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Genocidal Conquest, Plunder of Resources and Dehumanization of the Oromo in Ethiopia

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The Oromo and the Amhara people have lived as neighbours in the region of Shawa,¹ Ethiopia at least since the fourteenth century, if not earlier.² This article deals with genocidal violence during the conquest of the Oromo over the course of the nineteenth century. The process of conquest started during the long reign of Sahle Sellassie (1813–48) the leader, who first called himself *Negus* (king) of the small kingdom of north Shawa. He started systematic attacks against the Oromo communities to his south and east. The records show that on an annual basis throughout his reign, the king conducted three raids against Oromos, for the purpose of killing people, capturing slaves and cattle, and burning crops and houses. Additionally, Oromo “became fair ‘game’ for Amhara children to kill, loot, and pillage and thereby learn the art of warfare.”³ In the popular culture of the Amhara kingdom, the Oromo were depicted as enemies whose killing was the source of great joy such that young Amhara warrior’s head would be “lavished” with “*shariti*” (single ornament) and “*shamme*” (glass beads on his neck)⁴ as marks of bravery and honour.⁵ In the words of Asma Giyorgis, an Amhara historian regarded as objective:

All the youths of fourteen, fifteen and above wished to participate in the expedition to kill [Oromo], for he who did not put [*shariti*] on his head and *shamme* on his neck, would not be counted among men. Furthermore, one who experienced in the campaign and killing would take away the children of his kinsmen in order to enable them to kill the [Oromo]. When they captured the [Oromo] and taught the youths to exercise on them how to stab or hit with the blade, there would be great happiness and singing on their return.⁶

By 1840, Sahle Sellassie could mobilize up to 50,000 warriors against his Oromo neighbours. And yet, according the missionary Johan Ludwig Krapf, who was in the kingdom of Shawa from 1839–42, the king’s soldiers were not able to neutralize the effectiveness of Oromo cavalry.⁷ It was precisely for that purpose that Sahle Sellassie was the first to

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¹ Also written Shoa, Shewa, and Showa.

² Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo and the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia, 1300–1700* (Oxford: James Currey, 2015), 69–86.

³ Abbas H. Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance in the Ethiopian Empire, 1880-1974: The Case of the Arsi Oromo* (Boston: Brill, 2014), 158.

⁴ I am profoundly indebted to Professor Alemante Gebre Selassie for contacting a knowledgeable scholar and providing me with the possible nineteenth century Amharic meanings of two terms namely *shariti* (single ornament) and *shamme* (glass beads).

⁵ Bairu Tafla, trans. and ed., *Asma Giyorgis and His Works: History of the Galla and the Kingdom of Shaws* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag: Wiesbaden GMBH, 1987), 533.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ A.I. A. Gen. 16A. India Office Records, Krapf’s letter of 3 July 1840, from Ankober, folio 127–133.

write a letter to the British government in India and the French government requesting destructive weapons. In his letter of 20 January 1840, the king stated “may it please you to assist me particularly in sending guns, cannons and other things which I have not in my country,”⁸ As the historian Sven Rubenson wrote, “The destructive capacity of the king was enhanced by the fact that he was regarded as a more promising trade partner, than any of the Ethiopian rulers with whom the Europeans were involved in the 1830s and 1840s.”⁹ Additionally, European missionaries and diplomats at the king’s court urged their governments to supply the king with significant firepower, “So that he could spread the seeds of civilization [i.e. Christianity] among the [Oromo], and in order for him to be absolutely superior to the [Oromo] cavalry, we need to provide him with guns and cannons.”¹⁰ King Sahle Sellassie’s request was answered, which increased his destructive power.

For example, when the British diplomat Major Harris came [to Shawa] in 1840, he brought Sahle Sellassie a gift of 300 muskets, 2 cannon and 100 pistols, while the French diplomatic mission led by Rochet d’Hericourt brought him 140 muskets. Before the end of 1840, Sahle Sellassie had more than a thousand muskets in good working order and several pieces of cannon.¹¹

Though limited in quantity and quality, the king’s firepower was directed against the Oromo, who virtually lacked firepower. The Oromo were subjected to massive burning, looting and wanton destruction as witnessed by Harris in 1840.

... the order was given ... to destroy and plunder. Instantly ensued a rush from all quarters at full gallop. Flourishing fields of wheat, barley and beans, the produce of the toils of the [Oromo] tribe, were ravaged, and overrun by the lowest hordes, and in the course of half an hour, the soul being stripped of every acre of cultivation, there commenced a general scramble for the rafters and rails of houses, where most of the skeletons were presently consigned to the flames.¹²

Every year for over three decades, Sahle Sellassie led destructive raids against his Oromo neighbours. Driven by the assiduously stoked Amhara warrior’s hatred for the Oromo and motivated by the prospects for capturing slaves and for killing the Oromo during the raids,

Women and girls were torn from their hiding places ... old men and young were indiscriminately slain and mutilated among the fields and groves, flocks and herds were driven off in triumph and house after house was sacked and consigned to the flames.¹³

Rochet d’Hericourt, a French diplomat, who characterized “the Oromo [as] one of the finest and most vigorous races of Africa,”¹⁴ was horrified by Amhara warriors’ eagerness for cutting off the genital organs of their war captives.

⁸ Afrique Memoires et Documents Abyssinie 1838a, 1850, *Archives des Affaires Etrangères*, folio 231.

⁹ Sven Rubenson, *The Survival of Ethiopia’s Independence* (London: Heineman, 1976), 145.

¹⁰ Afrique Memoires et Documents Abyssinie 1838a, 1850, *Archives des Affaires Etrangères*, folio 231. See also. A.I. A .Gen. 16A. India Office Records, Krapf’s letter of 3 July 1840, From Ankober, folio 127–133.

¹¹ Mohammed Hassen and Richard Greenfield, “The Oromo Nation and Its Resistance to Amhara Colonial Administration,” in *Proceedings of The First International Congress of Somali Studies*, ed. Hussein Adam and Charles I. Gesheker (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), 550.

¹² Major W.C. Harris, *The Highlands of Aethiopia*, Vol. III (London: Longmans, 1844), 191.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Charles E. D’Hericourt, *Second voyage sur les deux rives de la mer Rouge, dans le pays des Adel’s et royaume du Choa* (Paris: Arthus Bertrand, 1846), 175.

The Amhara were not content to seize the cattle, they pursued with ferocity and cowardice women and children ... For [an Amhara], the sign of victory is snatching from the enemy that was defeated the organ of manhood, so he seeks to deprive his enemy to take away that awful trophy.¹⁵

Sahle Sellassie boasted to Harris, that he had already conducted 84 campaigns against his Oromo neighbours by 1840. In that year's campaign, in which Harris was present, the king invaded the territory of Meta Oromo, killing about 4,500 "persons of all ages," capturing over one thousand captives, most of them women and girls, as well as 43,000 heads of cattle.¹⁶ According to Harris, by 1840 Sahle Sellassie had more than eight thousand slaves of both sexes and "three hundred ... concubines of the royal harem."¹⁷ These were Oromo prisoners of war.

During his long reign, Sahle Sellassie was not able to establish direct Amhara authority over most of the Oromo in the region of Shawa.¹⁸ However, the king set the pattern for his grandson King Menelik of Shawa (1865–89) – and later Emperor of Ethiopia (1889–1913) – in four major ways. First, annual campaigns were conducted for killing and plundering Oromo resources. Second, raids were conducted for enslaving Oromo prisoners of war, which King Menelik transformed into a profitable business (see below). Third, Sahle Sellassie's conquest was accompanied by Amharization of a few Oromo chiefs, which included conversion to Orthodox Christianity, replacing Oromo names by Amhara ones, speaking Amharic language, and accepting the Amhara culture and way of life. Finally, though extremely limited, Sahle Sellassie initiated a policy of expansion into Oromo territory for the purpose of acquiring commodities (which his kingdom lacked) but with which he imported more European guns and cannons for conquering the Oromo.¹⁹ It was this policy of expansion into Oromo territory that King Menelik transformed into the creation of the modern Ethiopian empire upon the destruction of Oromo power²⁰ during the 1880s and 1890s. The destruction of Oromo power started in the region of Wallo.

Emperor Tewodros' War against the Oromo in Wallo

It was Emperor Tewodros (1855–68) who first attempted at destroying Oromo power in the region of Wallo. Tewodros fleetingly united historical Abyssinia on anti-Oromo and anti-Islamic policies. According to Hussein Ahmed, Tewodros' efforts were supported by contemporary Protestant missionaries for three reasons. First, they hoped that the subjugation of Wallo would inaugurate a period of tranquility. Second, they saw the struggle in terms of a confrontation between Christianity and Islam. Third, they believed that Wallo was the spearhead of the Muslim drive to take over Ethiopia.²¹

¹⁵ Ibid., 188.

¹⁶ Cited in Getahun Delibo, "Emperor Menelik's Ethiopia, 1865–1916: National Unification or Amhara Communal Domination" (PhD diss., Howard University, 1974), 32.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ed Simone, "The Amhara Military Expeditions against the Shawan Galla 1800–1850: A Reappraisal," in *Proceedings of the First United States Conference on Ethiopian Studies*, ed. Harold G. Marcus (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1973), 138.

¹⁹ Bonnie K. Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia the Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa* (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1990), 83.

²⁰ Teshale Tibebe, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia: 1896–1974* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1995), 39.

²¹ Hussein Ahmed, *Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wallo, Ethiopia: Revival, Reform and Reaction* (Boston: Brill, 2001), 165. See also Donald Crummey, "Tewodros as Reformer and Modernizer," *Journal of African History* 10, no. 3 (1969): 466–467.

For ten years, Tewodros conducted intensive campaigns against the Oromo in Wallo, destroying the people, burning houses, Muslim schools, mosques and plundering Oromo resources. Ahmed writes, "The extent of physical and material destruction and pillaging of the Wallo countryside affected the demographic, economic, and political vitality of the region for the remaining part of the century."²² In short, "... the violence of Tewodros dealt the coup de grace"²³ to the Oromo power in Wallo. Tewodros' anti-Oromo stance became the working model for Emperors Yohannes (1872–89) and Menelik (1889–1913), based upon the elimination of Oromo leadership, the destruction of Oromo culture and the complete subjugation of the Oromo masses to Amhara colonial domination.²⁴

King Menelik's Conquest of the Oromo and the Creation of Modern Ethiopia

It was King Menelik of Shawa who conquered the Oromo of Shawa, the Gibe region, Wallaga, Arsi, Bale, Hararghe, and Sidamo, one after the other. For this task, Menelik had European arsenals of destruction at his disposal, especially from France. By 1875, Menelik was already claiming that "the French are my friends; it is upon them that I shall base the hope of my reign."²⁵ The French provided him with weapons and trained his soldiers.

Menelik ... operated with French technicians, French map makers, French advice on the management of a standing army, and more French advice as to holding captured provinces with permanent garrisons of conscripted colonial troops. The French also armed his troops with firearms and did much else to organize his campaigns ... Without massive European help the [Oromo] would not have been conquered at all.²⁶

Beginning in the 1870s, Menelik imported huge quantities of weapons from the French, Italians, Russians, and other European countries. He paid for imported weapons with commodities plundered from Oromo areas, "including gold, ivory, coffee, musk, hides and skins and slaves."²⁷

In many areas, the Oromo put up determined resistance against Menelik soldiers. However, because they lacked firepower many Oromo groups were defeated one after the other. The one exception was the Arsi Oromo, who utterly lacked firepower, and yet heroically resisted the "longest and the most protracted war of conquest to be undertaken by Menelik and his key generals."²⁸ The Arsi fought back in huge numbers: they "alone [were] ... able to raise more than one hundred thousand warriors and crushed without difficulty all enemy forces."²⁹ In fact, Arsi Oromo, with their cavalry and spear defeated armies led by King Menelik himself on three separate occasions. During the six years of war, Arsi Oromo land was transformed,

²² Ahmed, "Islam in Nineteenth-Century Wallo," 167.

²³ Donald Crummey, "The Violence of Tewodros," *War and Society in Africa*, ed. Bethwell A. Ogot (London: Longman, 1972), 66, 68, 76.

²⁴ Mohammed Hassen, "Islam as a Resistance Ideology Among the Oromo of Ethiopia: The Wallo Case, 1700–1900," in *The Shadow of Conquest: Islam in Colonial Northeast Africa*, ed. Said S. Samatar (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 1992), 91.

²⁵ Harold G. Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik II: Ethiopia, 1844–1913* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 44.

²⁶ Lord Lytton, *The Stolen Report* (London: McDonald, 1966), 160.

²⁷ Holcomb and Ibssa, "The Invention of Ethiopia," 83.

²⁸ Gnamo, "Conquest and Resistance," 162.

²⁹ Martial De Salviac, *An Ancient People Great African Nation The Oromo*, trans. from the original French, Ayalew Kanno (Self-published, 2005), 350.

... into a looted and burnt battlefield. Every campaign resulted in the capture of tens of thousands of cattle. For instance, in one of his campaigns Menelik was said to have captured 150,435 head of cattle as well as an unlimited number of horses, goats, mules.³⁰

Ras Darghe, Menelik's cousin and his key general failed to defeat Arsi Oromo. In fact, his "army sustained cruel losses."³¹ He was outraged by Arsi resistance and was determined for slaughtering, and systematically mutilating them. On 6 September 1886, at the battlefield of Azule, more than Arsi 12,000 men were massacred. "*Ras Darghe* ... chased the Arsi survivors for many days killing and mutilating countless people along the way."³²

It was after the Battle of Azule that *Ras Darghe* appeared to have adopted the policy of mutilation and castration for terrorizing Arsi Oromo into submission. For that purpose, the village of "Anole seemed to have been chosen" for breaking Arsi Oromo resistance.

All the men and women present, ... perhaps more than thousand people, were mutilated, their right hands [of men] and right breast [of women] were cut off. As a further form of humiliation [for spreading] fear and terror the mutilated breasts and hands were tied around the neck of the victims who were sent back home.³³

The purpose of massive mutilation, according to Mekuria Bulcha, was to destroy psychologically Arsi Oromo resistance.³⁴ Amazingly some "mutilated hands were hung on a tree under which [Menelik's] soldiers sang and danced in celebration of this exploit."³⁵ This horrible mutilation, which struck the collective memories of the Arsi Oromo is still remembered as *bara harka fi harma muraa Anole* (the year of hand and breast mutilation at Anole). According to Abbas Haji:

Emasculation seems to have become one of the objectives of Menelik's army ... With their victories in the south the harvest of trophy increased. According to Merab pieces of mutilated vital organs (*salaba*) had commercial value in [Shawa] and were sold for up to 12 *thalers*.³⁶

During the six years of war, Arsi men, women and children were killed, their cattle confiscated, their crops and houses burned to the ground. An English traveller who passed through Arsi land only four years after its devastation had this to say about it:

Now was the time for the terrible [Oromo] to appear. Where was the country teeming with lusty war-like people? Certainly not here! What we found as we progressed was only a few poor villages of a hundred huts each and the native presenting the most abject appearance imaginable. Only four years ago they must have been a fine race of men. They loved to tell us of their former glory; their eyes would light up, and they would forget for the instant their present condition. Now the Abyssinians are the masters, and these poor people are only a remnant of a great tribe ... The [Arsi], here as elsewhere, were regarded as slaves and were even sold in the market as such.³⁷

³⁰ Ibid., 154.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 153.

³³ Ibid., 158.

³⁴ Mekuria Bulcha, *The Making of the Oromo Diaspora: A Historical Sociology of Forced Migration* (Minneapolis, MN: Kirk House Publishers, 2002), 73.

³⁵ Abbas Haji, "Menelik's Conquest as the Genesis of Ethiopian Crisis: A Case of the Arsi Oromo," *The Oromo Commentary* IV, no. 2 (1994): 20.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Donaldson A. Smith, "Expedition Through Somali Land to Lake Rudolf," *The Geographical Journal* 7 (1896): 123–127.

The ruthless nature of Menelik's warfare and the devastation of the Arsi Oromo, described in the above account, and the slavery and slave trade which it intensified, constituted a pattern followed in other conquered areas in southern Ethiopia. According to Martial de Salviac, a French missionary who lived among the Oromo during their conquest, Menelik's war of conquest and the natural calamities which followed its train, "all cut down [Oromo] ranks to eyesight," greatly reducing the size of the Oromo population.³⁸ Alexander Bulatovich, who "as a special guest of Menelik" toured extensive areas of Oromo territory in 1896 and 1897 and gathered information both from Menelik's soldiers and its Oromo victims, concluded that "the dreadful annihilation of more than half of the population during the conquest took away from the [Oromo] all possibility of thinking about any sort of uprising."³⁹

Such a catastrophic decline of population in colonial Africa took place only in the Congo, where King Leopold II of Belgium carried out genocidal plundering and "looted its rubber, brutalized its people, and ultimately slashed its population by ten million – all the while shrewdly cultivating his reputation as a great humanitarian."⁴⁰ King Leopold II's devastation of the Congo has been recognized as of "Holocaust dimensions."⁴¹ Similarly, the assault on the Oromo is in line with the salient features of Ralph Lemkin's concept of genocide.⁴² Following their conquest, the Oromo institutions of self-government were destroyed, their leadership liquidated or coopted, their territory divided, their social cohesion disrupted, their cultural institutions destroyed, their property plundered, their traditional religion interfered with, and their population decimated through a combination of factors including brutal warfare and natural calamities which accompanied that warfare.⁴³

When Menelik conquered the Kingdom of Walayta in 1894, it was reported that almost 119,000 men, women and children were killed or wounded.⁴⁴ In Walayta, Menelik's army captured 18,000 slaves and 180,000 head of cattle, of which the Emperor's share was 1,800 slaves and 18,000 head of cattle.⁴⁵ When Menelik's soldiers conquered the Kingdom of Kaficho in 1897, it was estimated that the population of that land was reduced two-thirds.⁴⁶

Genocide

Menelik's campaigns can be considered as a genocide for the following reasons. First, it resembles historic cases of imperial expansion to seize land and natural resources. It was Menelik's unbridled ambition to occupy "the green and lush Oromo lands and

³⁸ De Salviac, *An Ancient People*, 350.

³⁹ Alexander Bulatovich, *Ethiopia through Russian Eyes: Country in Transition, 1896–1898*, trans. and ed. Richard Seltzer (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2000), 68–69.

⁴⁰ Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), cover page.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴² Raphael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government Proposals for Redress* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1973), preface, xi–xii.

⁴³ These included the cattle plague of 1880–1893, which wiped out a vast part of the animal population, epidemics of typhus, dysentery and the great Ethiopian famine of the period.

⁴⁴ See for instance, Delibo, "Emperor Menelik's Ethiopia, 1865–1916," 113–114.

⁴⁵ See for instance, Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia, 1800–1935* (Addis Ababa: University Printing Press, 1968), 105. J.G. Vanderhaym, *Une expedition de Négous Menelik: Vingt mois en Abyssinie* (New York: Negro University Press, 1969; reprint; Paris: Librairie Version, 1896), 186.

⁴⁶ See J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia* (London: Oxford Press, 1952), 128–129.

their boundless commodities (gold, civet, ivory, coffee) and [their] prosperous markets,⁴⁷ that motivated his campaigns. “Throughout history most genocides ... were committed in the building and maintaining of empires.”⁴⁸ The Oromo and other peoples of southern Ethiopia were massacred in the building of the Ethiopian empire, and to this day they are still massacred by those seeking to maintain the same empire. Second, “Genocide is a form of one-sided mass killing” in which “the victim group has no organized military machinery that might be opposed to that of the perpetrator.”⁴⁹ It was Oromo lack of firearms and effective military organization that made them victims of one-sided mass killing. That is why Mekuria Bulcha argues that: “What occurred in some of the conquered territories ... was genocide.”⁵⁰ Third, Chalk and Jonassohn argue that genocide occurs in a political climate in which the difference between the perpetrators and the victims “were particularly large in terms of religion, language, manners, customs, and so on, then such as others were seen as less than fully human: pagans, savages, or even animals.”⁵¹ During Menelik’s war of conquest, the Oromo were different from the Amhara in terms of their religion, language, custom, culture, way of life, and political philosophy. In short, it was such differences, which made the Oromo in the eyes of the conquerors “something less than fully human,” which resulted in “their exclusion from the moral concerns of the conquerors.”⁵²

In Menelik’s empire the conquered Oromo territories experienced a catastrophic demographic decline and unprecedented levels of exploitation owing to the rapacious behaviour of Menelik’s colonial governors and armed settlers (*neftayna*, literally “riflemen”), who were given both the Oromo land and the people as labourers.⁵³ In most areas, two-thirds of Oromo land was distributed among the *neftayna*, the Orthodox church and the state, leaving only one-third for the Oromo on condition that they supplied forced labour for the armed settlers, and taxes, dues, and tithes to the imperial court and the Orthodox church.⁵⁴ Menelik’s colonial establishment in all Oromo territory was built on and sustained by Oromo peasants, whose status was “reduced to that of *gabars* (serfs) and were given to [Menelik’s] unsalaried officers and soldiers as material property to be owned and used as personal property.”⁵⁵

The war of conquest which produced thousands of captives for the Emperor and his generals intensified slave trade and slavery in Ethiopia, earning for Menelik the ignoble epithet of “the greatest slave entrepreneur [who] received the bulk of the proceeds.”⁵⁶ The Christian Emperor of Ethiopia, reportedly possessed 70,000 domestic slaves at the beginning of the twentieth century while his generals and soldiers were slavers who depopulated a number of areas.⁵⁷ Emperor Menelik received slaves “as tribute, and

⁴⁷ Addis Hiwet, *Ethiopia from Autocracy to Revolution* (London: Merlin Press, 1975), 4.

⁴⁸ Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analysis and Case Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 30.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

⁵⁰ Bulcha, “The Making of the Oromo Diaspora,” 53.

⁵¹ Chalk and Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide*, 28.

⁵² Bulcha, “The Making of the Oromo Diaspora,” 70.

⁵³ Timothy D. Fernyhough, “Serfs, Slaves and Shefta: Modes of Production in Southern Ethiopia from the Late Nineteenth Century to 1941,” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana, Champaign, 1986), 188.

⁵⁴ Delibo, “Emperor Menelik’s Ethiopia,” 198–199.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 213–14, 219.

⁵⁶ Harold G. Marcus, *The Life and Times of Menelik II: Ethiopia, 1844–1913* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 73.

⁵⁷ Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia 1800–1935* (Addis Ababa University Printing Press, 1968), 75. See also H. Darley, *Slavery and Ivory in Abyssinia* (London: H.F. & G. Witherby, 1926), 197–199, 201.

collected revenue in slaves from chiefs of the conquered territories until his death.⁵⁸ Perpetuating slavery in the conquered regions had the twin goal of making the colonies pay for their own conquest and providing the opportunity to imbue the “pagan” slaves with Christian virtues and love.⁵⁹

Oromo cultural and religious shrines and places of worship were replaced by the Amhara ones. Even Oromo village and town names were replaced by Amhara ones. For example, Finfinnee became Addis Ababa, Ambo was changed to Hagere Hiwot, Haro Maya to Alem Maya, Hadema to Nazreth, Walliso to Ghion, The Village of Ejersa Goro where Haile Sellassie was born, was renamed Bethlehem.⁶⁰ The goal of replacing Oromo village and town names by Amhara ones, to borrow Lemkin’s apt phrase, was to obliterate, “Every reminder of the former national character”⁶¹ of the Oromo.

The Oromo were denied not just basic human but also economic rights, reduced as it were to the status of the *gabar* (serf) and controlled by the predatory *neftayna*. When governors and their followers were transferred from one region to another, they took with them their private *gabars* in chains.⁶² In this sense, it is difficult to distinguish *gabar* as being any different from slaves. Since the armed settlers were neither paid salaries nor engaged in productive activities, they were given Oromo *gabars* in lieu of salary. Burdensome and exhausting obligations were put on the Oromo *gabar* who, according to one scholar,

... had to surrender a portion of the produce of the land to the landlord as tribute. The amount varied between a quarter and a third, but it was usually more as the legal ceiling was that it should not be more than three quarters! Besides, he paid a tenth of his total produce for the tithe. He was also expected to provide his landlord with honey, meat and firewood, dried grass, and sundry other items. Labor service was an added burden, he had to grind the landlord’s share of the grain, transport it to his residence, build his house, maintain his fences, care for his animals, and act as a porter, an escort, or a messenger. There was an obligation to present gifts on religious holidays and other social occasions. The multiple exactions imposed on the Oromo *gabars* meant the loss of a considerable portions of the [*gabars*] production, onerous labor service and manifold other impositions.⁶³

Economic exploitation was accompanied by socio-cultural and social and psychological dehumanization which set the tone for Amhara elites’ behaviour toward the Oromo. In one Amharic expression, Oromos were equated to human feces: “*Gallana sagara eyadar yegamal* [Galla and human feces stink more every passing day].”⁶⁴ Even Oromo humanity was questioned in another Amharic expression: “*Saw naw Galla?*” [Is it human or Galla?]⁶⁵

Lemkin argues that genocide “has two phases: one, destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group; the other the imposition of the national pattern of the

⁵⁸ Bucha, “The Making of the Oromo Diaspora,” 55.

⁵⁹ Delibo, “Emperor Menelik’s Ethiopia,” 219.

⁶⁰ Mohammed Hassen and Richard Greenfield, “The Oromo Nation and Its Resistance to Amhara Colonial Administration,” ed. Hussen M. Adam and Charles L. Gesheker (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 576.

⁶¹ Lemkin, *Axis Rule*, 82.

⁶² Fernyhough, “Serfs, Slaves and Shefta,” 181–82; Darley, “Slavery and Ivory,” 130–31.

⁶³ Abdulmejid Hussein, “The Political Economy of the Ethiopian Famine,” *Rehab: Drought, and Famine in Ethiopia*, ed. Abdulmejid Hussein (London: International African Institute, 1976), 14.

⁶⁴ Donald Donham, “Old Abyssinia and the New Ethiopian Empire: Themes in Social History,” *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia: Essays in History and Social Anthropology*, ed. Donald Donham and Wendy James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 13.

⁶⁵ Tibebe, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia*, 18.

oppressor.”⁶⁶ Both phases were implemented among the Oromo. After brutal conquest of the Oromo, Emperor Menelik abolished the Oromo *Chafe* assembly.⁶⁷ This assembly was an Oromo parliament that dealt with matters of highest importance: the making of laws, the declaration of war and conclusion of peace. The essential aspect of Oromo democracy was the election of political leaders once eight years. It was the *Chafee* Assembly that made the laws by which the Oromo were governed for that period.⁶⁸ The renowned Oromo laws were replaced by Amhara laws, election to political offices were banned and the meeting of *Chafe* Assembly prohibited. In short, the famous Oromo democratic institution was destroyed. This is addressed in the following short moving poem by a contemporary oral poet who depicted what happened to the Oromo in the region of Gullalle after they were defeated by one of Menelik’s generals.

Inxoxxoo dabatani
caffee gadlaaluun hafe
Finfinnee loon geessani
hora obaasuun hafe
Tulluu Daalattirratti
yaa’iin Gullallee hafe
Gafarsatti dabrani
qoraan cabsuunis hafe
Hurufa Bombirratti
jabbilee yaasuun hafe
bara jarri dufani
loon teennas indumani
idda [Mashashaa] dufe
birmadummaan is hafe.

No more standing on Intoto,⁶⁹
to look down at the pasture below,
No more taking cattle to Finfinnee,⁷⁰
to water at the mineral spring.
No more gathering on Tulluu Daalatti,
where the Gullallee assembly used to meet.
No more going beyond Gafarsa,
to chop firewood.
No more taking calves,
to the meadow of Hurufa Bombi
the year the enemy came,
our cattle were consumed.
Since [Mashashaa]⁷¹
freedom has vanished.⁷²

This means after their conquest, the Oromo in Gullalle, like Arsi Oromo lost their freedom of movement, their assembly was abolished, and their cattle looted. This attack on their political institutions and economic foundations was one aspect of Menelik’s genocidal campaign. The other aspect was Menelik’s attack on traditional Oromo religion. By 1900, Menelik even banned the famous Oromo pilgrimage to the land of Abba Muudaa.⁷³ The latter was the spiritual leader of traditional Oromo religion; and every eight years the Oromo from every corner of their country sent their representatives to honour Abba Muudaa. Through this pilgrimage, the Oromo maintained contact with their spiritual father and with one another. By banning the pilgrimage, Menelik deliberately prevented the Oromo from meeting with each other, while undermining traditional Oromo religion. The Oromo were even denied the spiritual experience of personal conversion to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Christianity. They were subjected to collective baptism. Once converted into Christianity, Oromo personal names were replaced by

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Tafla, *Asma Giyorkis and his Works*, 134–135.

⁶⁸ There is a good deal of scholarly work on the Oromo democratic institution known as the Gada System. Among others see Asmarom Legesse, *Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of African Society* (New York: Free Press, MacMillan, 1973). See also Asmarom Legesse, *Oromo Democracy: An Indigenous African Political System* (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2000).

⁶⁹ Entoto is the hill above Addis Ababa, was the second capital, King Menelik created in the heart of Oromo territory.

⁷⁰ Finfinnee was the original name of an area that was changed into Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital.

⁷¹ Mashashaa was one of the generals of Menelik who conquered the Oromo in the area of Gullallee.

⁷² Tamene Bitema, “On Some Oromo Historical Poems,” *Paidume Mittellugen Zur Kuhurkunde* 2a (1983): 218–319.

⁷³ Karl Knutsson, *Authority and Change: A Study of The Kallu Institution Among the Macha Galla of Ethiopia* (Goteborg: Enografiska Museet, 1967), 147–155.

Amhara ones. The use of Oromo personal name became a mark of shame and a badge of humiliation. However, “since in the Oromo tradition, personal names locate individuals within kinship structures, such forced name changes led to the alienation of people from kinship ties and caused a rupture in their social history.”⁷⁴

Conclusion

Ernest Gellner aptly described Ethiopia as “a prison-house of nations if ever there was one.”⁷⁵ In that prison-house of nations the Oromo language was banned from being used for radio broadcasting and publishing up to 1974. Up to 1991, it was neither permissible to teach nor to produce literature in the Oromo language, and nor was it possible to use it in legal forums. “In court or before an official an Oromo had to speak Amharic or use an interpreter. Even a case between two Oromos, before an Oromo-speaking magistrate, had to be heard in Amharic.”⁷⁶ Even today, Oromo Orthodox Church clergy are not permitted to preach in their language. Oromo Orthodox Christians are denied the right for learning and understanding their religion in their language.

From the time of its creation during the 1880s and 1890s and up to 1991, the Ethiopian state never recognized the identities, languages, and cultures of most of its peoples, including the Oromo. The identity of the Amhara national group, their language, culture, religion and way of life were projected as pan-Ethiopian identity. It was only after the establishment of federal system in Ethiopia in 1992, that the Oromo were able to administer themselves in Oromia, and for the first time to write and develop literature in their own language. At stake in the current genocidal war in Tigray, Oromia and other parts of Ethiopia is the existence of the federal system, and the threat that the Oromo will lose their democratic rights if it is dismantled. The Oromo fear that their language will be banned from being used for teaching, governmental services, and publishing in their country. The history of the Oromo reveals the meaning of Ethiopian imperial-nationalism and warns against its revival: “It remains the belief of the Amhara elites that to be an Ethiopian one has to cease to be an Oromo. The two things were/are seen as incompatible.”⁷⁷

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributor

Mohammed Hassen joined Department of History at Georgia State University in January 1992 and retired in 2017. His research interest is in Ethiopian history, with special focus on Oromo history, the area in which he has published extensively.

⁷⁴ Bulcha, “The Making of the Oromo Diaspora,” 192.

⁷⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 85.

⁷⁶ Paul Baxter, “Ethiopia’s Unacknowledged Problem: The Oromo,” *African Affairs* 77 (1978): 288.

⁷⁷ Mekuria Bulcha, “The Language Policies of Ethiopian Regimes and the History of Written Afaan Oromo: 1844–1994,” *Journal of Oromo Studies* 2, nos. 1–2 (1994): 101.