromo nationalism contests the legitimacy of the Ethiopian State, institutions, its ideological foundations based on master-servant relationship, and oppression. Oromo Orthodox Christians, though they share religion with Abyssinians, do not share the political/Ideological orientation of the Ethiopian Church whose main interest was the preservation structural inequalities enshrined in myths and legends, and power hierarchy inherited from the past or the status quo (Mekuria Bulcha 1994: 8-11). Likewise, Africa Christian churches and nationalists did not hesitate to challenge and struggle against their Christian oppressors from Europe.

Islam as a Protest Religion?

As opposed to Christianity, which embodied official/establishment religion, Islam was seen as anti-establishment religion and the religion of oppressed peoples. The Ethiopian ruling elites perceived it as their archenemy—and often presented the country as an "Island of Christianity in an Ocean of

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6.   Mr. Abiyu Geleta accuses the current government of the following: polarization of the core-state of Abyssinia along Tigray-Amhara ethnic divide; exploitation of the question of "nations, nationalities and peoples" to promote its own narrow ethnic interest in reckless disregard for genuine resolution of the problem; aggravation of natural and man-made disaster due to its irresponsible and tyrannical rule (*Ethiopian System of Domination and Consequences* by Abiyu Geleta, Representative of OLF Foreign Affairs Department). See: http://www.oromia.com/Articles/Ethiopian_system_of_domination_and_consequences.htm).

Muslims and pagans". Thus, to those who were opposed to the Amhara, Islam served as a refuge. As Trimingham (1952: 101) noted, "[...] Islam's force of expansion amongst pagans in Ethiopia was helped by the fact that it was the religion hostile to the Amharic race who lorded it over them." For his part, Ethiopian historiographers of the last century and, in particular, Menelik's contemporary, Astme, clearly confirms this point of view when describing the Islamisation of the Oromo. After giving the chronology of the Islamization of different Oromo groups before the end the last century Astme stated: "Even now, the rest of the Galla prefer to be Muslim rather than Christian, because they hate the Amhara; the Amhara priests, the bishop and the clergy do not like the Galla. They believe that Christianity cannot be understood by those whose ancestors were not Christians. There-fore, they do not teach them" (Bairu Tafla 1987).

This explanation is, however, not adequate because Islam entered the region long before the imperial conquest, and its remnants were a factor in the spread of Islam after the conquest. The present Southeastern Oromo region was a country of seven Islamic principalities, which used to be known in Syria and Egypt as the "country of Zeila" (Al-Omari 1927: 4). These included Islamic kingdoms such as Bali, Sharka, Arababini, and Dawaro, etc. After Ahmed B. Ibrahim al-Ghazi—called *Grain* in Ethiopia—waged his famous *Jihad* across the whole country (1529-1543), a *Jihad* which left both Muslims and Christians in a weakened state, the great migra-tion of the Oromo gained momentum: they moved North and North-East from their original cradle land (Mohammed Hassen 1990: 1-47) and estab-lished themselves in this "Sidama-Hadiya" culture area (Trimingham 1952; Braukämper 1977). Theoretically, this implied the disappearance of the Islamic religion—the religion of "Hadiya-Sidama" populations—under the impact of the great migrations of the Oromo. In actual fact, it turned out that these populations did not completely lose their identity and Islam survi-ved in some isolated places disguised under popular religions and cultural manifestations. Braukämper (1977: 22) calls the deformed Islamic ritual practices among the Arsi and the Hadiya "Medieval Islamic survivals" and argued that these pockets of cultural traits stimulated the process of (re)-Islamization of the region:

"[...] The expansion of the non-Muslim Oromo people during subsequent centuries mostly eliminated Islam in those areas. But some Muslim pockets, although cut off from the Islamic centers in the Horn of Africa, continued to exist, and in the folk religions of those areas, Muslim beliefs and practices survived in various degrees of adulteration. These leftovers from Medieval times [...] acted as stimulating factors in the (re-Islamization) of southeastern Ethiopia since the XIXth century."

In other words, Islam had roots from which it could grow again in the region and could use its new-found strength to counteract Christianity. Perhaps one could argue that elsewhere in Oromo country, for instance among the Tulama and the Matcha, where ancient Islamic influences did

not exist, the expansion of the Christian faith appeared smooth and unoppo-
sed. On the contrary, among the Arsi and the Oromo of Harar where there
was an old Islamic presence, Christianity failed to get a foothold. The
majority of the Oromo became Muslims after the colonization and subjuga-
tion of their country; that is in an empire where Islam was considered not
only as a secondary religion but also expected to disappear in the future
(Ullendorff 1960: 112). The Muslims were largely discriminated against
in all domains. Moreover, there was a considerable attempt to divide
the subject people, mainly the Oromo, along religious lines. For instance,
the Ethiopian ruling elite claimed that they were the most civilized and
attempted to tell the Oromo who were converted to Christianity that they
were more civilized than those who chose Islam. In this context, Islam
became a sort of rallying point even a resistance ideology of Muslims
against Abyssinian oppression. In effect, the Oromo needed a strong ideol-
ogy against the well-established state and the hegemony of Christian rulers.

The introduction and expansion of Islam among the Oromo were not
directly related to war and armed violence. Neither was it backed by
foreign power in expansion. Historically, even Ethiopia despite Gragn's
Jihad of the first half the 16th century which might have been motivated
by economic and demographic factors, there were no many instances of
forced expansion of Islam. This may be explained by the alleged friendly
relations established between the Abyssinian rulers and the first Muslims
who arrived, around 615, to escape from the persecution by non-Muslims
in Mecca (Trimingham 1952: 44-46). Perhaps as gratitude to favorable
accommodation of Muslims by a Christian king or because of their preoccu-
pation with their war in many other fronts, the first Muslims did not attack
Abyssinia. According to traditional Islam, the land were divided into two:
Dar el-Islam (the country of Islam) and *Dar el-harb* the country of war or
where the war can be waged against non-Muslims inhabitants. There is a
third category, though debated, called *Dar el-suhl* referring to the non-Muslim
countries that negotiated a peaceful co-existence with Muslim rulers for
autonomy and peace in exchange of some kind of tribute or tax paid to
the Muslim treasury (Mazrui 1997: 224). In the Abyssinian context, some
traditions maintain that the Prophet himself was said to have told his follow-
ers "Leave the Abyssinians in peace as long as they do not attack us"
(quoted in Cuoq 1981: 37). Whether the Arabs avoided a *Jihad* on Abyssi-
nia because of this advice or physical inability to launch war in all directions
at the same time cannot be said with certainty.

Let this be as it may, during the period that concerns this paper, the
expansion of Islam was pacific, i.e. through trade, in some areas, and mostly
through cultural contacts with Islamized neighbours by the intermediary of
scholars, *Ulama*. This peaceful expansion in the region can be contrasted
with the methods of evangelization: "[...] while Christian expansion in the
Horn took place essentially by conquest, Islam spread mainly by peaceful
means. Thus, there is no tradition of an aggressive Islam in the region,

and consequently, Islam fundamentalism cannot spread easily (Huliaras 1995: 244). The process of diffusion and consolidation by voluntary conversion took generations. Islam equally influences even today, not all Muslim provinces and districts at the same level. This Islam, so to speak, was tolerant and popular in nature, and has co-existed with local/indigenous culture in contradiction, and at times in harmony.

Although the conversion implied the acceptance of its basic dogma, the Oromo have succeeded in maintaining the essential part of their culture and identity through the process of social change. It is true that some institutions disappeared, e.g. *Gaada* and *Qaallu* due to the combination of different factors, which did not owe exclusively to Islam, such as socio-economic transformation from within and without. It seems as if the Oromo, often unconsciously, took a part of the *Shari'a* and maintained their law and customs based on *Seera* (Oromo laws) in the functioning of their society. Observation of social life, social experiences permits to understand how Oromo cultural heritages continue to manifest themselves in practice of Muslims and Christians.

Wahhabism versus Popular Islam and Oromo Ethnography

Oromo Muslims, as other Muslims in the region, are Sunni Muslims; the variant of Islam largely practiced by the majority of Muslims of the globe. They have close relations with Saudi Arabia, not only because of geographic proximity but also because this country is where the Muslim holy places are located. Over the last decades an increasing number of Oromo left for pilgrimage *(hajj)* and advanced studies in Islamic Universities. Many *Ulama* (religious scholars) successfully completed the cycles of Islamic sciences in the Wahhabi tradition, an official Saudi doctrine, and have returned to their country of origin. Some ended up there just as immigrant workers during the oil boom as others made their way to North America and Western Europe and even Australia.

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia was built on a historical alliance between the House of ash-Shaikh, his descendants, and the house of Sa'ud, the royal clan. When the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was set up in 1932 by Abdul Aziz, Wahhabism became its official doctrine (Asad 1993: 208-212). Wahhabism is generally known for its calls for orthodox interpretation of Islam, its restoration in its original purity, or as it was, and practiced during the life and times of the prophet and his immediate successors, the Caliphs. It is closely linked to Muhammed b. Abdul-Wahhab (1703-1787), the Najdi religious reformer. One of the main objectives of this Islamic school of thought is to combat against suspect innovations and popular superstitions, mysticism and *Sufism* which are perceived to be contradictory to the *Shari'a* enshrined in the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* (Laoust 1977). Saudi Arabia's government and political culture have been founded on the *Shari'a, Islamic*

laws and many observers and writers in the West consider it as an officially fundamentalist state.

The strict application of the *Shari'a,* as they were during the period of the prophet must be difficult to apply among Muslims of Africa in general and Oromo in particular. In effect, many *Shari'a* laws were rooted in the ethnography and culture of pre-Islamic Arab tribes generally referred to as *Jahiliyya* (the period of pre-Islamic ignorance). Most of the laws were Islamized and diffused as integral parts of Islamic laws and practices to other cultural areas. A similar process took place within Orthodox Christianity through which the Amhara introduced and disseminated their cultural values, norms and lifestyle among the newly converted people. Religion has been an important cultural trait and there is no pure religion as such separated from the culture of those who propagate it.

Thus a systematic application of the Wahhabi tradition of Islam into non-Arabic culture poses a series of problems. In effect, if African Islam, perhaps in other cultural areas as well, easily expanded and got many followers it was mainly because it managed to adapt itself to local cultures and incorporate some rituals, beliefs and other traits of culture, by Islamizing them, although the acceptance of its basic dogma is a prerequisite to be Muslims (Tapiéro 1969: 74). Popular Islam in many respects is certainly in contradiction with the Puritanism of Wahhabi tradition.

It may be useful to take some concrete examples to make this point. The Wahhabi Shaikhs recommended clan endogamy or cousin/cross-cousin marriage, common form of marriage alliances in Arab culture and kinship organization. Even though cousin marriage is not prescribed in Arab society, culturally it has been a preferred form of marriage. However, both cousin marriage and clan endogamy (marriage within one's *Gosa*) is in a complete contradiction with Oromo kinship system and matrimonial strategy based on a strict prohibition of clan endogamy. Despite strong resistance from the Arsi Oromo and, some Sheiks persuaded some of their supporters to accept a new form of marriage rule, often within their *Gosa,* and between cousins. Consequently, hundreds of such marriages were organized. But, these unions could not survive strong public criticism and disapproval; they all collapsed. The failure of these marriages can be explained mainly because they disrupted traditional definition of social universe and kinship relations and altered nomenclatures (kinship terms) and their social usage. For example, in such marriages, an uncle, father's brother, who is generally classified as a father, becomes a father in-law and his daughter, who is a sister, becomes a wife, etc. It also confused all rules of property and inheritance. This affects the social fabric and interpersonal attitudes and there are many indications that this newly introduced form of marriage is extremely challenged by the Arsi Muslims to this date.

Secondly, the Wahhabis have tried to oppose to the cult of saints, the most important opposition being directed against the pilgrimage/cult to Shaikh Hussein. In Oromia and the Horn of Africa in general, the cult of

the Sheik and visits to other Islamic shrines, have been the corner stone of popular Islam. For the Oromo, this pilgrimage *(Muuda)* represented a sort of continuity between the past and the present. In effect, when they abandoned the institutional pilgrimage every eight years to the Great *Qaalluu,* the cult of the Shaikh became a rallying point and an important factor in their spiritual life and world view (Abbas Haji Gnamo 1991). Thus, despite relentless struggle of the Shaikh of Wahhabi orientation to condemn this cult as non-Islamic or apostasy, Sheik Hussein has not lost influence. According to many informants, it was even reinforced; tens of thousands even more than hundred thousand Muslims continue their annual pilgrimage to Ana Jina, his burial place, and Sakina, a locality north of Shabale River, where he was said to have prayed—it has spread to Kenya.

Finally, the Oromo society functions, in large measures, according to its customary laws, *Seera,* although the *Shari'a* is applied in some aspects of social life. The exclusive application of *Shari'a* in a society where strong traditions persist cannot be materialized despite the Arabizing efforts of some religious leaders. In other words, in spite of their endorsement of some Christian or Islamic ethics, after their conversion, the Oromo are still attached to their beliefs, traditional religion, culture and ancestral laws described by a numbers of observers (de Salviac 1901; Bartels 1983).

Political Islam versus Oromo Nationalism

In this section we will see the meaning of political Islam and why it cannot be applied to Oromo cultural area and Oromo nationalism. The idea of Islamic fundamentalism or political Islam involves religion and politics (Jansen 1997). It associates political authority and legitimacy with the law of God, in this case, the *Shari'a* (Badie 1986: 251-253). Although the Wahhabi were said to have awakened Muslim intellectuals about religious reform to restore Islam's past glory it was the Arab-Israeli conflict of 1967 and the consequent defeat of Arabs that gave rise to greater politicization of Islam. As Abu-Rabi (1996: 262) put it: "It is not only that 'Political Islam' emerged as a viable political force, but that of Islam itself, as religion, history, and the central part of the collective subconscious, has assumed a new presence, and therefore, the post-1967 Arab discourse has been filled with religious language."

To this, one has to add the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, though the Shiite Islam has its roots elsewhere, which gave rise to a new dimension to political Islam. The combination of the two factors added to hegemonic western modernization/secularism[7] and materialism diffused through colo-

7. Islamists as many other Muslims reject vigorously secularism as a Western concept irrelevant to Muslim society. However, Kemalist Turkey, a Muslim nation, became a secular state. And even today more than 70% of the Turks vote for non-religious parties. Thus, it is possible to build secular political institutions even in a predominantly Muslim society.

nialism and later through global communication and the consequent dis-
covery of Europe by Muslims, as well the legacy of corrupt and inefficient,
autocratic national governments contributed to resurgence of Islam and
religious revivalism in general (Haynes 1994). However, the development
of Oromo nationalism has nothing to do with Islamic resurgence in the
Middle East/North Africa; its has local roots but its trajectory is very similar
with other ethno-political nationalism (Baxter *et al.* 1996).

Oromo Muslims are not familiar with modern Arab intellectual history,
which have influenced militant Islamic resurgence (Abu-Rabi 1996). But,
the existence of a political movement called Islamic Front for Liberation
of Oromia may give the impression that Muslims may be interested in or/
and inspired by political Islam. The fact is, however, that Oromo national-
ism does not aim to build a religious state although Islam served as resis-
tance ideology in the past and the struggle for religious equality and freedom
constituted an integral part of decades-long resistance against imperial rule.
The following declaration of the veteran Oromo nationalist and the leader
of Bale Resistance (1963-1970) summarizes the root causes of Oromo
nationalism:

"[...] Notice 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 partitioned our lands among them-
selves. Remember that they plundered and distorted our historical legacy that is
widely known; that they violated our dignity, calling us the filthy Galla. Do you
realize how many times you have been denied justice in the courts of law? You,
Muslims, your religion has been denigrated and you do not share equality with
Christians. Innumerable crimes that have not been committed by European coloni-
alists on the African peoples have been perpetrated upon you. You have been cru-
shed for eighty years now" (quoted in Gebru Tareke 1991: 131).

The formal, official recognition of Islam was just one of the conse-
quences of the Revolution of 1974, the collapse of the monarchy and conse-
quent divorce between the Church and the state. Following the Revolution,
the military took some important measures such as the land reform of 1975,
which was welcomed by the southern peoples in general and the Oromo in
particular. Paradoxically, it was during the post revolutionary period that
Oromo nationalism took on a new dimension and the Oromo Liberation
Front and many other nationalist movements were created.

Oromo nationalists are aware of the role history and cultural heritage
can play for the present generation and for generations to come. Sheik
Abdul Karim, the founder and leader of Islamic movement, himself adopted
the name of Shaikh Jaarraa. Apparently this choice was not made at ran-
dom; *Jaaraa* is the name of the ceremony marking the end of *Gadaa* cycle,
where the *lubaa*, outgoing *Gadaa* class, passes power to the incoming
Gadaa class, *lubaa*. *Jaarra* is also the basis of the Oromo calendar based
on the eight years term and passage to paternity or fatherhood and a sort

of retirement from active political life after covering the five *Gadaa* grades each lasting eight years. The word *(Jaarra)* itself comes from *jaaruu,* which means getting older. By combining the title of Chaikh, meaning religious leader or chief (in some contexts) and *Gadaa,* he is trying to reflect or to marry the past with the present, *Gadaa* and Islam. This demonstrates the importance of the past in Oromo's political thought. The reference to traditional institutions is in contradiction with fundamentalist perspective, which tends to ignore or undermine the pre-existing non-Islamic culture in favour of the *Shari'a.*

On the other hand, Muslim Oromos and Christians have proved time and again, that religious differences cannot prevent them from uniting on common goals. The Macha Tulama Association leadership embraced different religions and the movement heralded the birth of pan-Oromo nationalism. It got audience from all Oromo groups regardless of their religious affiliations. The most massive and unconditional support came from Arsi Muslims, as their objective was not to emancipate a particular religious group, but the Oromo nation as whole. Thus, right from the start, the Oromo nationalist movement has not been rooted in *Umma* (Arabic word standing for community of believers or community of the faithful) but in *Oromumma* (being/belonging to/or becoming Oromo) (Baxter *et al.* 1996); which involves a more inclusive definition of cultural/national identity based on common origins, idioms, history, memory and more importantly, a common harsh experience under an oppressive state and the consequent aspiration to transform this cultural nation into political nation as the only guarantee for developing and preserving their identity and culture.

As opposed to *Oromumma* based on nationhood and a specific territory, Oromia (i.e. the landed inhabited by the Oromo speakers), the concept of *Umma* does not recognize the idea of nation and nation-state. For political Islamists, the territorial state is the invention of the West, a creature of imperialism, alien to Islamic notions of authority, exercise of political power and the organization of political society. Consequently, as Zubaida (1997: 104) put it: "They seek a 'truly Islamic state', applying the *Shari'a* and unifying the fragmented Umma under a revived caliphate, thus providing for justice and the sovereignty of God. The primary model for such a state is contained in the 'sacred history' of the community-state embodied in the Arabian city or Madina in the time of Muhammed."

The call for a *Shari'a* based political culture/system related to historic Islam, means a recognition of the *Dawla* of dynasty, or a clique, which enjoys an absolute power legitimized by Islam: though it has been suggested that contemporary moderate Islamists "have come to accept crucial elements of political democracy: pluralism (within the framework of Islam), political participation, government accountability, rule of law and protection of human rights" (Krämer 1997: 80). Conversely, Oromo traditional politics was based on popular sovereignty and egalitarian principle of participation-representation in the political process and distributive justice. Some scholars regard the *Gadaa* system as one of the most sophisticated political sys-

tems ever developed by non-western societies. In words of Professor Legesse (2000: 195) "Oromo democracy is one of those remarkable creations of the human mind that evolved into a full-fledged system of government, as a result of five centuries of evolution and deliberate, rational, legislative transformation". Although there may not be a way to re-apply *Gadaa* as it functioned in the past it remains an important source of inspiration for building a new society. Some Oromo continue to believe that some aspects of *Gadaa* can still be relevant.

Here, the argument is that political Islam cannot be planted in all Islamic cultural areas or among all Islamized people like the Oromo and may depend on many sociological, political, economic factors and, above all, on the pre-existing cultures. The Oromo, as a people of liberal and tolerant tradition, cannot easily fall into zealous religious fanaticism and militancy of all kinds. This tradition can continue when leaders of secular thought are able to provide imaginative leadership and respond appropriately to the aspiration and expectation of their people. One cannot exclude, however, that the possibility that unsatisfied aspirations and frustration, inequality, deprivation, etc., may manifest themselves in religious terms (religious fundamentalism) as the only available alternative. The following insight of Emmanuel Wallerstein (Hopkins, Wallerstein *et al.* 1996: 223) can be relevant to my argument (the separation of religion and politics):

"Secularism succeeded as long as the vision of progress, under the aegis of reformist liberalism, reigned supreme. Religion was kept out of politics so long as people felt they could attain their political ends by political means in the only political arena that seemed to matter, the state. In so far as statism came under attack, however, secularism began to lose its major political justification. The re-emergence in new strength of fundamentalist/integrist/neo-traditionalist religious movements in some patterns predating the modern world-system, but rather as a revised, anti-statist mode of seeking to achieve the unfulfilled goal of modernity, equality in the realization of decent quality of life."

Therefore, one of the possible means to prevent this development may be a genuine political settlement to century-old colonial relations and inequalities in the Ethiopian Empire. The failure to find just, workable and lasting solution and the monopoly of state power by discriminatory minority regime may induce many Muslims to have to recourse Islamic forms of protest against political authority[8].

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8.   Bertrand BADIE (1986: 256) makes this point in the following terms: "Here the
      basic idea is that the political power which no longer conforms to Islam gives
      rise to *fitna* (sedition), and should be therefore be fought by any means available,
      including the *jihad*, which exists to liberate all people and those in the dar-Islam
      first all." But, it is not in the sense that the Oromo struggle has been waged
      against the imperial state.

I have tried to argue that the pre-existing culture is a condition *sine qua non* for the development of nationalism. Oromo nationalism cannot be an exception. Although Islam and Christianity are part of Oromo culture, their ideological aspects deflect Oromo nationalist aspiration. The paper did not study Islamic-Christian relations in Ethiopian history, but rather emphasized the importance of religious pluralism and tolerance in the multiethnic or multi-confessional society. Above all, I have indicated how the existence of Islam does not necessarily imply the prevalence of political Islam; its advent and development depend on specific historical, ethnographic and cultural circumstances. Thus it cannot spill over in all Islamic cultural areas overnight as some commentators and politicians seem to suggest. Yet, in a post-cold war situations in which international relations seem to be dominated by a "Clash of Civilizations" paradigm, many people do not seem to make this distinction (Huntington 1996; Halliday 1996; Mazrui 1997). Using this confusion, some regimes seek and receive the support of the West under the pretext of containing Fundamentalism, as did African dictators under the name of containing Communism during the Cold War, despite their poor democratic credentials and largely reported abuses of human rights and lack of internal legitimacy or popular support. In other words, "Islamic Peril" argument seems to be used a means of compensating a "strategic depreciation" of some countries after the end of the Cold War. As example Huliaras (1995: 244) mentions the case of Eritrea and Ethiopia: "Apart from the officials in Western capitals searching for new enemies, after the end of the Cold War, the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea [...] tend to over-emphasize the Islamic threat, hoping to stop the erosion of public support and, more importantly, to increase their countries' weakened strategic value after the collapse of the bipolar system."

Centre for International and Security Studies/Glendon College, York University, Toronto.

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ABSTRACT

The Oromo, the largest single national group in Ethiopia, follow Islam and Christianity since the middle of the 19th Century particularly after the conquest of the Ethiopian State, which triggered, directly or indirectly, a massive conversion. This article highlights the relationship between the Orthodox Church and Islam vis-à-vis the nascent but rapidly developing Oromo nationalism. Based on the analysis of Oromo ethnography, history, the system of thought and their contemporary political movements, the paper argues that Oromo nationalism is the antithesis of the Ethiopian state/official nationalism supported by the Orthodox Church. It also demonstrates that Islam is not a driving ideological force of Oromo's political struggle. On one the hand, it is in contradiction with many aspects of the pre-existing culture such as *Gadaa-Qaaluu* and other values from which the nationalists try to take inspiration to build their future. On the other hand, from the strategic perspective, the adoption of Islam or Christianity as an ideological tool of their nationalism would be a factor of more division and fragmentation. Thus Oromo mainstream nationalism is evolving on a secular political trajectory.

RÉSUMÉ

L'islam, l'Église orthodoxe et le nationalisme oromo en Éthiopie. — Les Oromos, qui constituent le groupe ethnique le plus important d'Éthiopie, embrassèrent l'islam et le christianisme à partir du milieu du XIXᵉ siècle, notamment après la conquête menée par l'État éthiopien, cette dernière favorisant directement ou indirectement la conversion massive de la population. Cet article met en lumière les rapports existant entre l'Église orthodoxe et l'islam d'une part et le développement du nationalisme oromo d'autre part. Fondé sur l'analyse de l'ethnographie, de l'histoire, du système de pensée et des mouvements politiques contemporains, cet article tente de montrer que le nationalisme oromo est l'antithèse de l'État éthiopien et du nationalisme officiel soutenus tous deux par l'Église orthodoxe. Il montre également que l'islam n'est pas une composante essentielle de la lutte politique du peuple oromo. En effet, il entre en contradiction avec nombre d'aspects de la culture préexistante tels que le

système *gadaa-qaaluu* ainsi que d'autres valeurs dont les nationalistes s'inspirent pour construire l'avenir. Par ailleurs, d'un point de vue stratégique, l'adoption de l'islam ou du christianisme en tant qu'outil idéologique du nationalisme serait un facteur supplémentaire de division et de fragmentation. C'est pourquoi le nationalisme oromo évolue principalement sur une trajectoire politique essentiellement laïque.