

*IDENTITY IN ETHIOPIA:
THE OROMO
FROM THE 16TH TO THE 19TH
CENTURY*

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the thesis of Cherri Reni Wemlinger find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Chair

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Abstract

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This thesis looks at changing identity through the history of the Oromo people of Ethiopia from the 16th to 19th century. Using culture, religion, and identity to situate the mechanisms used by the Oromo, I explore how they have maintained and altered their sense of self; it seeks a better understanding of the role identity maintenance and formation play in the unfolding of world history. The diverse history of Ethiopia provides a unique venue for studying cultural change. Ethiopia had global connections throughout Asia and the Middle East, maintaining strong trade relations with Egypt, Arabia, the Mediterranean, and Eurasia. These trade relations were an important element in the spread of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism into the area that is modern day Ethiopia.

Although there has been considerable contact between these religious systems, there still remain distinct practices which reveal clues about the agency groups have used to create their own identities. The cultural group that will be the focus of this thesis are the Oromo. The Oromo constitute the largest ethnic group in modern day Ethiopia. They are an eastern Cushitic speaking people. The Oromo began to move north into Abyssinian territory after fighting

between the Sultanate of Adal and the Christian Solomonite kingdom, in the 16th century weakened both groups and gave the Oromo an opening to relocate. The Oromo chose different religious identities to define themselves and to gain power in their new homes.

The Oromo identify as a single ethnic group, but are also subdivided into smaller groups related to their families of origin. The Oromo practice Islam, Christianity, and Oromo religion. Even though they have adopted diverse religious beliefs systems, these systems all bear distinct Oromo cultural elements. The Oromo exercised power over their own identities, defined their own cultural and religious character, and have maintained their ethnic distinctiveness.

This thesis will provide a blueprint for looking at religion as a system used to define and empower. By investigating the syncretism of religious systems and the methods used by specific groups of people to shape their own identities in the face of changing political and cultural environments, it is possible to identify some of the mechanisms used by minority cultures to shape and maintain identity.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my children Erik, Elizabeth, Zachary and Joshua Wemlinger without whose support and love I could never have completed this project.

Also included are Tessa, my daughter-in-law, and Cora and Declan, my grandchildren, who offered diversion and perspective during the completion of this project

“Peoples create their own histories by making choices within a framework of opportunities and constraints. In the historical interaction of small groups within a larger state and social formation, the context of constraints and opportunities changes over time, as do the choices and actions of the smaller groups.”¹

James Quirin
Fisk University

Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how the Oromo who lived within the borders of modern day Ethiopia used elements of their own culture to maintain their distinct identity in spite of the influence of non-Oromo religions and how they molded these religious systems to accommodate their cultural identity between the 16th and 19th centuries. The diverse history of Ethiopia provides a unique venue for studying cultural change. Ethiopia had global connections throughout Asia and the Middle East, maintaining strong trade relations with Egypt, Arabia, the Mediterranean, and Eurasia. These trade relations were an important element in the spread of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism into the area that comprises modern day Ethiopia. The culture of the Amhara which inhabited northern Ethiopia was dominated by religious interests. Abrahamic religions have had a strong presence in this area; Judaism from the 10th century BCE according to the *Kebrā Nagast*, Islam since the 7th century, and Christianity from the 4th century, making Ethiopia one of the oldest centers of both Christianity and Islam on earth.² Besides the influences of these religious systems ethnic groups in this region had a diversity of religious

¹ James Quirin, "Caste and Class in Historical North-West Ethiopia: The Beta Israel (Falasha) and Kemant, 1300-1900." *The Journal of African History* 39. 2. , 1998: 195.

² Miguel F. Brooks, *A Modern Translation of the Kebrā Nagast (Glory of the Kings) translated by Miguel F. Brooks.* (Asmara, Eritrea: The Red Sea Press, Inc., 2002), 175.

belief systems. The area that comprises modern day Ethiopia provides the historian with an intriguing mix of landscapes when looking at concepts of identity and power including the impact religion has had on these concepts over time. Some Oromo have chosen to adhere to Islam or Christianity, while including elements of Oromo religion into their cultural identity. Ethiopian nationalism is an important part of Ethiopian culture, but the Oromo strongly identify as Oromo. Although this thesis focuses on Oromo identity, between the 16th and 19th centuries the Oromo were identified primarily by their interaction with the ruling Amhara. A discussion of the Amhara and the general history of Ethiopia are necessary to historically contextualize the Oromo.

Religion, for many people, plays a significant role in creating a sense of identity. Ethiopia is an example of a state whose national identity is shaped by its religious heritage. From the early contact of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon, as described in the *Kebrā Nagast* (The Glory of the Kings), the Amhara who later became the founders of the modern state of Ethiopia and the ethnic groups which lived under their rule have defined who they are in terms of religious identities. This is important in regard to Oromo identity because the Amhara were imperialistic and used this relationship to the Queen of Sheba to justify their right to rule. This was especially evident during the Solomonic dynasty, which held power from 1270 to 1974. By establishing their authority through their connection to the offspring of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon they rationalized forced conversion of the non-Christian population of the area to Christianity. Religious status was a determinant of social status and the Oromo were marginalized based on their religious identity.

The *Kebrā Nagast* is at least seven hundred years old and tells the story of how the Queen of Sheba met Solomon and how the Ark of the Covenant came to Ethiopia. It is written in

Ge'ez (the Ethiopian sacred language) and traces the conversion of the Ethiopians to the faith of the "Lord God of Israel." As pointed out by Edward Ullendorff "The *Kebrä Nagast* is not merely a literary work, but . . . it is the repository of Ethiopian national and religious feelings."³ As this thesis focuses on how cultural groups use religion to their advantage in gaining power and in shaping their identities, Ethiopia's strong religious character provides a significant amount of material to work with. The four primary religious systems that are historically important include those held by local communities, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Although there has been considerable contact between these religious systems, there still remain distinct practices which reveal clues about the agency groups have used to create their own identities. The cultural group that will be the focus of this thesis are the Oromo. In many early travel writings the Oromo were referred to as the Galla by some non-Oromo. This reference was pejorative, based on its translation as "pagan" in Somali and "wandering" or "stranger" in Oromo. The Oromo constitute the largest ethnic group in modern day Ethiopia. They are an Eastern Cushitic speaking people. The traditional view held that the Oromo had occupied most of the Horn of Africa until around the 10th century when the Somali moved in from the south and forced the Oromo out of this area and toward the area that makes up the modern state of Ethiopia. This view provided an explanation for the movement of the Oromo into this area in the 16th century. Most recent research contends that both the Somali and Oromo lived in southern Ethiopia and that the Oromo migrated further into the area that makes up the modern state of Ethiopia beginning in 1532.⁴ Whichever viewpoint is taken sufficient historical documentation exists to date their movement into Ethiopia in the mid 16th century.

³ Edward Ullendorff, *Ethiopia and the Bible* (Oxford: University Press for the British Academy, 1968), 75.

⁴ Herbert S. Lewis, "The Origins of the Galla and Somali." *The Journal of African History* 7.1 (1966): 27.

The Oromo began to move north into Ethiopia after fighting between the Sultanate of Adal and the Christian Solomonite kingdom, in the 16th century, weakened both groups and gave the Oromo an opening to relocate. The Oromo chose different religious identities to define themselves and to gain power in their new homes. The Oromo identify as a single ethnic group, but are also subdivided into smaller groups related to their families of origin. The Oromo practice Islam, Christianity, and traditional Oromo religion. Even though they have adopted diverse religious beliefs systems, these systems all bear distinct Oromo cultural elements. The Oromo exercised power over their own identities, defined their own cultural and religious character, and have maintained their ethnic distinctiveness. The agency that has been exercised is evident in the differing paths that ethnically similar groups have taken depending on specific needs.

Religion is a worldwide phenomenon that impacts identity and the unique situation in Ethiopia with the historically distinct influence of the Abrahamic religions makes it a rich source of experiences for historical consideration. These religions intersected with local religions, and the ways they were used by the Ethiopians to define themselves has broad implications for other areas of the world in which Islam and Christianity have spread. The discrete aspects of manipulating these religious systems to gain power will shed light on similarities that may be found in other areas and could inform a broader research project. This thesis and its discussion of concepts of identity and power in relation to religion has a world history perspective because the issues raised by the Abrahamic religions are issues that have historically had a major impact on the world at large. This thesis will provide a blueprint for looking at religion as a system used to define and empower. By investigating the syncretism of religious systems and the methods used

by specific groups of people to shape their own identities in the face of changing political and cultural environments, it is possible to identify some of the mechanisms used by minority cultures to shape and maintain identity.

One historical example of just such a use of religion can be seen in the 1868 Meiji restoration. Much like Japan before the Meiji restoration, the Oromo lived in small, “clan” type groups which bore specific names. They often fought with one another over resources and control of specific areas. As they came into contact with the Amhara and their cultural autonomy was challenged, they used cultural mechanisms to maintain their identity. Like the Oromo case, the Meiji restoration also included a religious component. On July 8 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry anchored the USS *Powhatan* in Edo (Tokyo) Bay and gave an ultimatum to the Japanese to open their ports to trade. Until this time the Japanese had only been a confederation of shogunates, but realizing the threat posed by United States forces the Meiji accelerated their move to construct a national identity.⁵ The Meiji created a collective identity through uniting the people of Japan in a system of religion that was characterized by worship of the emperor. They built shrines, creating sites of memory, as visual reminders of their collective identity. This mythologizing formed a unified identity where none had existed before. This identity and the “religious” components it included empowered the Japanese in their interaction with the west.⁶ By strengthening their own religious system the Japanese were also able to resist proselytization by Christian groups when they began to send missionaries to Japan, thereby retaining their religious identity.

⁵ T. Fujitani, *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 4-28.

⁶ Fujitani, 1.

The Oromo also used components of their religious system to maintain a sense of cultural identity. Although some Oromo adopted Islam or Christianity, they also maintained elements of their non-Abrahamic religion such as the *gada* system. This system of social organization retained significance in Oromo culture regardless of the dominant culture in which the Oromo lived. By looking at religion in relation to the power that people exert on religions that encroach on local belief systems, historians can begin to unlock the complex tools used to retain or gain power and to retain and clarify identity of social groups within a state and world community; just as the Japanese and the Oromo did.

Historiography

Although much has been written about religious systems in the area that makes up modern day Ethiopia, no scholarship looks at concepts of identity and power as it is approached in this thesis. The material that is available deals with the history of religion, the history of Ethiopia, political history, economic history, culture and art, but not identity and power. Ethiopian religious history and culture are discussed in works which deal with the whole of Africa, but these works by their very nature do not contain extensive discussions of how cultural groups in modern day Ethiopia exhibit agency in relation to cultural change and religious systems.

The first large scale work on Ethiopia was written by an Ethiopian monk, in 1681.⁷ Since then, Ethiopia has attracted significant historical treatment. Early work included E. A. Wallis

⁷ Hiob Ludolf, *A New History of Ethiopia being a full and accurate description of the kingdom of Abessinia*,

Budge's, two volume histories, written in 1928.⁸ Although Budge's work added a significant number of translated texts to western scholarship regarding Ethiopia, it was steeped in colonial ideology and presented a skewed view of Ethiopians and their religious systems. During the Italian invasion of 1936, Sylvia Estelle Pankhurst (1882-1960) became interested in Ethiopia, and raised funds to build a teaching hospital. In 1955, her book *Ethiopia, a Cultural History* was published.⁹ Her son, Dr. Richard Pankhurst has done extensive work on Ethiopian history and is a greatly respected scholar in both Ethiopia and internationally. Dr. Pankhurst has written or edited 17 books on Ethiopia, including *The Ethiopians* published in 1998, and more than 400 articles.¹⁰

The religious historiography of Ethiopia is of primary interest to this thesis and includes numerous contributions. Early works include *The Church History of Ethiopia* written by a British clergyman, Michael Geddes and published in 1696 provides an interesting discussion of

vulgarly, though erroneously, called the Empire of Prester John: in four books . . . illustrated with copper plates. London: Printed for Samuel Smith, bookseller. 1684.

⁸ E. A. Wallis Budge, *A History of Ethiopia, Nubia, and Abyssinia in Two Volumes*. (London: Methuen & Co. LTD., 1928).

⁹ Sylvia Pankhurst, *Ethiopia: A Cultural History*, (London: Lalibela House and Sidgwick & Jackson, 1955).

¹⁰ Dr. Pankhurst's work is extensive and covers subjects from economics to medical history. Some of the most beneficial of his works are those that provide access to primary documents of Ethiopian history these include: *Letters from Ethiopian Rulers (Early and Mid-Nineteenth Century)*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. *The Ethiopian Royal Chronicles*. Addis Ababa: Oxford University Press, 1967. *Travellers in Ethiopia*. London: Oxford University Press, 1965. Two of his works provide access to historical photographs and engravings these are: *Ethiopia Photographed: Historic Photographs of the Country and its People Taken Between 1867 and 1935*. London: Keagan Paul International, 1996 co-authored by Denis Gerard. *Ethiopia Engraved: An Illustrated Catalogue of Engravings by Foreign Travellers From 1681-1900*. London: Kegan Paul International, 1988, co-authored with Leila Ingrams. Some of his other works include: *The Ethiopians*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. *An Introduction to the Economic History of Ethiopia from Early Times to 1800*. *The Ethiopian Borderlands: Essays in Regional History from Ancient Times to the End of the 18th Century*. Lawrenceville, New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 1997. *History of Ethiopian Towns from the Middle Ages to the Early Nineteenth Century*. Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1982. *An Introduction to the Medical History of Ethiopia*. Trenton, New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 1990. *A Social History of Ethiopia: The Northern and Central Highlands from Early Medieval Times to the Rise of Emperor Tewodros II*. Trenton, New Jersey: Red Sea Press, 1992. *State and Land in Ethiopian History*. Addis Ababa: Institute of Ethiopian Studies, 1966.

the early Ethiopian church.¹¹ Another very useful text by Donald Crummy, published in 1973, *Priests and Politicians: Protestant and Catholic Missions in Orthodox Ethiopia 1830-1868* discusses 19th foreign missions in Ethiopia.¹² More recent additions include Stuart C. H. Munro-Hay's *Ethiopia and Alexandria: the metropolitan episcopacy of Ethiopia, 4th-14th centuries*, published in 1997, which looks at the ecclesiastical history of Ethiopia.¹³ Works that discuss Islam in Ethiopia include a work written by J. Spencer Trimingham, published in 1952, *Islam in Ethiopia*.¹⁴ This book describes the history of Islam in Ethiopia and the interaction between the Christian kingdom and the Muslims. *Church and State in Ethiopia 1270-1527*, written by Taddesse Tamrat and published in 1972 is also an important work.¹⁵ Although these works discuss religion in Ethiopia, none of them address the formation of identities and the exercise of power addressed in this thesis.

A great deal of scholarship regarding Ethiopian religions has been produced in German, some of which has been translated into English. These include such works as *Worlds of Memory and Wisdom: Encounters of Jews and African Christians*, edited by Jean Halperin and Hans Ucko, published in 2005.¹⁶ This work addresses the relationships between Christians and Jews in Ethiopia. Another worthwhile text published in 2006, *African Identities and World Christianity in the Twentieth Century*, resulted from the Third International Munich-Freising

¹¹ Michael Geddes, *The church-history of Ethiopia [microform] : wherein among other things, the two great splendid Roman missions into that empire are placed in their true light : to which are added, an epitome of the Dominican history of that church, and an account of the practices and conviction of Maria of the Annunciation, the famous nun of Lisbon*. London : Printed for Ri. Chiswell ..., 1696

¹² Donald Crummey, *Priests and politicians: Protestant and Catholic missions in Orthodox Ethiopia, 1830-1868*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

¹³ Stuart C. Munro-Hay, *Ethiopia and Alexandria : the metropolitan episcopacy of Ethiopia* Warszawa : Zas Pan, 1997.

¹⁴ J. Spencer Trimingham, *Islam in Ethiopia*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1952).

¹⁵ Tamrat, Taddesse. *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-152*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

¹⁶ Jean Halperin and Hans Ucko. *Worlds of Memory and Wisdom: Encounters of Jews and African Christians*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2005).

Conference on the History of Christianity in the Non-Western World (September 15-17, 2004).¹⁷ Again the essays in this text address many aspects of Christianity in Africa including Ethiopia, but look at identity from the perspective of the religion forming identity as opposed to the agency exercised by Ethiopians to use religion as one aspect of identity formation. Other contributions address health and religion, conflict and religion, but none address identity formation and the agency exercised by Ethiopians.

Identity as a general topic has been the subject of numerous texts many produced by sociologists and philosophers. One notable example published in 2005 is *The Ethics of Identity* by Kwame Anthony Appiah, an African Studies scholar and philosopher. This work focuses on the constraints that are placed on individuality based on our collective identities including, sexuality, race, religion, gender, and nationality. His work confronts the “rest and the West” ideology using identity as a criteria for finding similarities as well as differences based on the concept that humans value identity. Being a philosopher, Appiah also considers the moral impetus to identity. Numerous works relating to identity focus on ethnicity. These include *The Invention of Ethnicity* edited by Werner Sollors (1989), a collection of essays that loosely focuses on the socially and historically constructed nature of ethnicity.¹⁸ This work provides a challenging view to preconceptions of ethnicity. *Ethnic Identity* edited by Lola Romanucci-Ross, George A. De Vos, and Takeyuki Tsuda (2006), is a revised edition of a 1975 study of ethnic identity.¹⁹ Using a psycho cultural approach and looking at new topics this edition addresses four concerns: how national loyalty interacts with ethnic identity, the preservation of

¹⁷ Klaus Koschorke, *African Identities and World Christianity in the Twentieth Century: Proceedings of the Third International Munich-Freising Conference on the History of Christianity in the Non-Western World September 15-17, 2004*, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005).

¹⁸ Werner Sollors, ed. *The Invention of Ethnicity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹⁹ Lola Romanucci-Ross and George A. DeVos and Takeyuki Tsuda eds. *Ethnic Identity*, (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2006).

ethnic identity in immigrant populations, the tension between ethnic ascription and self-definition, and changing identities in the face of changing political climates. *Ethnicity and Race* by Stephen Cornell and Douglas Harmann (2007) looks at constructionist and primordialist discussions of identity formation.²⁰ This is an excellent text and provides considerable material relating to identity formation, leaning toward a combination of these two approaches.

The relationship between violence and identity also has relevance for African identities. Monique Marks' *Young Warriors: Youth Politics, Identity and Violence in South Africa* (2001)²¹ and *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2006) by Amartya Sen both look at how the need to protect identity is often a catalyst for violence as well as violence as an element of group identity. Marks points out that the youth in Diepkloof, South Africa, created an identity for themselves that was in reaction to the assigned identity ascribed to them by the South African government. Even as the African National Congress, which supported these youth in their activities, stopped advocating violence as progress was made to stop apartheid, many of these youth did not change their identities because their circumstances had not changed. Sen argues that much ethnic violence is sustained by an illusion of unique identity.

African identity is treated in several works which deal with either specific cultural groups or with an overall political identity for the African continent. *The Swahili: Idiom and Identity of an African People* by Alamin M. Mazrui and Ibrahim Noor Shariff (1994) discusses the relativity of Swahili identity.²² Mazrui and Shariff argue that misconceptions regarding the origin of Swahili as a language and the descent of the people who identify as Swahili have led to

²⁰ Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*. (Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press, 2007).

²¹ Monique Marks, *Young Warriors: Youth Politics, Identity and Violence in South Africa*, (Johannesburg, South Africa: Witwatersrand University Press, 2001).

²² Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

erroneous conclusions about Swahili identity. *Crafting Identity in Zimbabwe and Mozambique* by Elizabeth MacGonagle (2007) challenges the long held belief that the identity of the Ndaus of eastern Zimbabwe and central Mozambique was formed by colonialists.²³ MacGonagle provides historical evidence that Ndaus identity was formed over a process of historical change prior to the arrival of formal colonialism. Both of these works provide examples of scholarship on the historical development of identity in discrete African communities.

Ethiopian studies in Italy have a significant historiography. From the beginning of Italian colonialism in Africa during the scramble for Africa until the fall of the fascist regime in 1941, Ethiopia was of major interest to Italian scholars. After World War II, Italians collectively pushed their involvement in Ethiopia out of the national memory. Unlike most other European states Italians have not, until recently, pursued a scholarly treatment of their colonial past. Italian historians did not examine Italian colonial policy nor did Italian scholars conduct research in Africa. In the 1970's Irma Taddia was the sole Italian scholar working on Italian colonialism. In 1986 she published her work *L'Eritrea colonia* which dealt with the social history of Eritrea.²⁴ Not until recently have more Italian scholars begun to look closely at Ethiopia as a subject of study. A work published in 2005 *Italian Colonialism*, edited by Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, is a compilation that includes the work of both African and Italian scholars.²⁵ Numerous works have been published by Italian scholars, but few are available in English. The new generation of Italian scholars is taking advantage of Italian primary sources, which have been ignored by both foreign and Italian scholars in the past. The 1999 work of Federica Guazzini, *Le ragioni di un*

²³ Elizabeth MacGonagle, *Crafting Identity In Zimbabwe and Mozambique*, (Rochester, New York: Rochester University Press, 2007).

²⁴ Irma Taddia, *L'Eritrea-colonia, 1890-1952: Paesaggi, Strutture, Unomini del Colonialismo*, (Milano, Italy: F. Angeli, 1986).

²⁵ Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, eds. *Italian Colonialism*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

confine coloniale. Eritrea 1898-1908, focuses on the colonial borders of Eritrea and Ethiopia.²⁶

Studies of religion in Ethiopia have also been published recently. A text on the Orthodox Church was published in 2002 by Paolo Borruso, *L'ultimo impero cristiano. Politica e religione nell'Etiopia contemporanea 1916-1974*, again available only in Italian.²⁷ Although many of these sources are not currently available in English, they hold great future promise for Ethiopian historiography as they open up the Italian archives and provide a sense of what is available for researchers.

Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan edited a text *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory* published in 2005, which provides an intriguing look at how Italians “forgot” their colonial heritage.²⁸ Several essays deal with Italian colonial memory and East Africa. The contribution by Sandra Ponzanesi, “Beyond the Black Venus: Colonial Sexual Politics and Contemporary Visual Practices” discusses the gendered terms in which colonial power and racial difference were structured. Using women’s bodies as a way to communicate the exoticism and eroticism of the “racial other” orientalist art produced a body of work that provided a strong and unmistakable message. Another similar work which looks at constructed identities is Delacroix’s *Women of Algiers* which compares photographs of Muslim women and African women. The African women are depicted as sensual, nude, and sexually available—the author discusses the way the artist creates, for the Muslim women, an image of the “Other” mysterious and dangerous, while the constructed identity for the African women is “primitive” without

²⁶ Frederica Guazzini, *Le Ragioni di un Confine Coloniale: Eritrea, 1898-1908*, (Torino, Italy: L’Harmattan Italia, 1999).

²⁷ Paolo Borruso, *L’ultimo Impero Cristiano: Politica e Religione nell’Etiopia Contemporanea (1916-1974)*, (Milano, Italy: Guerini e Associati, 2002).

²⁸ Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan, eds. *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005).

“civilized” morals.²⁹ The author then goes on to argue that even in modern portrayals that are purporting to unseat these colonial racial biases there is an essentializing reinforcement of the images. These texts illustrate the use of race and gender in the colonial fixing of Ethiopian identity. These works are very useful in discussing identity and the impact colonialism had on Ethiopian identity.

Several general histories of Ethiopia are being produced by Ethiopian scholars and Arabic scholars. Sergew Hable Sellassie wrote an excellent text *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*.³⁰ Published in 1972 this text provides an in-depth look at Ethiopian history and its global trade connections. *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1974* by Bahru Zewde (1991) is a concise and well written overview of Ethiopia’s modern history.³¹ Several studies written by anthropologists or political scientists are useful in historical research as they provide some basic context for the cultural material being discussed in this thesis. Two that should be mentioned here are *Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of African Society* by Asmarom Legesse (1973)³² and *Oromia & Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868-1992* by Asafa Jalata (1993).³³ Both of these texts include important cultural information directly addressing the Oromo.

Much work is being done in Ethiopian history, but the work is so vast and the use of primary sources is problematic as most of them were produced by the Amhara rulers or European travelers. Because of this the Oromo for instance are seen as “interlopers” or

²⁹ Assia Djebar, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*, (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1992).

³⁰ Sergew Hable Selassie, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*, (Addis Ababa: United Printers, 1972).

³¹ Bahru Zewde, *A History of Modern Ethiopia*, (London: James Currey Ltd, 1991).

³² Asmarom Legesse, *Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of African Society*, (New York: The Free Press A Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973).

³³ Asafa Jalata, *Oromia & Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868-1992* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1993).

“invaders” when they historically inhabited the land they were attempting to protect against Amhara imperialistic expansion. It is very difficult to get to Oromo history that depicts their perspective. The Oromo had virtually no written history until the early twentieth century. One text printed in 1922 and compiled by Enrico Cerulli includes some oral histories and some cultural works such as poems and songs.³⁴ There are several other areas of Ethiopian historiography that are sorely lacking. One of these areas relates to the revisiting of much of the previous work that was written with such a strong bias that the picture of the Ethiopian past is strongly tainted. Another area includes the need to look more closely at primary sources and trace the history of the less dominant cultural groups. Not until the history of many of these groups is better understood can an accurate picture of Ethiopian history be portrayed.

Concepts of Power, Religion and Identity

Three terms that should be defined before proceeding are: power, identity, and religion. Power must be defined not only as a standalone term, but in context. For instance, there is a difference between political power and the power to change. Political power is defined as power to exert influence and affect change in political systems. Power to change is the ability to exert control on one's own person and cause a change in personal behavior or attitudes. Power is a much discussed concept and as this thesis focuses on concepts of power and identity a brief discussion of the sociological approaches to power is called for. Michel Foucault's work expanded discussions about power. He sees power as an organizing principle and indicates that culture should be studied with regard to its relationship to power. Power does not originate in

³⁴ Enrico Cerulli, "The Folk-Literature of the Galla." in *Harvard African Studies Volume III, Varia Africana III* edited by E. A. Hooton, Natica I. Bates, and Assistant Editor Ruth Otis Sawtell, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The African Department of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, 1922).

large institutions, but rather power exists as “an infinitely complex network of ‘micro-powers’ that permeate every aspect of social life.”³⁵ According to Foucault, power is exhibited in small acts, such as the power to make someone act in a certain way without exerting any particular force on them. Foucault discusses power as having a direct connection with knowledge, arguing that “power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); power and knowledge directly imply one another;”³⁶ So to have knowledge implies having power.

Power is also defined as the ability to cause or bring about change. This can be done by one’s own actions or by eliciting a specific response from someone else. French and Raven identified five categories of power, including legitimate power, referent power, expert power, information power, reward power, and coercive power. Reward power is defined as the power of the wielder to grant desired objects, position, or privileges on the recipient. In this thesis reward power is an effective description of the kind of power the Christian state exerted on the non-Christian population by allowing them to own land for instance for submission to the state. Coercive power is defined as the means and ability to inflict negative influences on those who refuse to submit to the requested norms. This power was also a part of the state’s response to the non-Christian population, for instance the requirement that the non-Christians live in a slum away from the Christian population.³⁷ These expressions of power provide a way to think of how power is exhibited.

Power can also be defined as the ability to exert control, the ability to exert authority, the ability to do or to act. Keith Dowding, in his definition of rational choice theory, argues that

³⁵ Alan Sheridan, *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth* (London: Routledge, 1980), 139.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vantage Books, 1995), 27.

³⁷ J. R. P. French, J.R.P. and B. Raven,(1959). 'The bases of social power,' in D. Cartwright (ed.) *Studies in Social Power*. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1959).

groups or individuals are “actors” who choose from a “choice set” a group of possible actions and outcomes. They evaluate the costs and make the decision to exercise power in the most rational manner to accomplish the goals they have in mind.³⁸ Power, as discussed in relation to the Oromo in this thesis, is the power to control their own identity. It is the power to choose and then to take whatever action is necessary to see that choice come to fruition. The concept of power in this thesis is closely tied to considerations of identity.

Psychologist Erik Erikson provided some of the earliest work on identity. He focused on the formation of “ego identity” and “social or cultural identity” that was influenced by the ego’s role in society.³⁹ Identity is defined as the condition of being oneself, the way in which one defines oneself. In much of the material written about Africa, there is a sense of African identity as being defined by who they are not. This is one element that is dispelled in these case studies. The examples given do not exhibit Ethiopians with no concept of self, who define themselves by comparison to the West. Instead this thesis points out the agency and the control that Oromo exercise over their own identities.

The impact of colonialism on African identities is the subject of much scholarly enterprise. In the globalized, modern environment identifying the locus of change in cultural expression is often problematic and contentious. Questions of whether change is forced or whether it is preferred; how power was used from the outside, to effect change or how groups use agency to gain power by manipulating cultural change for their own benefit, are strongly debated. Crawford Young proposes that the discussion of identity formation is informed by scholarship that suggests three important approaches. Studies produced after World War II focus on ‘instrumentalism’ or ‘primordialism’ and, in more recent scholarship, ‘constructivism’ has

³⁸ Keith M. Dowding, *Power* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

³⁹ Robert Coles editor, *Erik Erikson Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001).

been added. Instrumentalism suggests that “rational considerations as determined by the group inform group actions.” Primordialism emphasizes the emotional content of identity formation and constructivism looks at identity formation as being the progression through which primordial or traditional features of identity have actually been created or ‘invented’ and manipulated in much more recent times in both Africa and elsewhere.⁴⁰ Young provides a conceptual framework for discussing concepts of identity and cultural change in Ethiopian society. Combining the frameworks of instrumentalism, primordialism, and constructivism to provide context we can analyze the influences that impacted the Oromo in the choices they made about their cultural identity, and how this relates to their perceptions of the importance of power in their societies.

In discussions concerning identity in scholarship relating to Africa there is a significant focus on concepts of social or cultural identity. Tony Waters, in his discussion of Hutu and Tutsi identity in Rwanda, points out much of the ambiguity that surrounds identity formation in Africa because of colonial influence. As he states “the 'socially constructed' differences between Hutu and Tutsi have become a legitimated reason for murdering one’s neighbors . . . My own observations in the Benaco refugee camp for 'Hutu' illustrate how quickly and drastically such seemingly 'fixed' identities can change.”⁴¹ In the cases discussed in this text the issue of ‘fixed’ identities will be challenged, but not as a result of colonial pressure. Rather, the focus will be on Oromo agency in altering or creating their identity in order to gain or maintain power. In a 1991 study by William F. S. Miles and David A. Rochefort, concerning African nationalist identity in Niger and Nigeria, the two concluded that religion and village of birth placed above ethnicity or

⁴⁰ Crawford Young, "The Dialectics of Cultural Pluralism: Concept and Reality." In *Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism: The Nation-State at Bay?*, Crawford Young, editor (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 23.

⁴¹ Tony Waters, "Tutsi Social Identity in Contemporary Africa." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 33.2, (1995): 343.

national identity.⁴² Identity among these groups is based more on religion than nationality or ethnicity. Although Ethiopia is often pointed out as an anomaly because of the strength of Ethiopian national identity, Miles and Rochefort provide evidence that religious and community identity are significant in overall concepts of identity in Africa. The concept of nationalism is not explored in this thesis, but religious and community identities are, and according to the work done by Miles and Rochefort these are the two primary points of identity identified in their study.

Another sociological term that needs to be discussed is the concept of religion. In this thesis religion is considered in its connection to inter-human behavior. The definition of religion according to Milton Yinger “is the attempt to bring the relative, the temporary, the disappointing, the painful things in life into relation with what is conceived to be permanent, absolute, and cosmically optimistic.”⁴³ Yinger discusses that there is no need to wait until a ‘universally’ established characterization of religion is reached to examine religious trends. Religion as used here is a system of thought that defines, explains, and makes sense of life on a very basic everyday level. For non-Abrahamic religions in Ethiopia this is the most coherent description of religion. It is not so much about the hereafter, it is about the present. In Ethiopia religion is an important element of community identity and social relationships.

⁴² William F. S. Miles and David A. Rochefort, "Nationalism Versus Ethnic Identity in Sub-Saharan Africa." *The American Political Science Review* 85.2 (1991): 397.

⁴³ Milton J. Yinger, *Religion in the Struggle for Power: A Study in the Sociology of Religion* (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1961), 5.

Considering Culture

In the context of cultural history, Clifford Geertz provided a crucial way to contextualize historical methodology in his groundbreaking concept of “thick description.”⁴⁴ Geertz ceased to ask the question “What is the relationship between society and culture?” which social-science historians had posed. Instead, he simply asked “What is culture?” This provided a conceptual framework that was pursued by cultural anthropologists, but among historians it gave rise to considerable angst. How would evidence be verified? What about the enigmatic nature of interpretation? Cultural history which includes the discussion of religion, power, and identity, in the context of Geertz’s framework, depended on the skill of the interpreter and not on a scientific framework in order to produce history. The writing of history became conjectural and depended on the concept of “plausibility.” As Natalie Davis’s work *The Return of Martin Guerre* exemplifies, in writing “cultural” history, it was necessary to look at patterns and theories outside of the discipline of history.⁴⁵ Although, in most recent historiography, culture is a layer of history that can be considered in terms of change, it still contains a significant dependence on interpretation.

When culture is melded with other historiographic methods it can add a rich texture to the work and reveals more about “change over time” than a simple analysis of events would otherwise reveal. For instance, using Immanuel Wallerstein’s world systems analysis in conjunction with religion as a world system provides an interesting way to look at religion. It is most often the work of history to look at change in relationship to “differences,” but as Wallerstein has pointed out there are times when the similarities are just as informative.

⁴⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 3-30.

⁴⁵ Natalie Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

We can always pinpoint differences. It is the easiest of all scholarly tasks, since everything is always different in some ways from everything else across time and space. What is harder and takes priority is to discover similarities. Only when we have exhausted our statements of the similarities is it prudent to analyze the residual differences. And this is all the more true if one's moral concern is with social transformation. One wants to be sure that a difference matters, that it truly suggests transformation.⁴⁶

It is this aspect of similarities that this thesis is addressing; ways of finding the places where Ethiopian religious systems intersect with Abrahamic systems and are manipulated by societies to create an identity that provides a connection to their previously held beliefs and the beliefs of those in power with which they must interact.

What Lies Ahead?

This thesis looks at changing identity through the history of the Oromo people of Ethiopia from the 16th to 19th century. Using culture, religion, and identity to situate the mechanisms used by the Oromo, I explore how they have maintained and altered their sense of self; it seeks a better understanding of the role identity maintenance and formation play in the unfolding of world history. This chapter has provided an introduction to the problem, historiography, and concepts relevant to this study. Chapter two will address Ethiopian history and the history of the Oromo people. Chapter three will include a discussion of culture, religion, and identity as it applies to the Oromo, and chapter four will be a case study of some of the mechanisms used by the Oromo to maintain their identity in the face of significant cultural, political, and economic pressure.

⁴⁶ Immanuel Wallerstein, "Feudalism, Capitalism, and the World-System in the Perspective of Latin America and the Caribbean: Comments on Stern's Critical Tests." *The American Historical Review* 93.4, (1988): 881.

The Ethiopians, despite their current difficulties, can look forward to the future with confidence. There is every hope that their age-old country, which maintained its independence throughout the era of the "Scramble for Africa ", will be able to overcome the present-day problems of poverty and economic under-development, and it will rank in the twenty-first century as one of the greatest and most honored of African states.

Professor Richard Pankhurst

Chapter 2: Historical Context

The Oromo have a significant presence in the written history of the area that includes the modern state of Ethiopia, even though most of the scholarship focuses on the Amharic kingdom. The Oromo at one time ruled much of Abyssinia under Ras Guksa (c.1790-1825).⁴⁷ The dynasty of the Yadjow Oromo lasted for over sixty years and ended with the death of Ras Ali (r. 1831-1854) in 1866.⁴⁸ In numerous primary documents of the 16th to 19th centuries, written by European travelers, government officials, Portuguese monks, and Muslim traders among others, the Oromo are given considerable attention and it is because of their relationship with the Abyssinian state that the history of Abyssinia is important to any discussion of Oromo

identity. The solidarity of Oromo identity was influenced by their combined resistance to Amhara control. The

European travelers and military personnel which came into direct contact with the Oromo during this period provide the bulk of documentary evidence concerning Oromo identity. In order to



Figure 1: Aksumite Kingdom at its zenith in the 3rd & 4th century.
Image from:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kingdom_of_Aksum

⁴⁷ Clements R. Markham, *A History of The Abyssinian Expedition*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1869), 49. See also Trimingham, 1952, 110.

⁴⁸ Trimingham, 1952, 110.

provide historical context for the Oromo, the history of the area which is now Ethiopia will be addressed.

Historians have traditionally identified the homeland of the Oromo as the Horn of Africa. Christopher Ehret places their homeland in the Ethiopian highlands, while Herbert S. Lewis situates it in southern and eastern Ethiopia.⁴⁹ Asafa Jalata points out that caution must be used in attempting to situate a homeland for the Oromo because of the colonial influences of both the Amharic state and Europeans.⁵⁰ The importance of the discussion of the location of an Oromo homeland is based on scholarship that supported the identity of the Oromo as interlopers—invaders into Amhara territory. The location of the linguistic homeland of the Oromo in the Ethiopian highlands establishes them as inhabitants of this area for at least as long as the Amhara if not longer.

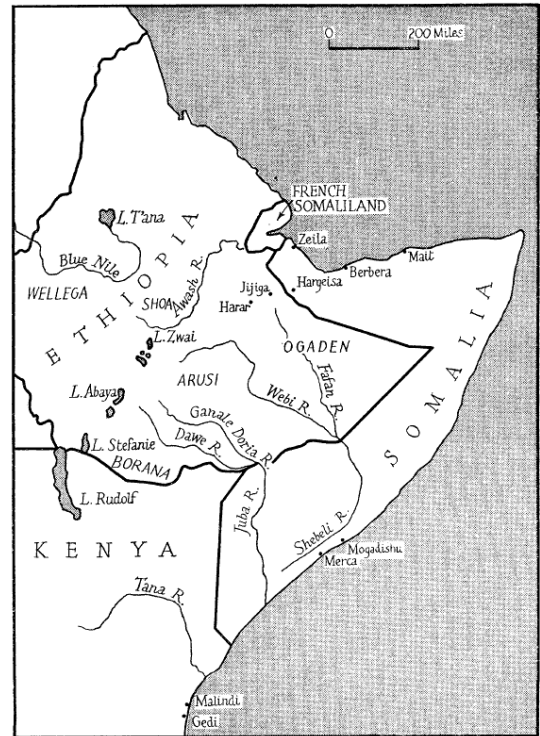


Figure 2 Map of Oromo Area

Image taken from Herbert S. Lewis' article "The Origins of the Galla and Somali" page 28.

In an early map completed by Fra Mauro in 1460 there is a reference to a river, which he named the Galla river.⁵¹ Due to the description this river is believed to be the Wabi Shebelle River (identified on the map located here as the Webi R. and then lower the Shebeli R.). This

⁴⁹ There are differing views concerning the actual location of the Oromo homeland. Ehret in his texts *Southern Nilotic History* (1971) and *Ethiopians and East Africans* (1974) places their point of origin in the Ethiopian highlands, while Lewis in his article "The Origins of the Galla and Somali" in *The Journal of African History* (1966) places it in southern Ethiopia. Most linguistic evidence supports their residence in what is now known as Oromia which includes the central highlands and parts of southern Ethiopia.

⁵⁰ Jalata, 17.

⁵¹ Fra Mauro was a Venetian monk who lived in the 15th century. In 1457 he created an extremely accurate of the known world. The map, commissioned by king Alfonso V of Portugal and is known as the "Fra Mauro map."

information is significant to Oromo history in two ways, first it is one of the earliest uses of the term “Galla” and second this river holds significant importance in Amhara tradition. According to Hassen, this river was the boundary between the Christian kingdom and . . . the Galla.⁵² This information indicates that the Oromo were present in or near the Amhara kingdom from a very early date.

The early inhabitants of northern Ethiopia are believed to have been a fusion of Cushites, who were indigenous to the area and Semitic peoples from Arabia. Pankhurst provides a basic overview of the distribution of the linguistic groups in the region of Ethiopia. The Semitic languages dominated in the north including Ge’ez, the ancient ecclesiastical language. In the south the eastern Cushitic languages discussed by Ehret are spoken. Omotic languages are found in the south-west and Nilo-Saharan languages are more common on the western periphery of Ethiopia.⁵³

The language of the Oromo has been identified as eastern Cushitic by numerous linguists, including Christopher Ehret. The oral traditions of the Oromo hold that their homeland is south-central Ethiopia, in or near the Borana area. Other traditions place their origin in the area of Mount Wolabo, thirty miles east of Lake Abaya and north of Borana, while yet another place of origin is Bahrgamo, identified as the region around Lake Abaya. As can be seen from the accompanying map these locations are all very close to one another, indicating a consistent identification with south-central Ethiopia. The difficulty that arises in establishing a definite location for the origins of the Oromo is that scant evidence exists concerning them and their

⁵² Mohammed Hassen, “The Pre-Sixteenth Century Oromo Presence within the Medieval Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia.” In *River of Blessings: Essays in Honor of Paul Baxter*, (Syracuse, New York: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, 1994), 44.

⁵³ Richard Pankhurst, *The Ethiopians* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 7-8.

movements prior to the 16th century. Beginning in the 16th century there is a considerable amount of material that refers to the “Galla” or, as they prefer to be called, the Oromo.

The Oromo occupied a large geographic area and lived in smaller community groups, but they still share a common linguistic connection. There are numerous branches of people that are self-identified as

Oromo. This name means “brave men”

which as will be discussed later in this thesis provides a clue to the way the Oromo identified themselves and the way they

were perceived by outsiders. The Oromo descended from an

ancestor named Oromo. Descent from this family is a treasured part of the oral tradition of the Oromo.⁵⁴ Two descendants of Oromo are part of this genealogy, Borana and Barentu. According to Hassen the separation of these two groups probably occurred during the 14th century with the Borana moving to the area west of the Ganale River and the Barentu remaining east of the river.⁵⁵ There is no documentation that establishes exactly why this movement occurred.

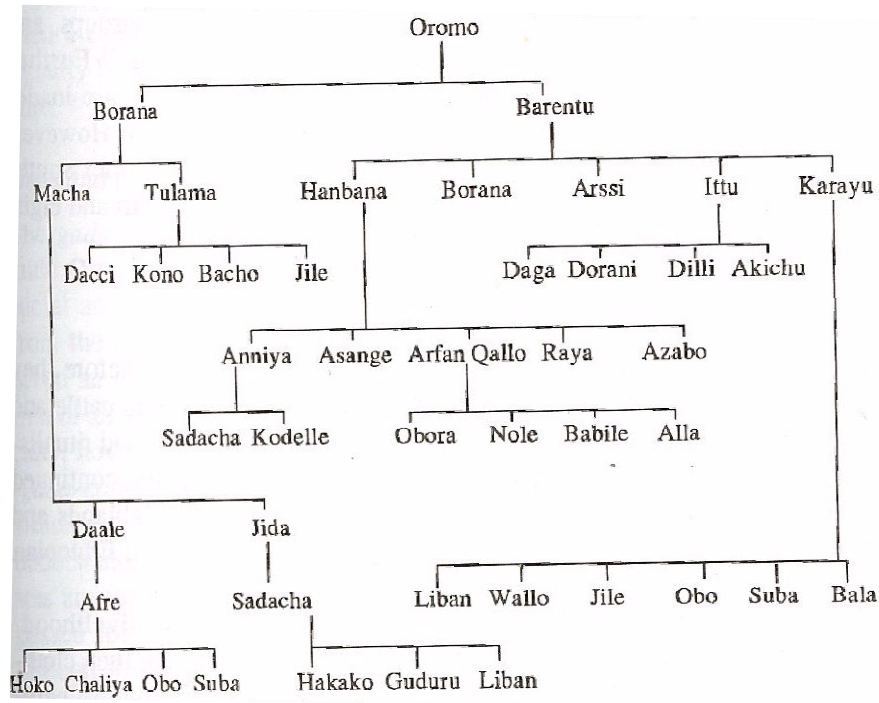


Figure 3 Oromo Genealogy

Taken from Oromia & Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868-1992 by Asafa Jalata Page 17.

⁵⁴ Jalata, 16.

⁵⁵ Hassen, 6.

There are numerous groups of Oromo which live in different geographic areas and speak different dialects of Oromo. These include the Arssi, Wallo, Tulma, Kaffa, Jimma, and many others. Their names are derived from either the geographic location in which they resided or from their “clan” or family name. To further confuse matters these groups are often called by different names depending on the source being used. This is especially relevant in the primary sources. Some groups that are identified as being of major importance at one time in history will have little importance at a later time. For the most part the groups identified specifically in this paper can be placed geographically or by using the genealogy included. Their specific significance of each sub-group to Oromo identity cannot be addressed in this thesis because of length and complexity.

Although these groups often act independently and sometimes fight as siblings do, they share their Oromo identity including language. The Oromo language is in the Afro-Asiatic language family and is a branch of the sub-group of Cushitic languages. Enrico Cerulli pointed out Ethiopian Oromo languages are divided into three main dialects that of the -Tuluma, spoken in Shewa; and Eastern Oromo, which is spoken near Harar, Arusi, etc. The Wallo dialect is somewhat like that of the

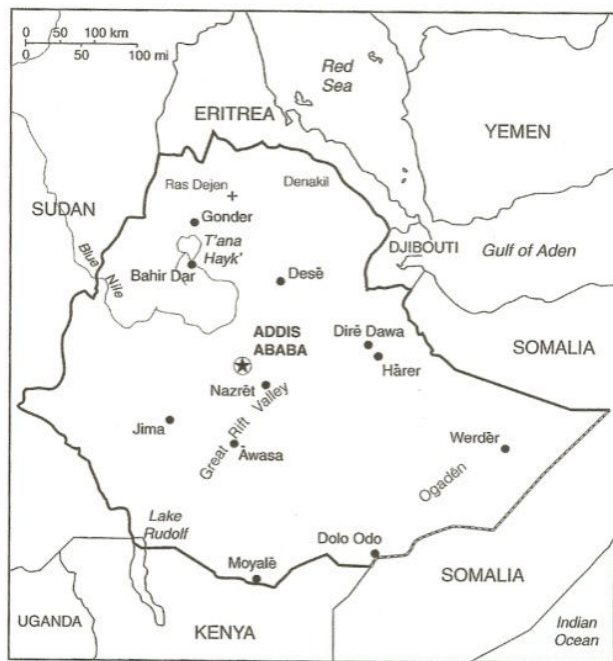


Figure 4: Map of Ethiopia today

Image from. *The History of Ethiopia* by Adejumobi, Saheed A Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007.

Eastern Oromo with slight variations.⁵⁶ Oromo, also known as afaan Oromoo or Oromiffa, is closely related to the Somali and Konso languages. According to Gene Gragg “Oromiffa is considered one of the five most widely spoken languages from among the approximately 1000 languages of Africa.⁵⁷ It is spoken by approximately thirty-million Oromo and is the lingua franca in southern Ethiopia.

Located in the Red Sea area and the Horn of Africa the modern state of Ethiopia comprises a much larger territory than did its predecessor the kingdom of Aksum. In the 9th and 10th century the Aksumite kingdom extended south from the Red Sea near the Dahlak Island to Lake Agaya. At its height Ethiopia included Eritrea which is now an independent territory. The history of Ethiopia is long and dynamic, and is mentioned in both classical Greek literature and the Bible. In the western tradition, Ethiopia’s name derives from the Greeks, who referred to the population as Ethiops because of their dark skin. According to E. A. Wallis Budge, local tradition holds that the name derives from Aethiopsis, a descendant of Kush.⁵⁸ Ethiopia, with the exception of a five-year occupation by Italy (1936-1941), was one of only two African states to maintain independence in the face of European colonization, the other one being Liberia. Because of its long history of self control Ethiopia has held philosophical sway over the hearts and minds of people in the African Diasporas. According to Saheed A. Adejumobi, the term Ethiopia became the “generic term for the whole universe of dark-skinned people in Western

⁵⁶ Cerulli, Enrico. "The Folk-Literature of the Galla." in *Harvard African Studies Volume III, Varia Africana III* edited by E. A. Hooton, Natica I. Bates, and Assistant Editor Ruth Otis Sawtell. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The African Department of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, 1922), 11.

⁵⁷ Gene B. Gragg, *Oromo Dictionary*, (East Lansing, Michigan: African Studies Center, Michigan State University, 1982), 5.

⁵⁸ Jon Abbink, “An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of Identity and Politics.” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 11.2, (1998): 109-124.

narratives.”⁵⁹ There were over time several major kingdoms in the area that is now part of modern day Ethiopia including the kingdoms of Punt, Nubia, Meroe, and Aksum.

Ethiopia was mythologized as the “Hidden Empire” and the embodiment of African independence because of the defeat of Italian forces by Menelik II at the battle of Adwa in 1896. The promise of Ethiopia for all of Africa led to the intellectual movement *Ethiopianism*. This term emerged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries as an Afro-Atlantic literary-religious tradition. Ethiopianism was expressed in slave narratives, sermons, and political tracts. Practitioners of Ethiopianism were inspired by the Bible verse in Psalm 68:31; “Princes shall come of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.” Some equated this verse to a prophecy of “salvation” for the Ethiopians; while others saw this as a prophecy that blacks would someday rule the world.⁶⁰ Thus the history of Ethiopia is more than just a national history; it characterized the hope of Africa as the continent was shaking off the chains of colonial rule.

Ethiopia, with a population of 78,254,090 people, is the third most populous African state after Nigeria and Egypt.⁶¹ The two largest ethnic groups in Ethiopia include the Oromo (formerly known as the Galla), comprising 32.1% of the population and the Amhara at 30%. Ethiopians are 60.8% Christian and 32.8% Muslim.⁶² Ethiopia is the home of two language families: Afro-Asiatic including sub-groups Cushitic, Omotic, Semitic, and Nilo-Saharan. Ge`ez is the one of the oldest of the Semitic languages in Ethiopia and is used for ecclesiastical purposes only. The Coptic Christian Bible was translated into Ge`ez as early as 615 CE, as were many other

⁵⁹ Saheed A. Adejumobi, *The History of Ethiopia* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 2.

⁶⁰ Saheed A. Adejumobi, *The History of Ethiopia*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007),3.

⁶¹ CIA. *CIA Factbook*. May 20, 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2119.html> (accessed May 20, 2008).

⁶² CIA. *CIA Factbook*. March 6, 2008. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html#People> (accessed March 14, 2008).

documents.⁶³ Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as well as numerous non-Abrahamic African religions, have all played a part in the spiritual life of Ethiopians. This mixture of rich cultural diversity and contact with Abrahamic religions from their inception makes Ethiopia an excellent place to look at the impact of religion, as a cultural system, on concepts of power and identity.

The kingdom of Aksum was the predecessor of the modern day state of Ethiopia. From as early as the 1st century CE Aksum was engaged in trade with Egypt. According to Pankhurst there are records of trade with the kingdom of Punt in myrrh.⁶⁴ They also enjoyed early trade relations with the kingdom of Meroe. One of the most significant trade routes ran to Sudan, on to Egypt, and to the Mediterranean. There were also significant trade relations across the Gulf of Aden with Arabia. Trading items included gold, ivory, and slaves. Aksum enjoyed a dynamic trade economy for much of its history. Later ties with Hellenistic traders and contacts with Rome linked Aksum to Europe. As Pankhurst points out, the area that now comprises Ethiopia also enjoyed strong trade with the Indian sub-continent, primarily the Gujarat area.⁶⁵ The Ethiopians took both ivory and gold to India, bringing home Indian cotton, spices and silk. Not only did they engage in trade with India, but the Ethiopians dispatched ambassadors to the Mogul Empire. Later, the Amhara engaged in close relations with the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century. So although the landscape of Ethiopia was formidable and did not easily lend itself to communication, even in its very early history it had global contacts.

The early history of what would later become the basis of the modern state of Ethiopia is closely connected to that of Egypt and the kingdom of Meroe. This area known as Kush was occupied by the Egyptians as early as 1500 BCE. According to P. L. Shinnie, by 750 BCE an

⁶³ Adejumobi, 7.

⁶⁴ Stuart C. Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Press, 1991), 8.

⁶⁵ Pankhurst (1998), 11.

independent Kushite state had developed in this area.⁶⁶ This early Kushite kingdom is believed to have been centered at Napata, but later moved to Meroe. The dynasty that is identified as the Meroe dynasty is dated from 275 BCE. The evidence to support this claim is based on archeological remains and funerary material. By 590 BCE a Meroitic civilization can be identified including not only material evidence, but also a distinct language. Looking at inscriptions of kings in the later part of the 5th century BCE there are elements of Ancient Egyptian and the influence of an indigenous language.⁶⁷ In 450 BCE Herodotus, while he was in Egypt, mentions meeting people from Meroe, from which he gained information about their kingdom. The geographer Strabo, who traveled to Egypt and Kush around 7 CE, made the following observation concerning fugitives taken by Petronius in 24 BCE: “Among these fugitives were the generals of Queen Candace, who was ruler of the Aethiopians in my time—a masculine sort of woman, and blind in one eye. . . After this he set out for Napata. This was the royal residence of Candace.”⁶⁸ There are two concerns that should be addressed here, first the use of the term Aethiopia. According to Strabo, Aethiopia was all of the land south of Egypt, which extended past its modern borders. This makes the reference to Candace as Queen of Ethiopia problematic as the area that became the basis of modern day Ethiopia was the kingdom of Aksum. It should also be pointed out that the use of “Candace” as a proper name was an error as “Candace” was later discovered to be a title and not a proper name, although there is speculation that an actual Candace did exist. It most likely denoted a prominent female

⁶⁶ P. L. Shinnie, “The Nilotic Sudan and Ethiopia, c. 660 BC to c. AD 600” in *The Cambridge History of Africa Volume 2 from c. 500 BC to AD 1050*, edited by J. D. Fage, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 210.

⁶⁷ Shinnie, 221.

⁶⁸ *The Geography of Strabo with an English Translation by Horace Leonard Jones, Volume Eight*, (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1912), 139.

administrator or the ‘queen mother.’⁶⁹ Meroe is believed to have come under direct control of the kingdom of Aksum sometime during the reign of King Ezana around 350 CE.

There is an inscription written in Ge’ez which describes the conquest of Meroe. As Shinnie states, “The text itself begins with the protocol normal in Aksumite inscriptions of this period. Ezana states the countries over which he claimed to rule including some in South Arabia, such as Himyar and Saba, and some in the neighbourhood of Aksum, such as Bega and Kasa (presumably Kush or Meroe), thus implying that he already controlled it.”⁷⁰ This places both Meroe and Saba as part of the Aksumite kingdom. As early as 750 to 650 BCE there appeared Sabaeen influences on the Ethiopian plateau; these included sacred royalty, astral religion, and language. There is some question as to the origination of these influences and whether or not they were superimposed on the Aksumite culture. The Sabaeen came from the area now known as Yemen and spoke an ancient Arabic dialect. They built the obelisk of Aksum, which was inscribed with the Sabaeen language.⁷¹ In time, the Aksumites developed their own language called Ge’ez, or Ethiopic, which had elements of both Sabaeen language and non-Semitic languages from earlier inhabitants of the area.

It is generally accepted that Ethiopia was the fabled land of Punt (Pwene), which is discussed in Egyptian chronicles as the supplier of luxury items to the Pharaonic court. In the first half of the first millennium BCE the D’MT kingdom arose, which is the first recorded literate civilization in Ethiopia.⁷² The Aksumite kingdom arose as early as the 1st century CE and

⁶⁹ Shinnie, 248.

⁷⁰ Shinnie, 260.

⁷¹ Richard Pankhurst, ed. *The Ethiopian Chronicles*. (Addis Abba: Oxford University Press, 1967), viii.

⁷² It is important to note that although several scholars including Richard Pankhurst in 1998 text, *The Ethiopians*, Sergew Hable Selassie in his 1972 text, *Ancient and Medieval Ethiopian History to 1270*, and Stuart Munro-Hay in his 1991 text, *Axum*, suggest that Punt was the ancient kingdom that preceded Aksum other scholars question this connection. One school of thought places the kingdom of Punt in the Horn of Africa including Somali territory.

declined around the 7th century CE. The first recorded evidence of Christian converts in Aksum was the 4th century ruler Ezana. A brief discussion of the religious history of Aksum will provide context.

Religion has played a significant role in the history of Ethiopia. According to the Coptic Church, Mark (a follower of Jesus) brought Christianity to Egypt in the first century, during the reign of the Roman emperor Nero (r. 54-68). Christianity spread throughout Egypt within fifty years of Mark's arrival in Alexandria. The Roman conquest of the 1st century also increased the influence of Christianity in Northern Africa. It is imperative to look at Christianity in Ethiopia from its earliest record in the 4th century forward, as the early contact had a significant impact on Ethiopian “national” identity. This influenced Oromo identity because in order to gain or retain power in the Solomonic dynasty it was necessary to be identified as a Christian.

When delving into the realm of myth and religion it is necessary to set aside the conventions of “reality” and accept that “truth” cannot always be documented. This is especially relevant in the discussion of Christianity in Ethiopia. Events that predate the founding of the Christian religion are of great significance to the religious identity of Ethiopian Christians. The “truth” of some of the beliefs concerning the origination of Christianity in Ethiopia will not be addressed; instead, the beliefs espoused by the Ethiopians concerning their engagement with Christian history will be given preference. Most national identities are subject to question, but their importance is not minimized by the “facts.” Rather, the beliefs of the adherents are more important than whether the accepted histories can be proven.

The Queen of Sheba visited Solomon, in Jerusalem, as referenced in the Old Testament section of the Bible and in the Quran.⁷³ The dates associated with her visit and the reign of Menelik are not known, but the range is between the 10th and 3rd century BCE. According to the *Kebra Nagast*, Sheba and Solomon were married and produced a child named Menelik.⁷⁴ Although the Bible does not record this marriage, its impact on Ethiopian identity is significant. When Menelik became an adult he visited his father Solomon. His father welcomed him as his firstborn and tried to persuade Menelik to stay in Israel and to reign after Solomon's death. Menelik refused and decided to return to Ethiopia. As related by A. H. M. Jones and Elizabeth Monroe, "King Solomon anointed Menelik with the holy oil of kingship, and named his name David, and made a law that henceforth only his male issue should reign in Ethiopia."⁷⁵ In the *Kebra Nagast* the story is related as follows, after his failure to persuade Menelik to stay in Jerusalem Solomon approached his officers, councilors, and great men of his kingdom and said "I have not been able to persuade my child. Hear now what I have to say. Let us together make a resolution to consecrate my son King of Ethiopia, and to surround him with your children."⁷⁶ Solomon requested that the leaders of Israel send their firstborn sons with Menelik to be his advisors. These young men were sad to leave their homes and decided to take the Ark of the Covenant, a holy relic for the Jewish people, with them. This aspect of Ethiopian history is of great importance to Ethiopian identity and its presence in Ethiopia is celebrated even to this day through the festival Timkat'—The Feast of Epiphany—in January. Because of its importance the source of this story is related here at length.

⁷³ *Holy Bible*, I Kings 10:1-13 and 2 Chronicles 9:1-12. *Quran*, 27:26-40

⁷⁴ Brooks, *the Kebra Nagast*.

⁷⁵ A. H. M. Jones and Elizabeth Monroe. *A History of Ethiopia*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 13.

⁷⁶ *Magda Queen of Sheba: From the Ancient Royal Abyssinian Manuscript, "The Glory of the Kings."* First translated into a European tongue by Hugues Le Roux and into English by Mrs. John Van Vorst, (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1907), 94.

The moment had come to make ready their departure. It was a cause of rejoicing for the officers of the King of Ethiopia and of sorrow for the officers of the King of Israel. Therefore these young men gathered together, wept with their fathers, their mothers, their relatives . . . Now when the first-born of the Great men of Israel received the order to set out with the son of the King, they took counsel together and said: “What is to become of us? We are leaving the land where we were born, our parents, our fellow countrymen. . . . We are not faint-hearted because our parents have repudiated us; we are sad because of Sion, the Ark of the Covenant, our Patron. For they cause us to abandon it. Now through it formerly it was that we were dedicated to God. It is for this reason that we are cast down. We weep because of this. . . . What shall we decide concerning Sion? Azareas, son of the High Priest Zadok, interrupted and said: I am going to advise you as to what we must do; . . . we must take away with us Sion, our Patron.”⁷⁷

They secreted away the Ark of the Covenant and Christian Ethiopians still believe the Ark of the Covenant is in Ethiopia. When the loss was discovered in Jerusalem, Solomon and his counselors chose to keep its loss a secret. Solomon found comfort in the knowledge that the Ark had gone with his eldest son to Ethiopia. Shortly after this Balthazar, king of Rome, requested that King Solomon send some of his sons to marry Balthazar’s daughters. The identity of this king is unknown as historically Rome was not founded until after Solomon’s death. There is a possibility that this could have been a reference to Belshazzar prince of Babylon, but again the dates are questionable as he ruled in the 6th century BCE. Solomon complied, and according to legend “so was fulfilled the prophecy that kings of the seed of David and Solomon should rule over the entire world.”⁷⁸ Some sources indicate that when the Jews and Romans were complicit in the crucifixion of Jesus they both lost their birthright because they abandoned the “true” faith. According to Ethiopian legend, this left only the Ethiopians as the “true” church.⁷⁹

The time when Aksum became Christian is often dated from early in the 4th century CE, when King Ezana was converted. Two Christian missionaries from Syria, the brothers Aedesius

⁷⁷ *Magda Queen of Sheba: From the Ancient Royal Abyssinian Manuscript*, 111-114.

⁷⁸ Jones and Monroe, 15.

⁷⁹ Jones and Monroe, 16.

and Frumentius, are credited with the conversion of Aksum to Christianity.⁸⁰ According to the account of Rufinus Tyrannius (340-410) related by E. A. Wallis Budge,

Meropius, a Syrian merchant, set out in a ship for India intending to open up a business connection with the Indians. He took with him two young Christian kinsmen who were brothers called Frumentius and Aedesius, and as they were sailing down the Red Sea they landed at a certain place, probably to revictual the ship. The natives seized the merchant and his crew, but they spared the two brothers whom they took to the king, and he made Frumentius his chancellor, and Aedesius his cupbearer or butler.⁸¹

As the story goes, the king died and the queen requested the two brothers remain, which they did. Later the brothers returned to their own country and actively sought trade opportunities with Aksum for other Christians; by the time they returned to Aksum there was a significant foreign Christian community there. Frumentius went to Alexandria and requested that the current bishop, Athanasius, send a bishop to Ethiopia. Prior to 370 Frumentius was consecrated as bishop of Aksum and is credited as being the founder of the church of Abyssinia (Ethiopia).

Frumentius's first convert was King Ezana (r.320-360), the most important of the early Aksumite rulers. The acceptance of Christianity was by no means universal, however: many groups such as the Agaw and most Aksumites maintained their religious systems and the Falasha practiced Judaism.⁸² Nevertheless, the king's conversion was the first step in expanding Christianity throughout Aksum.

King Ezana expanded and unified the kingdom of Aksum, all the while introducing Christianity and facilitating its expansion in his kingdom. In the 5th century a group of Greek-speaking missionaries came to Aksum. These 'Nine Saints' from Syria introduced a monastic

⁸⁰ E. A. Wallis Budge, *A History of Ethiopia, Nubia, and Abyssinia in Two Volumes* (London: Methuen & Co. LTD., 1928), 147.

⁸¹ Budge, 147.

⁸² Budge, 147-149.

system into Aksum as well as a Christian educational system.⁸³ Christianity continued to grow in the kingdom, as witnessed by archeological evidence; by the 6th century numerous churches had been established throughout what would later become the state of Ethiopia. In the 7th century another Abrahamic religion would influence Ethiopian history.

The Aksumite Empire of Ethiopia had close dealings with the Arabian Peninsula and at times ruled Yemen. Traders from Aksum not only maintained active trade relations with the area, but several Ethiopians lived in Mecca. In the early years before Islam became a formal religion, Muhammad preached in Mecca and criticized Meccan policies. In this early period, fearing for the safety of his followers, he sought asylum for some of his them from the Emperor of Aksum; during 615 and 616 over one-hundred such people found asylum in the court of Aksum. As pointed out by David Robinson, “Included among them were some important figures: Muhammad’s daughter Ruqayya, her husband Uthman (who would become the third caliph), Muhammad’s future wife Umm Habiba, and his cousin Jafar, the brother of Ali.”⁸⁴ The asylum offered by Armah II, who is credited with being the Aksumite emperor who welcomed the followers of Muhammad, was important enough to be recorded in the Hadith (ways of the Prophet) as “the first and second *hijras* (migrations) to Abyssinia.” Because of the protection offered by Armah II, Muhammad made Aksum “off limits” for *jihad*, and tradition holds that Muhammad said of Aksum “leave the Abyssinians alone.”⁸⁵

As Islam gained strength after Mohammed’s death in 632 Muslim traders brought their new religion with them to Ethiopia and this, along with intermarriage, facilitated the spread of

⁸³ Pankhurst (1998), 37-39.

⁸⁴ David Robinson, *Muslim Societies in African History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 111.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Islam in the Horn of Africa.⁸⁶ As a result, trading centers were the first to adopt Islam. Often this started as a cursory acceptance to facilitate trade, but as time passed many of these merchants became devout Muslims. During this period the Muslim traders enjoyed royal protection, but not the right to proselytize or freedom of worship. As early as the 8th century the Dahlak Islands, an important Ethiopian trading center, had embraced Islam. Shewa was the oldest documented inland Muslim sultanate. It was ruled by the Makhzumi family, and continued from 896 to 1295. They were deposed by the Walashma dynasty, which continued from 1295 to 1415.

The inland Muslim sultanate in Shewa was, according to Tamrat “still very weak, and did not constitute a serious danger either to the Christian kingdom or to the pagan interior of southern Ethiopia.”⁸⁷ In the second half of the 10th century two crucial events increased Muslim power in Ethiopia. One was the rise of a rebel queen in Aksum. Her exact name is a matter of contention, being Judit, Gudit, or Esato, i. e. ‘fire’.⁸⁸ Pankhurst recounts two accounts contemporary to her rule. The first by a 10th century Arab geographer called Ibn Hawqal states “The country of Habasha [Ethiopia] has been ruled by a woman for many years Until today she rules with complete independence in her own country and the frontier areas of . . . the Habasha.”⁸⁹ Another account is from an 11th century Coptic work the *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*. In this work the author, referring to the Aksumite king, observes, “A woman, a queen of the Bani al-Hamwiyah had revolted against him and against his country. She took captive from it many people and burned many cities and drove him from place to place.”⁹⁰ The

⁸⁶ Nyang, 43.

⁸⁷ Taddesse Tamrat, “Ethiopia the Red Sea and the Horn” in *The Cambridge History of Africa, Volume 3 from c. 1050 to 1600*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 104.

⁸⁸ Pankhurst (1998), 41.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Pankhurst (1998), 42.

activities of this queen not only weakened the Aksumite kingdom providing opportunity for the expansion of Islam, but it also provided an opportunity for the Zagwe kings to usurp authority.

The second event that provided an occasion for the expansion of Islam in Ethiopia was the rise to power of the Fatimids in Egypt in the 10th century. They expanded trade in the Red Sea and, as a result, Muslim traders moved inland. Zeila became a major center of Muslim power in Ethiopia. According to Tamrat “it was in this direction that Islam was destined to play a most significant role in the history of the Ethiopian region.”⁹¹ The sultanate of Shewa grew in importance until it gained the attention of the Amharic state and conflict soon resulted. A document discovered by Dr. Enrico Cerulli and referred to by Trimmingham shows the decline of the Makhzumi sultanate in Shewa and the rise of the Walashma sultanate deposing the Makhzumite sultan in 1285. The period from the 10th to the 12th century was the earliest period of organized growth of Islam in Ethiopia. Muslim advances and pressure from the local communities caused a decline in the Aksumite kingdom, but Christian culture continued to develop.

The next major dynasty to follow that of Aksum was that of the Zagwe`, who were Agaw in origin. The Agaw like the Oromo are part of the subgroup of eastern Cushitic speakers. This dynasty lasted from 1137 to 1270. The Christian Aksumite kingdom languished until it was rejuvenated by the Zagwe kings from 1150 to 1270. The rise of the Zagwe kings represented a significant shift in Ethiopian history because it led to a relocation of the power center farther south toward Lasta and the Wallo province and significant expansion of Christianity.⁹² King Lalibela, who reigned from 1205-1225, is remembered as one of the greatest of the Zagwe kings.

⁹¹ Tamrat, in *The Cambridge History of Africa, Volume 3*, 105.

⁹² Pankhurst (1998), 46.

It was during his reign that the famous rock-hewn churches were built.⁹³ King Lalibela claimed his right to rule from his Biblical connection to Moses, who married an Ethiopian woman. Although he did not claim to have descended from Solomon, this connection to Moses was sufficient to legitimize his right to rule.⁹⁴ A similar claim was made by other Zagwe kings. The Zagwe dynasty would later succumb to an Amharic dynasty that laid claim to the throne through the line of Solomon.

In 1270 the Solomonic dynasty took power and ruled until after World War II. This group of rulers legitimized their rule through their status as descendants of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. This, according to Donald Johnson, led to “a uniquely Ethiopian synthesis of the earlier monastic influence and the Solomonid traditions gradually developed. In the fourteenth century, the Ethiopians were ruling the only Christian state in Africa.”⁹⁵ Non-Abrahamic religions in Ethiopia as well as many other parts of Africa connect identity to community and ancestors, establishing a direct line of descent from Solomon and Sheba provided a sense of community identity that was essential to the strong influence Christianity exerted in Ethiopia.

As early as 1494, Portuguese Catholic missionaries arrived in Ethiopia. The first recorded example is Pedro de Covilha, who was not allowed to leave and died after thirty years. Later Catholic missionaries had more success and in 1543 the Portuguese were instrumental in the defeat of the Adal, the Imam of Ahmad.⁹⁶ Pedro Paez, a Jesuit, arrived in Ethiopia in 1603. He was a talented linguist and learned to read and write Amharic and Ge`ez. In 1622 King Susenyos

⁹³ Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Christianity in Africa*, (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 47.

⁹⁴ Pankhurst (1998), 48.

⁹⁵ Donald Johnson and Jean Elliot Johnson, *Universal Religions in World History: The Spread of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam to 1500* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2007), 114.

⁹⁶ Budge, 155.

declared himself to be a Catholic. The Catholics experienced limited success in their efforts in Ethiopia; however, the Bible that is the authority of Ethiopian faith is the same as that used by the Catholic Church and the orthodox Greek Church.⁹⁷ In the 19th century Catholics again entered into religious dialogue with Ethiopia, but had limited success. As pointed out by Isichei, “Christian Ethiopia, like the Coptic community, was not a mission field at all; it was an ancient and thoroughly Africanized church.”⁹⁸ Ethiopians had no need of conversion; they were already Christians despite the fact that the missionaries who came to Ethiopia believed that the Christianity practiced there was not “real Christianity.”

Between the 13th and 16th centuries Islamic states dominated a large part of central Ethiopia whose ethnic core were Hadiya-Sidama-speaking peoples. Christianity during this period tended to expand along a north-south axis, while Islam expanded in an east-west direction. The zones of convergence resulted in areas of mixed adherence to Islam and Christianity. After the establishment of the Solomonic kingdom in 1270, tensions between the Muslim community and the Christian community increased. The Solomonic kingdom expanded into the lowlands and took control of the port of Masawa on the Red Sea in the 14th and 15th centuries. The Ottoman expansion into Egypt and the Red Sea in the early 16th century also raised tensions between the local Muslim communities and the Solomonic kingdom. As a result of Ottoman expansion and the expansion of the Solomonic kingdom into Masawa and other areas that were Islamic territories, local Muslim leaders moved to stop Christian expansion and exact revenge for encroachment into their territory.

⁹⁷ Budge, 156.

⁹⁸ Isichei (1995), 51.

Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim Gran was the match that lit the fire of conflict between the Solomonic kingdom and the Ethiopian Muslims. From 1527 to 1543 he and his followers won battle after battle against the Christian Ethiopian kingdom.⁹⁹ The Christians called on the assistance of the Portuguese and killed Ahmad. As Robinson points out Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim Gran's campaigns did threaten the integrity of the Christian state and drove it into alliance with the Portuguese missionaries and military advisors. But the Solomonic rulers then formed enduring relations with the Ottomans, who were ready to accept the religious status quo in Ethiopia and encourage the growth of trade."¹⁰⁰ Militancy and conflict often characterized relations between the Christians and Muslims, but at other times they lived in relative peace and participated in lucrative trade with one another. It is at this point that the Oromo are first acknowledged as such in a written text.

In 1541 the Emperor Galawdewos took over as emperor of Ethiopia. His chronicler provides us with one of the first written sources of information about the Oromo. Prior to the reign of Galawdewos the war between Ibn Gran and the Ethiopians had significantly depleted their resources and weakened the state. With the help of the Portuguese under the command of Cristovao da Gama the Ethiopians were able to defeat Ibn Gran. The decisive battle on February 21, 1543 effectively put an end to the Gran's campaign.¹⁰¹ It was near this time that the Oromo began to expand into the territory claimed by the Solomonic Emperor. According to the chronicler of Galawdewos "The glorious King Galawdewos devoted all his time to building a town of refuge entirely for believers who had been driven from their lands by the Gallas, and he

⁹⁹ Robinson, 114.

¹⁰⁰ Robinson 115.

¹⁰¹ Pankhurst (1967), 71-72.

provided them with all their needs.”¹⁰² Another text that mentions the Oromo was a work produced by an Ethiopian priest named Bahrey. His text was written in the 1580’s or 1590’s and he spoke at length about the invasion of the Oromo into the Gamo region on the shores of Lake Abaya in southern Ethiopia. In his history the opening line is “I have begun to write the history of the Galla in order to make known the number of their [sic] tribes, their readiness to kill people, and the brutality of their manners.”¹⁰³ Bahrey was a witness to the expansion of the Oromo in southern Ethiopia and he provides some of the first descriptions of the Oromo. He identifies two main branches the Baraytuma and the Boran. The expansion of the Oromo is well documented by the chronicles of the Ethiopian kings as well as by Bahrey.

The confrontations between Galawdewos and the Oromo in the 16th century continued for two centuries. According to Pankhurst this Oromo migration north resulted in the separation of the Christian Ethiopian Empire from the Muslim emirate of Adal, which had been its former rival. It also caused a major decrease of the revenues and territory of the Christian Ethiopian Empire.¹⁰⁴ In the latter half of the 16th century, the Oromo controlled most of south-eastern Ethiopia. Bahrey points out one aspect of Oromo culture that aided their military success that of riding horses, as his history recounts “This *luba* [age-set] Mesle, in the 16th century, began the custom of riding horse and mules, which the Galla had not done previously.”¹⁰⁵ This use of horses made the already formidable Oromo warriors even more successful. Another aspect of their method of military engagement is related by Manoel d’Almeida, who wrote of his visit to Ethiopia in the 1620’s. He points out one method used by the Oromo to deal with their enemies.

¹⁰² Pankhurst (1967), 78.

¹⁰³ Bahrey’s History of the Galla in *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593-1646*, translated and edited by C. F. Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1954), 111.

¹⁰⁴ Pankhurst (1998), 96-97.

¹⁰⁵ Bahrey, 117.

After relating that the Oromo do not sow crops, but rather get their sustenance from cattle

Almeida relates the following:

The fact that they do not sow is of great use to them in that the Abyssinians cannot penetrate far into their country; when the Gallas know that they are invading with a strong army, they retire with their cattle many days' journey into the interior. The Abyssinians therefore never seize, or can seize supplies, and are thus compelled to withdraw to their own territories, often with heavy losses of men from sheer hunger.¹⁰⁶

By denying their enemies sustenance, they forced them to retreat from Oromo territory.

By the 17th century a change began to take place in the interaction between the Solomonic empire and the Oromo. Gondar became the capital of the Solomonic dynasty in 1636.¹⁰⁷ Gondar was a wealthy capital with a cosmopolitan population. This period lasted until the death of Iyasu II in 1755 and was characterized by stability and prosperity. During the reign of Emperor Iyasu I (1682-1706), the import of firearms increased and, as a result, the Ethiopians were better equipped to mount an assault on the Oromo. As Iyasu's chronicler pointed out "When the Gallas come against you do not allow them to fight in small battles, but fire rifles so that we can hear your shots and we will at once come to help you; this noise of rifles will be a signal between you and me. Be on Guard!"¹⁰⁸ As the power of the Ethiopian state grew, some Oromo allied themselves with the Ethiopians. It was during this time that the Oromo became more integrated into the Christian Ethiopian state and the Muslims and Christians lived in relative peace. By the reign of Iyasu II (1730-1755), the Oromo played a significant part in the Ethiopian administration. According to Pankhurst, Iyasu II was succeeded by his half Oromo son

¹⁰⁶ Manoel d'Almeida, in *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593-1646*, translated and edited by C. F. Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1954), 136.

¹⁰⁷ Pankhurst (1998), 109.

¹⁰⁸ Pankhurst (1967), 107.

in 1755. The influence was so strong that Bruce recorded “nothing was heard at the palace but Galla.”¹⁰⁹ In the 19th century, changes would occur and hostilities would once again be renewed.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries Muslim societies prospered. This, in turn, encouraged more settlement in Ethiopia by Arab traders and clerics. They brought with them Sufism, the new vehicle for Islamicization. Muslims could be found throughout Ethiopia and across all social sectors. Shaikh Muhammad Shafi (1743-1806) settled in central Ethiopia and lived at a “place called Jama Negus, ‘the community of the king’, because of the size and militancy of his following.”¹¹⁰ By the late 19th century Christian Abyssinian rulers were ambitiously seeking to centralize control of the previous domains controlled by the Solomonic dynasty and to modernize their state.

By the 19th century, with Oromo power significantly diminished, the Oromo—who had converted to Islam—faced the ire of the Ethiopian rulers as did all of the Muslims in Ethiopian territory. Three stand out in their aggressive expansion and attack on the Muslim communities, Tewodros II (reigned 1855-1868), Yohannes IV (reigned 1872-1889), and Menelik II (reigned 1889-1913).¹¹¹ One incident of the fierceness with which Tewodros fought the Oromo is related by Stern:

At *Saga Gora* the royal forces came in contact with *Adara Bille* . . . in the very first charge the Abyssinians, led to the onslaught by their martial Sovereign, displayed a courage which struck terror into the hearts of their oppressors, and made them shrink from encountering a foe whose natural animosity long years of relentless tyranny had stimulated to a pitch bordering on a kind of religious frenzy. *Adara Bille* and upwards of a thousand *Gallas* [Oromo] fell in battle, or perished under the executioner’s knife, whilst the country around was plundered, and the poor women and children carried captive into the various provinces of Abyssinia. The *Wollo Galla*, after this defeat, did not renew the contest . . . fled to

¹⁰⁹ James Bruce, *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile, 5 Volumes* (Edinburgh, 1790), 658.

¹¹⁰ Robinson, 116.

¹¹¹ Nehemia Levtzion and Randall L. Pouwels, *The History of Islam in Africa* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2000), 234.

their mountain fastnesses, to brood over their late disaster, and to concert means for future action.¹¹²

As a result of incidents like that described by Stern, the Oromo sought alliances with the Muslims in order to resist Tewodros, an account related by Hassen includes an excerpt from a letter drafted by Massaja “All the Galla [Oromo] will unite as one man and they will repay Tewodros’s threat with their spears.”¹¹³ This letter, crafted



Figure 5 Tewodros II

Image taken from EthiopianHistory.com
http://www.ethiopianhistory.com/Tewodros_II
(accessed April 5, 2008)

during the reign of Abba Bagibo (r.1825-1861), further indicated that the Oromo would unite with the Muslims to fight Tewodros. These alliances united the Oromo in the Gibe highlands with the Muslims against a common enemy which facilitated adoption of Islam. The Oromo were a marginalized group by the end of the 19th century and it was not until the late 20th century that their voice was once again heard.

It was during the reign of Abba Bagibo that the first Protestant mission was founded in Ethiopia. Anglican missionary Samuel Gobat founded the first Protestant mission in Ethiopia in 1830. Isichei points out that the reason for welcoming these missionaries was less a religious one than a desire to benefit from the access to technology they expected the missionaries to provide.¹¹⁴ Relations with Protestant missionaries remained tenuous, but became increasingly strained during the reign of Emperor Tewodros II (1855-1868).¹¹⁵

¹¹² Sterns (1862), 76.

¹¹³ Hassen, 194.

¹¹⁴ Isichei (1995), 212.

¹¹⁵ Felix Ekechi, “Christianity” in *Africa: African Cultures and Societies Before 1885 Vol. 2*, Toyin Falola, editor, (Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 2000), 132.

Tewodros II worked to modernize and unify Ethiopia. In order to accomplish this he took control of Shewa, Gojjam, and Wollo ousting the rulers of these regions. He imprisoned his rivals, including Sahle Mariam, who would become Emperor Menelik II. He also looked to missionaries as a way to gain access to western technology and thereby modernize Ethiopia. An unknown chronicler relates, “The Emperor Tewodros and the Queen of England were at first in good relations. . . . He asked for workers because he wished to establish in his country industries using iron, wood and brass [as well as the making of] rifles and carts.”¹¹⁶ His desire for technology over religious interests often resulted in conflicts with both the church and missionaries, which ultimately led to his downfall. The Protestant missionary efforts in Ethiopia were unsuccessful because the Ethiopians were already predominantly Christian and were more interested in technology than in conversion.

During Tewodros’s reign, Egypt and the Ottoman Empire attempted to take over Ethiopia. Fearing the Muslim powers he wrote to Queen Victoria for both military assistance and skilled workers to assist in his modernization efforts. The letter was never received by Queen Victoria and in response Tewodros imprisoned numerous British subjects, among them a man named Henry A. Stern. In a book written by Stern prior to his imprisonment he relates the following description of Tewodros, “Goaded to desperation by these perpetual revolutions, his fiery temper burst through every bond of humanity, and most atrocious and revolting deed were, regardless of sex and station, perpetrated on the hapless victims of his vengeance.”¹¹⁷ Although Stern was purported to be “a bigoted London-based Protestant Missionary” his opinions were commensurate to those held by Tewodros’s enemies.¹¹⁸ As a result of the imprisonment of

¹¹⁶ Pankhurst (1967), 154.

¹¹⁷ Stern (1862), 80.

¹¹⁸ Pankhurst (1998), 153.

British subjects an expeditionary force was dispatched and the two sides met at Magdala. Tewodros was soundly defeated and on April 13, 1868, he committed suicide.¹¹⁹ The next notable ruler was Yohannes IV (r. 1872-1889).

Yohannes was another of the great 19th century rulers of Ethiopia. Yohannes was not bent on a centralized monarchy as Tewodros had been. He was challenged by the Muslims and had to deal with Menelik, who had escaped from Tewodros's captivity. His reign was also plagued by military conflict with the Muslims on his northern borders. In a show-down with the Egyptian troops of Ismail Pasha at the battle of Gundat on November 16, 1875 Yohannes's troops won a resounding victory. Ismail assembled an even larger contingent of 15,000 to 20,000 troops and the next year the two met again at the battle of Gura between March 7th and 9th.¹²⁰ Once again Yohannes's troops won and, as related by his chronicler, "In the fifth year of the reign of Atse Yohannes the Muslims rose up against him . . . [the Egyptians] sent many ships; their armament was considerable . . . There was so great a battle that the earth was washed with the blood of the Muslims."¹²¹ Yohannes defeated the Muslims and eventually Menelik accepted Yohannes' rule. In return Yohannes recognized the hereditary right to the title King of Shewa that Menelik had held prior to his imprisonment by Tewodros.

Yohannes' reign also witnessed the opening of the Suez Canal, which increased interest in the Red Sea because of its connection with the Mediterranean. This contributed to the Italians' interest in Ethiopia, which became manifest during the reign of Menelik II. Yohannes signed the Hewett Treaty at Adawa on June 3, 1884 with the British. This treaty promised restoration of the Bogos area to Ethiopian rule and free transit under British protection of goods

¹¹⁹ Pankhurst (1998), 151-160.

¹²⁰ Pankhurst (1998), 165-166.

¹²¹ Pankhurst (1967), 161.

including armaments at the port of Massawa. Eight months later the Italians, with the support of the British Government, seized Massawa and began to move inland. The British favored Italian expansion into the Red Sea area in order to thwart the efforts of the French in the scramble for Africa.

The Italians soon reached the Bogos area, which had been given back to Ethiopia in the Hewitt Treaty. The British in an attempt to avoid armed conflict between the Italians and the Ethiopians sent Sir Gerald Portal, in 1887 to negotiate a peaceful resolution. When asked to surrender the Bogos area to the Italians Yohannes responded, “By the treaty made by Admiral Hewett, all the country evacuated by the Egyptians on my frontier was ceded to me at the instigation of England, and now you have come to ask me to give it up again.”¹²² With pressure from the Dervishes, who were attempting to take control of the western borders which were vacated by the Egyptians, and the Italians in the east Yohannes retreated. On March 9, 1889 shortly after a battle at Matamma with the Dervishes, Yohannes “was mortally wounded by a sniper’s bullet.”¹²³ He died the next day.

Menelik II, King of Shewa, had given up any claim to the throne of Ethiopia in 1878, but upon the death of Yohannes he again asserted his claim. Menelik had been in friendly relations with the Italians since 1875, when an Italian mission led by Marquis Orazio Antinori for



Figure 6 Menelik II

Image taken from Imperial Ethiopia website
<http://www.imperialethiopia.org/history3.htm>
(Accessed April 6, 2008).

the Italian Geographical Society arrived in the Shewan capital of Ankobar. On May 21, 1883, Menelik and the Italians signed a Treaty of Friendship and Commerce which included open trade

¹²² Gerald H. Portal, *My Mission to Abyssinia* (London: E. Arnold, 1892), 158.

¹²³ Pankhurst (1998), 175.

and unrestricted travel between Italy and Shewa. When Yohannes died, Menelik looked to the Italians to help him gain the throne of Ethiopia. As a result a Treaty of Perpetual Peace and Friendship was signed on May 2, 1889.¹²⁴ This treaty recognized Menelik's claim to the imperial throne and allowed him to import armaments through Italian colonial territory. It also allowed the Italians to expand their colonial holdings. Conflicts over interpretation of some of the articles in the treaty soon led to strained relations between the two. A letter written to King Umberto I recounted in *Storia diplomatic dell'Etiopia durante il regno di Menelik II* by C. Rossetti provides a sense of Menelik's frustration with the disparate "understandings" of the terms of the treaty.

When I made that treaty of friendship with Italy, in order that our secrets be guarded and that our understanding be not spoiled, I said that because of our friendship, our affairs might be carried on with the aid of the Sovereign of Italy, but I have not made any treaty which obliged me to do so, and, today I am not the man to accept it.¹²⁵

This letter dispatched on September 17 1890, was only one of several letters of protest written by Menelik. Meanwhile Menelik began to import arms procured from the colonial rivals of Italy, France and Russia. The Italians tried to gain the support of local leaders against Menelik, but were unsuccessful and by the latter half of 1894 decided that only by military action would they reach their objective of total control in Ethiopia.

In 1896 Menelik II led the Ethiopian army to a crucial victory over Italian forces at the battle of Adwa, in northern Ethiopia. Ethiopia gained significant prestige with its defeat of the Italians and became members of the League of Nations after World War I.¹²⁶ This secured an independent Ethiopia until the Italians again invaded on the eve of the Second World War. In October 1935 the Second Italo-Abyssinian War began interrupting the independence of Ethiopia.

¹²⁴ Pankhurst (1998), 181.

¹²⁵ Pankhurst (1998), 187.

¹²⁶ This brief overview of Ethiopian history is condensed from Richard Pankhurst's *The Ethiopians* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998).

The Italian occupation lasted from 1936 until 1941. The Ethiopian fighters, joined by British forces, liberated Ethiopia from the Italians in the course of the East African Campaign in 1941. Upon the signing of the Anglo-Ethiopian Agreement in December of 1944 Ethiopia was once again free of European intervention.



Figure 7 Haile Selassie

Image taken from Biografías y Vidas <http://www.biografiasyvidas.com/biografia/h/haile.htm> (Accessed April 6, 2008).

Emperor Haile Selassie I came to power in the early twentieth century and began to modernize Ethiopia. Selassie, by far the most influential leader of Ethiopia in the twentieth century, reigned as regent from 1916 to 1930 and as Emperor from 1930 to 1974. Selassie's reign was characterized by stability during a time of upheaval in Africa. Historians have criticized his failure to modernize Ethiopia and his strong suppression of rebellions. In 1973, as Ethiopia dealt with serious economic issues, Selassie's popularity waned. In 1974 a Marxist military junta, the "Derg" led by Mengistu Haile Mariam, deposed him, and established a one-party communist state. In 1991, rebel forces succeeded in ousting Mengistu and a new government led by Meles Zenawi was instituted.

Conclusion

Christianity maintained a strong presence in Ethiopia and had a significant impact on Ethiopian national identity. Some Oromo became Christians, but others either retained their traditional beliefs or became Muslims. There were several aspects of African Islam that were important in its ability to survive in Ethiopia against dominant Christian rule, but the most compelling aspects were cultural. Islam offered a religion that contained an element of resistance

to non-Muslim forces. Islam was viewed in this way because it had withstood Christian influences in the past and Muslim traders were not required to convert to Christianity in order to trade with the Christian Amhara. Because of trade relations, Muslims were often given royal protection and they moved throughout the Christian state. Muslims were also allowed to own property and they intermarried among the Amhara because of economic considerations. This appealed to the Oromo who were not given this freedom of movement.

From the Aksumite kingdom to the modern Ethiopian state, considerable global interaction has shaped Ethiopia. From the strong trade networks established in Europe and Asia to the influence of three world religions, Ethiopia's national identity and the identities of the discrete people groups within the states modern borders have been subjected to considerable pressure. What mechanisms have Ethiopians used to retain their identities and, more specifically, what have the Oromo maintained of their identity and what has changed? The next chapter will provide a discussion of culture, religion, and identity as general terms, and also in regard to the Oromo of Ethiopia.

There are many aspects of identity, both social and material, that can be gleaned from available sources. Rituals, language, economic activities, institutions, just to name a few all bear identifying markers. Much of the material available which allows consideration of cultural change and identity formation or re-creation is in the form of early traveler accounts, official records, missionary documents, and material culture such as obelisks and engravings. Using these materials and some ethnographic material will allow for a glimpse at changing identities in Ethiopia and will help to identify the mechanisms for maintaining or reforming identity.

The identity I am thinking of is something that hovers between a man and the rest of the world: a midpoint between his view of himself and theirs of him—for each, of course, affects the other continually. A reciprocal fluxion, sir. There is nothing absolute about this identity of mine.

Stephen Maturin
from *Master and Commander*
by Patrick O'Brian

Chapter 3: Identity, Culture, and Religion

Culture, as a site of identity expression, gains its strength from the fact that culture involves the conceptual scheme through which humans interpret their world and the individual's place in the world. Often a change in identity is forced on a group by a more powerful group and, when the more powerful group takes control, the “others” are treated as inferiors.

From 1882 to 1886 Menelik, the ruler of the Amhara kingdom of Shewa attacked and finally overwhelmed the Arssi Oromo. Soon the Kaffa and Jimma were also brought under Menelik's control. He eventually controlled all of the area now known as Ethiopia.¹²⁷ As part of his effort to bring these areas under his power he put Amhara/Tigre Christians in control. The new administrators imposed Amhara language, culture, and Christianity on the local populations as pointed out by Shehim.¹²⁸ In cases such as this there was no effort to incorporate the indigenous people and they were the targets of strong discrimination. Some of the Oromo tried to fit in by changing their names to Amharic names and by entering the service of the Crown as semi-formal officials called *balabbats*. Oromo culture during this time was considered by those in power to be inferior to Amharic culture and as a result Oromo identity was also viewed as

¹²⁷ Kassim Shehim, “Ethiopia, Revolution, and the Question of Nationalities: The Case of the Afar.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 23.2 (1985): 332.

¹²⁸ Shehim, 333.

inferior. Over time the political structure changed and the Oromo were able to begin to reconstruct their collective identity and take pride in it.

This thesis proposes that identity is maintained through cultural systems, including religion. Identity is not formed by culture, but rather culture is an outgrowth of identity. The Oromo used the *gada* system, their shared language, and elements of their traditional religion to maintain their identity in the Amharic state, which later became Ethiopia. Although religion as a belief system is very different from religion as a cultural system, the importance of the cultural expression of religious belief serves as a strong cohesive mechanism in the maintenance and expression of identity. Because of the dependence of this thesis on a clear understanding of identity, culture, and religion, this chapter focuses on these terms in relation to the Oromo. A significant portion of the material for this section will be taken from a text that was published in 1922 by Enrico Cerulli which focuses on Oromo folktales. This material provides insight into Oromo culture from an Oromo perspective.

Cerulli's work provides a rare look into Oromo culture through this documentation of many of their songs and prose. This material was gathered in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These stories and songs were collected from individuals and from other older texts such as *The Galla Spelling Book by Onesimos Nesib, a native Galla, Printed at the Swedish Mission Press in Moncullo near Massowah, 1894* and another title written in Oromo the name of which in English would be something like "The beginning of teaching; that is, a book of conversation for those who study the language of the Galla. To show the natives of Galla countries the way to God; collected and printed (this book) by Awag Onesimos and Ganon Aster."¹²⁹ It should be noted that the latter was not a book written to spread Christianity. It included war songs, songs dedicated to *Waqaa* (the Oromo God), and other materials. Most of

¹²⁹ Cerulli, 15.

this material was written in Oromo and reflects Oromo culture. One of the songs included by Cerulli focuses on the battle between the Oromo and the Amhara. Another song discusses the battle of Adawa. Although this work provides information about Oromo identity it does not address formation of Oromo identity.

One way to understand group identity is to look at the historical formation of that identity and to consider how it has changed over time in light of changing political, economic, and social circumstances. The group response to those circumstances must also be taken into account, including which cultural elements have remained fixed and which have been re-crafted. With the Oromo this is difficult, for most of their early history is described by outsiders rather than members of the Oromo community. The time period addressed in this thesis is from the 16th through the 19th century, for which written material is available that addresses concepts of Oromo identity. Prior to the 16th century there is little or no mention of a collective Oromo identity, but linguistic differentiation suggests that one existed. Because of this the issue of identity formation is even more problematic for the Oromo. An illustrative discussion of identity formation will provide context for conceptualizing how identities are formed.

The example that will be used to discuss identity formation is related by Kwame Anthony Appiah and is significant because it provides an interesting case study on the fluidity of the lines between “us” and “them” which are defined by concepts of identity. In Oklahoma, in 1953 a group of researchers did a study on “the formation of in-groups and out-groups” among some white, middle-class, Protestant eleven-year-old boys. All of the boys were from similar backgrounds. The boys were taken to a camp and they were not made aware that there was another group of boys nearby until several days after their arrival. The two groups on their own initiative challenged one another to a variety of competitive events. The researchers were

surprised at how quickly tempers flared and the idea of “us” and “them” was developed. One of the more compelling developments had to do with the creation of distinct identities as related by Appiah.

It starts with the self-assigned labels of the two groups: the Rattlers and the Eagles. The groups did not arrive with these names; nor did it occur to group members that they needed a name, until they learned about the presence of another group on the campgrounds. Among the Rattlers, an ethic of “toughness” had arisen . . . Cursing . . . also became commonplace in this group. When the Eagles won a baseball game against the Rattlers, they came, during a postgame conversation, to attribute the victory to a group prayer they’d offered before the game. After further deliberation, the Eagles decided that the Rattlers’ tendency to curse had contributed to their defeat as well. “Hey, you guys, let’s not do any more cussing, and I’m serious, too,” one Eagle said to the others, and the proposal won general approval. In the course of a subsequent football game, the Rattlers (who won narrowly) engaged in clamorous jeering and boasting. Rather than respond in kind, the Eagles decided that yelling in front of the Rattlers would bring bad luck: they came to refrain not only from cussing but from bragging. These differences were reflected in the way the groups described each other. To the Rattlers (in their internal discussions), the Eagles were “sissies,” “cowards,” “little babies.” To the Eagles, the Rattlers were a “bunch of cussers,” “poor losers,” and “bums.” One group saw itself, and was seen as prayerful, pious, and clean-living; the other as boisterous, tough, and scrappy.¹³⁰

This lengthy example provides numerous points of discussion concerning identity formation and maintenance. The fact that all of these events took place in four days among a group of eleven-year-olds who were virtually identical in background illustrates the complexity of discussing identities.

The concepts of “racial” and ethnic identities are usually considered to be major categories of identity, but as this example illustrates there was no difference ethnically or racially and still, contending identities were formed. These identities provided solidarity for each group and set them in contention to one another. Appiah relates that the tension between the Rattlers and the Eagles was not just friendly competition: “Flags weren’t just captured but burned and

¹³⁰ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 62-63.

shredded. Raids were staged on the other group's cabin; property was disarrayed, trophies stolen. Staff members had to intervene when one group of boys prepared themselves for a retaliatory raid by arming themselves with rocks."¹³¹ The formation of identities is complex and historical. Yet as they develop, and when competition for resources or some other stressor is applied to the social structure, the importance of identity is propelled ahead of other social concerns. Individuals will die for their identity group and will perpetrate unspeakable violence when they perceive that their identity is in danger of being compromised.

Oromo identity during the 16th to 19th century was defined from the outside by warfare. Through the work of Cerulli's transcription of war stories a view of how the Oromo accepted the identity of a "warrior class" can be seen. This is especially telling when placed in contrast to the pastoral songs. When the warriors went to battle they often wrote "boasting-songs" to celebrate their successes and to record their experiences. The following song records a warrior's experience in a battle, the details of which are too extensive to record here. The enemy has taken his bride and he secretly goes into the fortress, rescues her, and as he is leaving cuts off the tail of his enemy's horse. He then records the following boasting song:

The hero of Garbi of Gilo . . . every day kills seven [warriors]. He killed the father and the son. . . . The day after tomorrow, Friday, Goridda will eat you . . . From the village of Gawe Onco, I will arise and go forth. The tail-cutter Garbi has cut off the tail for me. Tell your bride.¹³²

There are numerous entries in the text that are very similar to this example of praising the strength and exploits of the warrior. This then can be compared to the pastoralist songs in the text "O sun, come! Come! On the road of the rising salt pit of Canco, beware the thorns, lean upon the staff! Come singing!"¹³³ This song would have been sung by the shepherd as the sheep were

¹³¹ Appiah (2005), 62.

¹³² Cerulli, 19.

¹³³ Cerulli, 147.

led to pasture in the morning. These provide a glimpse into the multiplicity of Oromo identity. Both were recorded at nearly the same time, whether the pastoral song is one that was handed down from before the turbulent period in which it is recorded is impossible to know. One is the boast of a warrior after having humiliated his enemy and it threatens destruction, while the other is the song of a shepherd leading his flocks to the pasture and warning them to beware the thorns. Oromo identity, as described here, is multilayered and fluid; it is complex and diverse.

Identity is both individual and group oriented. For the individual it provides a sense of belonging to something larger. For the group, identity provides a rallying point for mutual support. Both of the preceding entries were individual expressions of identity, but both are also representative of Oromo group identity. The importance of individual identity cannot be overstated. People the world over are unique and self-creating. This is not to say that the individual creates their identity *de novo* and that their identities are independent of their social context. Instead, individual identity is defined by the way the individual interacts within a larger social context. The integration of their cultural heritage and the interaction with other cultural groups with which they come into contact is a defining aspect of individual identity and contributes much to its development. Individual identity is deliberative and self-directing. The cultural experience of the individual acts as a tool box, providing various tools for the individual to choose from in forming their own personal identity. According to Appiah, “We make up selves from a tool kit of options made available by our culture and society.”¹³⁴ Individuals make choices based on the available options.

Personal identities which are often described as character traits, include features such as wit, charm, and intelligence, to name a few. Collective identities are sociological in nature they

¹³⁴ Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Identity, Authenticity, Survival: Multicultural Societies and Social Reproduction.” In *Multiculturalism: Examining The Politics of Recognition*, edited by Amy Charles Taylor and Amy Gutman, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 155.

include aspects of “race” or “ethnicity.”¹³⁵ For instance the Oromo attempted to resist the Amharic state especially in relation to its effort to control Oromo land, but there was also a need to interact with and be accepted by the state hierarchy. This is true of the individual identity also. Individuals possess a separate identity, but within a social context, for the most part, they desire to be part of a collective identity as well as maintaining their individual identity. This need speaks to the tension between individual identity and social identity and to the tension between ethnic group identities within a multicultural state, as Appiah describes:

The rhetoric of authenticity proposes not only that I have a way of being that is all my own, but that in developing it I must fight against the family, organized religion, society, the school, the state—all the forces of convention. This is wrong, however, not only because it is in dialogue with other people’s understandings of who I am that I develop a conception of my own identity but also because my identity is crucially constituted through concepts and practices made available to me by religion, society, school, and state, and mediated to varying degrees by the family. Dialogue shapes the identity I develop as I grow up, but the very material out of which I form it is provided, in part, by my society.¹³⁶

This discussion not only points out the tension between individual identity and social identity, but also alludes to the discrete cultural identities embedded in a multicultural state, such as Ethiopia. The application of these concepts to my thesis is that when the Oromo came into direct conflict with the Amharic Christians their identity in time became very much defined in terms of their response to the Amhara. The questions I am addressing are what mechanisms the Oromo used to maintain their identity as they worked to define themselves.

This thesis looks at the “collective” identity of the Oromo within the Ethiopian state, but it is important to note that this is not meant to attribute a “collectivist” ideology to African or Oromo identity. In much earlier scholarship there was a tendency to attribute ideas of

¹³⁵ Appiah (1994), 155.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

“individualism” to modern western societies, while non-western societies were discussed in “collectivist” terms. This stereotyping indicated that individualism was a creation of Western civilization and that non-Western people groups were governed by social shame rather than conscience.¹³⁷ It is not my intention to give credence to this ideology. The Oromo are treated as a group and not as individuals because of the strength of their collective identity, but this in no way is meant to indicate that all Oromo are the same or that they do not have individual identities that are separate from their cultural identity.

Identities are fluid, and as such, the historical approach is best suited to the discussion of changing identities because they derive from the past. The aspects of identity that are defining may differ from group to group. For one group language may be the defining element. For another it may be a particular custom, while physical characteristics may provide the cohesive element of another group’s identity. Moreover, identity is both an internal and an external process. Groups shape their identity, but those on the outside have a say in the process and often have a defining role in the identity that a group experiences in daily life. For instance, Oromo identity was strongly determined by their resistance to Abyssinian colonialism and their status as non-Christians in a Christian state.

This provides an interesting discussion of Oromo identity, which is characterized by the Amhara and many Europeans as being “pagans.” This will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter, but the discussion of religious criteria as an aspect of identity will be helpful. In the text by Cerulli there is a section of “Festive and Religious Songs,” and under this heading there are both pagan and Christian entries. Again, these were documented at the same time in the same community so that there is no sense of a passage of time. Some of the Oromo chose to

¹³⁷ Robert Levine, “Infant Environments in Psychoanalysis: A Cross-Cultural View.” In J. Stigler, R. Shweder, & G. Herdt, ed., *Cultural Psychology: Essays on Comparative Human Development*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 454-474.

follow Oromo religious beliefs and some chose to follow Christian beliefs, yet there is seldom mention of “Christian Oromo” in primary documents and much more attention is given to the “pagan” aspect of Oromo identity. The number of songs recorded as “pagan” is significantly more than those recorded that were said to be Christian, but there were examples of Christian songs that were part of Oromo culture. Below are two examples, one from each section. They provide an interesting contrast:

O wonder! O wonder! . . . The wonders are six: The hornbill complains without being sick; the plant flourishes without nourishment; the water runs without being urged; the earth is fixed without pegs; the heavens hold themselves up without supports; in the firmament He (God) has sown the chick-peas of heaven. These things fill me with wonder. Let us all pray to God! O God, who hast caused me to pass the day cause me to pass the night well!¹³⁸

Come, blossom! Blossom, O little flower! Our family has sung; blossom, O little flower! It has made the gnats fall; blossom, O little flower! The Cross of the one rich in oxen; . . . The chief of the people has sung; blossom, O little flower! It has made the gnats fall; blossom, O little flower!¹³⁹

The interesting contrast is that the song which begins “O wonder!” is the song recorded as the pagan song. The second song is recorded as the Christian song, which records a celebration of the cross. It would have been quite difficult for a “novice” to have established which was which. This begs the question as to what was it about the Oromo that made it so easy to identify them as “pagan.”

Often identity is expressed through material means, such as the wearing of certain types of clothing. One example of this is the Oromo custom of wrapping the peritoneum of a sacrifice around their necks. This sacrifice was made at the door of a slain enemy before the Oromo

¹³⁸ Cerulli, 137.

¹³⁹ Cerulli, 145.

entered the enemy's home.¹⁴⁰ This wearing of the peritoneum was very significant for the Oromo and had a religious connotation.¹⁴¹ This was an external expression of Oromo identity that was often mentioned by travelers. It identified the wearer as not only a warrior, but also as a person who respected the religious traditions of the Oromo. Religion can be used to re-create one's identity or to maintain an identity. In the early Ethiopian state, forced conversion was used by the Christian state to acculturate those in the territories they were bringing under their control. For instance, one aspect of this is that Menelik demanded that the wearing of the peritoneum be abandoned because it was un-Christian. To the Oromo who were Christian this meant more than a religious display it was a part of the expression of their identity. By demanding that they stop wearing this, Menelik was asking them to deny their identity and to become "Amhara" not just Christian.¹⁴² Some Oromo are Muslims, some are Christians, some adhere to the Oromo religion, and still others do not adhere to any specific religion. In the case of the Oromo their religion was tied very closely to their cultural identity and even when they "converted" to Christianity or became Muslims they often maintained most of the elements of their religious system and created a syncretic form of Christianity which was unique to their cultural group.

Identities may be expressed through cultural systems such as language, religion, etc., but the formation of the identities goes beyond these expressions. They are also most often formed in relation to social change or social stress. In order to create an identity there needs to be an "other" for without an "other" there can be no "us." According to Elizabeth MacGonagle "the identities of a particular people exist "in a context of oppositions and relativities" as groups

¹⁴⁰ Cerulli, 107.

¹⁴¹ Oromo myth held that a cow ate the sacred book and the book was absorbed in the peritoneum, which is the membrane that covers the abdominal cavity. By wearing this around their necks they are wearing the sacred words.

¹⁴² Cerulli, 102.

classify “others” during their own acts of self-identification.”¹⁴³ There is no need for an “us” and “them” unless it provides a benefit. In the case of the Oromo, the Christian Amharic state based acceptance on religious conversion. If the Oromo chose to be Christian they could benefit from state structures, they could own land, they could move freely; if they did not become Christians they were enemies of the state and were treated as such. The Oromo navigated these contentious identities and formed a strong group identity regardless of religious affiliation.

One of the stressors that had an impact on Oromo identity between the 16th and 19th century was their struggle with the Amhara. While much of the history of this period is taken from European accounts Cerulli provides an alternative view. In contrast to the “fierce” warrior is the experience of Tura; “The girth of the horse has been broken. It has been well understood that it shall fall down. O cutter of the rim of the cups! Tura, the son of Tobbo has well understood that he will die. (but) Tura has refused porridge.”¹⁴⁴ This song speaks of the fact that although Tura knew he could not win he would rather die than be seen as a coward. Another example is that of Nasiro who laments fighting in a foreign land exiled from his native country. “Nasiro has fared badly going out (of his country). The lion has gone out of his house. My lion has fared badly going out (of his country). If I had stayed in my country, they would have killed (cattle for sacrifices after victory) and they would have given me presents. O foreign country! They (i. e. the strangers) stay and laugh in my face!”¹⁴⁵ These examples show a different side of the warrior identity from the perspective of the Oromo warrior. The final example of Oromo experiences during the conflict with Menelik include one that was sung by a Cabo minstrel after his people were massacred. “O rich, be proud! O poor, shed your tears! The cold (son) of Danci,

¹⁴³ Elizabeth MacGonagle, *Crafting Identity In Zimbabwe and Mozambique* (Rochester, New York: Rochester University Press, 2007), 2.

¹⁴⁴ Cerulli, 69.

¹⁴⁵ Cerulli, 70.

Gobana whose horse is the wind, no doubt he will come and he will make us all equal!”¹⁴⁶ This alludes to the fact that the Amhara conqueror erased all distinctions between rich and poor, by killing both. These examples provide another side of Oromo identity: that of the defeated, which became their lot as they were subdued by Menelik’s forces.

Often people like the Oromo that are historically defined by their resistance or their position as a warrior class are denied any other identity. Before this section closes a few brief examples of Oromo in situations other than war with the Amhara will provide a more balanced perspective on Oromo identity. This first example relates a story of a hunting celebration held by Tullu Abba Gifar at Gingo. He was a Muslim and a center for Islamic studies had been established on his lands. When these celebrations occurred, the Oromo minstrels would gather at his court to show off their songs and prose in this scholarly environment. On one occasion several songs were presented that discussed a challenge between Tallo Mamud, a famous Muslim warrior and elephant hunter and the Oromo governor of a province in the Gimma kingdom. Tallo boasted that he could kill an elephant with a sword and a prize of a horse named Sardo was to be presented if he succeeded. The governor agreed and here is a section of Tallo’s victory song, “O daughter of Gallo, the lion, seven times fall down [from the trees] and break yourself! Run! Come to me! . . . Sardo, the necklace of Tucco, the fine (horse) of Tute Danno, repose! There is the death of a man!”¹⁴⁷ Tallo won the wager and killed the elephant, but in the fray Sardo, his prize, was killed. This provides a glimpse of the Oromo interacting with the Muslims. They were desirous of performing their songs and prose in a “scholarly” environment. This is in contrast to the “warrior” identity—it is an identity of scholars and performers. The Oromo produced songs and literature and history.

¹⁴⁶ Cerulli, 74.

¹⁴⁷ Cerulli, 20.

Another aspect that is in contrast to the “warrior” identity is that of the lover. Cerulli records numerous love songs and nuptial songs. One of the more beautiful love songs is related below:

If I might be an ox, an ox, a beautiful ox, beautiful but stubborn; the merchant would buy me, would buy and slaughter me, would spread my skin, would bring me to the market. The coarse woman would bargain for me; the beautiful girl would buy me. She would crush perfumes for me; I would spend the night rolled up (around her); I would spend the afternoon rolled up (around her). Her husband would say, “it is a dead (skin)!” But I would have my love!¹⁴⁸

This man is willing to give his life just to be with the woman he loves! These samples provide a broader view of Oromo identity than can be gleaned from reading accounts that focus on their “fierceness” as warriors. In many cases Europeans gained their knowledge of Oromo identity from the Amhara and the Amhara experienced the Oromo through resistance.

Culture and identity, as tools of historical inquiry, work together to provide a deeper understanding of historical change over time. An examination of the fluidity of culture and identity and the historical landscape in which change or stability can be examined is necessary to understanding violence and sociopolitical divisions. In a quickly globalizing environment, ethnic and cultural distinctiveness is of great concern; by looking at how groups have maintained their identities or shaped them to meet their needs a clearer picture of some of the mechanisms that propel historical change can be determined. Individuals have a personal identity that is interwoven with the collective identity of the culture in which they live. These identities are fluid, but it is the historical context of these identities that add meaning. This history may change or be changed to support the desired identity, but the history is an integral part of being and forms the core of identity maintenance.

¹⁴⁸ Cerulli, 107.

The complexities of defining identity as a term and a specific identity demand a multi-faceted approach. Identity gains its “power” through the meaning attributed to the identity both by those being identified in a specific way and those outside of the group. The importance of identity to human existence is that it provides context for our lives and actions. Identity has considerable value and power in human interaction. The desire to have the better identity defines the way groups interact. Political power and the belief that they had a “superior” identity allowed the Amhara to treat the Oromo and other ethnic groups in Ethiopia as less equal and to subject them to ill treatment. This aspect of identity in a historical context provides a way to look at the motivators for action. Although identity protection and formation are not the only concerns that propel historical change, they definitely contribute. In order for group identity to be established or reinforced it needs to be supported by ideology or religion or some other historical connection on which the group can fasten their individual faith and collective confidence. So, for instance, with the Oromo the actual function of the *gada* system as a governing tool is much less important to their identity than the historical connection that they as a collective group have to the system itself. The *gada* provides the group with a sense of the past, a sense of where they as individuals fit into their society. It is true that this system identifies only male social grades and it would be interesting to look at the effect this system has on women, but this subject is outside of the particular purview of this thesis.

Identities are plural, even with regard to collective identities. The Oromo identify as a single ethnic group, but within this group there are smaller groups such as the Arssi and the Tulama—all of which maintain a distinct identity. The Oromo are also Ethiopian and African. The distinction comes as individuals and groups establish the priority of their multiple identities. The idea that a person or a group has only one identity is a form of reductionism referred to as

“singular affiliation.”¹⁴⁹ As an example, the Oromo religion is distinct and, as will be discussed later in this chapter, is still very much a part of Oromo identity, but many Oromo are practicing Christians or Muslims. They identify with being both Oromo and with aspects of Oromo religious practice, while also identifying with Christianity or Islam. The individual or group may give priority to one identity in some situations or in a historical period and then give priority to another aspect of their identity when circumstances change. This multiplicity of identification can lead to confusion, but is a consistent aspect of identity.

It is also important to note that all identities are not durable and some perceived identities are no more than classifications. For example, the Oromo were identified by outsiders as Galla until the 20th century. In early scholarship the Oromo were identified by this term and the characteristics attached to it as “barbarians” and “pagans” were primary attributed to the Oromo. In the 21st century this identity has been abandoned in favor of the Oromo identity, which includes the perception that the Oromo were historically present in the highlands of Ethiopia from well before their so called “invasion” in the 16th century. This re-structured identity shows them to be pastoralists who became militarily active in defense of their way of life, not as “barbarians.” Another aspect of identity is the confusion between identity and classification. Classification does not become identity until there is a need for solidarity. As Sen points out “Classification is certainly cheap, but identity is not . . . [and] a shared quandary . . . can provide a reason for a sense of identity.”¹⁵⁰ The individual groups of Oromo were “classified” as one, but it was not until the 16th century when their culture was threatened by absorption into the Christian Amharic state, that their identity as Oromo became relevant. The individual groups of Oromo had often fought with one another, but they shared a common form of government in the

¹⁴⁹ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 20.

¹⁵⁰ Sen, 27.

gada system. They met as a unified group. There is no written documentation that indicates why the groups split, but historians such as Jalata point out that it may have been due to pressures placed on them by the wars between the Amhara and the Muslims.¹⁵¹ Although they divided into separate groups they continued to share a sense of a common identity and their resistance to the Amharic state solidified this shared identity.

Although Oromo identity is based on common heritage they did find ways to include those who were not descendants of Oromo in their identity group. They practiced Oromoization of conquered peoples. They adopted them into the clan through a practice known as *mogasa* or *gudifacha*. They attached these adopted Oromo to a specific clan so that they were able to identify themselves with an Oromo genealogy. At first the rights of these individuals was limited, but as time passed they were fully assimilated and given complete rights. This adoption was not based on conversion to Oromo religion, as was required by the Amhara. Although details are sketchy, it appears that all that was needed to become part of the Oromo was a willingness to live in community with the Oromo.¹⁵²

There are several elements of identity that are often shared within ethnic groups and which the Oromo also share. These include a sense of shared history and common ancestry, the recognition of a homeland or place of common origin, and strong political solidarity. Often in regard to the history, the actual history is often mythologized or made into legend. There is most often a desire to keep the ethnic group free of outsiders, but methods of initiating outsiders to the group usually exist. Most cultural groups have a sense of a “homeland,” a territory or place from which they emanated. Regardless of whether or not they still live in that place there is a sense that this place is home. There is also a sense of political solidarity; a shared political structure is

¹⁵¹ Jalata, 20.

¹⁵² Jalata, 16.

also a common aspect of cultural groups. This may not translate into the same political affiliation, but the ethnic group would support or be against similar political issues.

Identities come with behavioral expectations. These expectations are often ambiguous or unspoken, but there would be a tendency across the culture to adhere to, or at least acknowledge, these considerations. These ways of thinking help to shape the daily lives of those that relate to a specific identity. For instance, Muslims would be “expected” to pray five times a day facing Mecca, this is an anticipated behavior that is part of Muslim identity. As Appiah points out “Collective identities . . . provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories. . . . it matters to people that their lives have a certain narrative unity; they want to be able to tell a story of their lives that makes sense. . . in the way appropriate by the standards made available in my culture to a person of my identity (160).”¹⁵³ The performance or expression of identity is the most visible aspect of identity to the outsider and provides a space for discussion of the mechanisms for the maintenance of identity. Culture is one of the major sites of identity expression.

Identity is a complicated concept. There are numerous characteristics, beliefs, values, etc. that are important to identity formation and maintenance. Religion and culture play significant roles in this discussion. Identity is not a result of culture, but culture is the expression of a historically formed identity. The following section provides a discussion of Oromo religion and culture.

¹⁵³ Appiah (1994), 160.

Religion and Culture among the Oromo

Many of the treatments of religion in Ethiopia focus on the Abrahamic systems of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. These have all had a major impact on Ethiopian identity, yet their expression in Ethiopia is distinct. This overview of some of the basic concepts of non-Abrahamic religion in Ethiopia will provide important background for better understanding the concepts discussed in this chapter.

In addressing non-Abrahamic religious systems in Africa the choice of terms used is of significant interest. The struggle to find a term that would appropriately identify the non-Abrahamic religions and not lend a “primitive” quality to the discussion of “traditional” African religions has been frustrating. The term “traditional” gives the impression of being old, out of date, not ‘modern’ or well informed, archaic. The term “traditional” also provides a sense of being ahistorical and is a widely used term to describe local religions. Considering another term like “other African religions” tends to give the Abrahamic religions pre-eminence. The best option is to use specific terms such as Oromo religion. There are roughly three thousand religious identities in Africa and each has distinct characteristics.¹⁵⁴ This section, however, will summarize some of the characteristics common to most non-Abrahamic African religions, including the Oromo religion.

Religion in Africa is not limited to superficial ritual or performance, but rather is an integral part of society. John S. Mbiti, an expert in non-Abrahamic African religions, points out that “Religion is the strongest element in traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest

¹⁵⁴ Mbiti, 1.

influence upon the thinking and living of the people concerned.”¹⁵⁵ Due to its integral nature, it is very difficult to isolate religious beliefs from societal structures. For example, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and secular, the material and spiritual; community life is characterized by the religious. Equally important, non-Abrahamic Ethiopian religion is not an individual affair; it is about the individual in relationship to the community. This aspect is also present in Oromo religion and is one reason that Oromo religion played such a significant role in identity maintenance among the Oromo. The *gada* system, which will be discussed in the next chapter, is one aspect of Oromo religion that is woven into the social experience of the Oromo. The ceremonies and rituals are religious in nature, but the system itself is a system of social organization and political leadership.

In non-Abrahamic African religions, community membership involves ceremonies, rituals, festivals, and the beliefs of the community. To distance oneself from the religion of the community would mean giving up kinship connections, the context for security, and connection to the group from which the individual frames their identity. In essence, being without religion in an African community means to be excommunicated from life and society. Since non-Abrahamic Ethiopian religions are so strongly associated with community life, there is no element of conversion or proselytization. Each community has a distinct religious system and, as pointed out by Mbiti, “the propagation of such a complete system would involve propagating the entire life of the people concerned. Therefore a person has to be born in a particular society in order to assimilate the religious system of the society to which he [sic] belongs. An outsider cannot enter or appreciate fully the religion of another society.”¹⁵⁶ When an individual is born into a community they inherit a religious identity along with their cultural identity. Even when

¹⁵⁵ Mbiti, 1.

¹⁵⁶ Mbiti, 4.

an Oromo becomes a Christian they continue to associate with their Oromo religious identity. This concept of religious membership starts before the birth of the individual and continues after death.

The participants in Oromo religion learn the religious traditions that were handed down by their forefathers through the lives of their community and family. Religion is a single whole that is exemplified in the actions of the individual in relation to the community. There are no actual founders, but there are people who hold places of honor. Among the Oromo, the Qallu holds this position.¹⁵⁷ The office of Qallu is much like that of a high priest. The first Qallu is believed to have been of divine origin. There are several myths concerning his origin, but one holds that he was the “eldest son of Ilma Orma.”¹⁵⁸ This would have made him the “eldest son” of the Oromo and as such the source of their traditions. There is also another office that is of importance in Oromo cosmology the *Abba Muda*. The person who held this position was their spiritual leader. This personage would be the equivalent of the Christian Moses or Muhammad to the Muslims. He lived in the land that was the birthplace of the Oromo and delegates from both the Borana and Barentu went to him to receive his blessing. This pilgrimage was of great importance to the Oromo.¹⁵⁹

Most, but not all, non-Abrahamic African religions have a “supreme god” among the many spirits and divinities that inhabit their religious sphere.¹⁶⁰ Oromo religion focuses on one God known as *Waaqa*. As related by Manoel de Almeida’s *The History of High Ethiopia or*

¹⁵⁷ Bartel, 123.

¹⁵⁸ Hassen, 6.

¹⁵⁹ Jalata, 20.

¹⁶⁰ It should be noted that there exists a significant debate concerning polytheism and monotheism in African ontology. Most experts will agree that there is a concept of a supreme God, but there are also many who would disagree. As this thesis is not focusing on that debate we will acknowledge the debate. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis these terms are complicated.

Abassia when he was speaking of the Oromo, “they have no idols to worship.”¹⁶¹ Waqa is the source of all life and is the creator.¹⁶² Waqa is infinite and omnipresent. Everything has been placed in order by Waqa and he is its guardian. Waqa is not the only spiritual being recognized by Oromo religion. There are numerous saint-like divinities called *ayana*, which are manifestations of Waqa’s creative spirit. These are not additional gods, but rather part of the divine essence of Waqa.¹⁶³ The Qallu maintains a line of communication between the *ayana* and the Oromo community in which they serve.

The institution of the Qallu and its connection to Waqa are the central aspects of Oromo religion. In the early history of the Oromo there was only one Qallu, but when the Borana and the Barentu separated in the 16th century migration each group had their own Qallu. As pointed out by Hassen, “The religious leaders who accompanied the migrating groups were not Qallu in the real sense of the term. They were called *irressa*, “the right hand” of the Qallu, his emissaries.”¹⁶⁴

In relation to Oromo identity there are several aspects of the religious system that are significant. The continued adherence to the shared religion that worshiped Waqa, the recognition of the Qallu even when the groups split in the 16th century, and the recognition of a place of origin signified as the place where the Abba Muda dwelt were strong mechanisms that allowed the Oromo to maintain a unified identity. The Barentu moved to the geographic areas currently known as Arssi, northern and eastern Shewa, Hararghe, and Wallo. The Borana moved

¹⁶¹ Charles Fraser Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford, *Some records of Ethiopia, 1593-1646; being extracts from the History of High Ethiopia or Abassia, by Manoel de Almeida, together with Bahrey’s History of the Galla*, (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1954), 136.

¹⁶² Bartels, 14.

¹⁶³ Bartel, 371.

¹⁶⁴ Hassen, 9.

toward the Gibe regions, Wallaga, Goffa, Sidamo, Gamu, Kaffa, Illubabor, and western Shewa. Historically, the Qallu and the *gada* were the “special mark” of the Oromo nation as Hassen states “the office of the Abba Muda and the institution of Qallu remained in the hands of the descendants of the Borana or Barentu, who were termed in the national myth as “pure” Oromo.”¹⁶⁵ The religion of the Oromo was more than a belief system: it shaped Oromo culture.

Culture as a term is complex, but it is important to understand a general concept of culture in order to discuss the Oromo and their identity. From its roots as a noun referring to the process of cultivation of crops to its extension to include cultivation of the human mind, the term culture has garnered an extensive retinue of meanings. As Raymond Williams points out, the concept of culture in relation to human activity can be reduced to two primary emphases, one being the “informing spirit of a whole way of life, which is manifest over the whole range of social activities.”¹⁶⁶ It is this perspective of culture that this thesis is dealing with.

In its early use and as a general term, culture was considered all that was symbolic: it included all of the learned conceptual aspects of human society. Culture pointed to the human ability to overcome their environment and to use symbols as a way to experience their world and infuse it with meaning. It was defined more in relation to the manifestations of these symbolic elements, as the way in which people communicated their identity. Culture, according to Otis Mason, “applies to all the artificialities of human life. It is the history of man recorded in the works of his hands.”¹⁶⁷ Identity is expressed through culture created by individuals and societies. People constantly struggle to make sense of themselves based on the cultural climate in which they live, while trying to understand those that are different from them. In doing this they still

¹⁶⁵ Hassen, 9.

¹⁶⁶ Williams 1995, 11-12.

¹⁶⁷ Otis T. Mason, "Mind and Matter in Culture." *American Anthropologist, New Series* 10.2 (1908): 187.

used culture as a point of reference. It is a term used to describe tools used by individuals to make sense of the world they live in.

Culture—the ideas, emotions, values, art, music, rituals, religion that are integral parts of every society—is as important to the understanding of history as are dates and “facts”. Without cultural context the dates are only numbers and the facts are meaningless words. When a historian develops a thesis focusing on a monument telling about the materials used, the construction methods, the location, and the time it represents, these are only relevant if the reason for the monument is communicated. The history of how an identity was formed and changed as political, economic, and environmental circumstances, changed provides a better understanding of the flow of change over time.

There are several aspects of Oromo culture that have been important tools in maintaining their cultural identity. The one that plays most prominently in most academic discussions of the Oromo is the *gada* system which manifests aspects of Oromo religion, organizes the structure of their society, and provides a sense of time. Oromo religion has remained a strong aspect of Oromo culture regardless of the religious belief system held by the individuals or groups; whether practicing Christianity, Islam, or Oromo religion cultural elements of the Oromo religious system have remained consistent. Another aspect of Oromo identity that will be addressed in this thesis is language, which has also played a significant role in identity maintenance of the Oromo.

Culture is a primary tool through which identity is expressed. Religion, language, and social structure are all aspects of cultural expression. The Oromo share many common cultural elements, but the ones that will be focused on in the next chapter are religion and social structure

through the *gada* system. By looking at mechanisms which were used by the Oromo to maintain their identities or to facilitate cultural change, previous historiographic work on trade, politics, conflict, and other topics can be re-conceptualized to take identity into account. From a world history perspective concepts of identity and the mechanisms used to maintain or re-create identity can be applied in a variety of situations.

“The skin creaks according to the country.”¹⁶⁸
Different countries, different customs

Oromo Proverb
Collected by Enrico Cerulli

Chapter 4: Oromo Cultural Identity

The Oromo in Ethiopia endured imperialist aggression by the Amharic dominated state from before the 16th century and well into the 20th century. As pointed out by the following excerpt from a document created by the Oromo Liberation Front in May 1999, the Oromo have a unique cultural identity:

The Oromo people have a distinct culture and language of their own. They are a fiercely egalitarian people that have lived under a remarkable and complex indigenous democratic system known as Gada--in which political, military and other leaders including legal experts are elected for non-renewable eight-year term from among males who excel during five eight-year long grades of continuous training. That the Oromo culture and the symbols of egalitarian Gada democratic government and other institutions have continuously endured the last 105 years of continuous open and clandestine war by foreign forces is a remarkable testimony to the endurance of the Oromo cultural identity and democratic heritage. The Oromo people are followers of three major religions: Islam, Christian, and indigenous Oromo religion. Because of their democratic heritage, there is no religious extremism or intolerance among the people.¹⁶⁹

While some Oromo adopted Christianity and Islam they still maintained a cultural connection with their traditional religion. It is my contention that the Oromo of Ethiopia have maintained

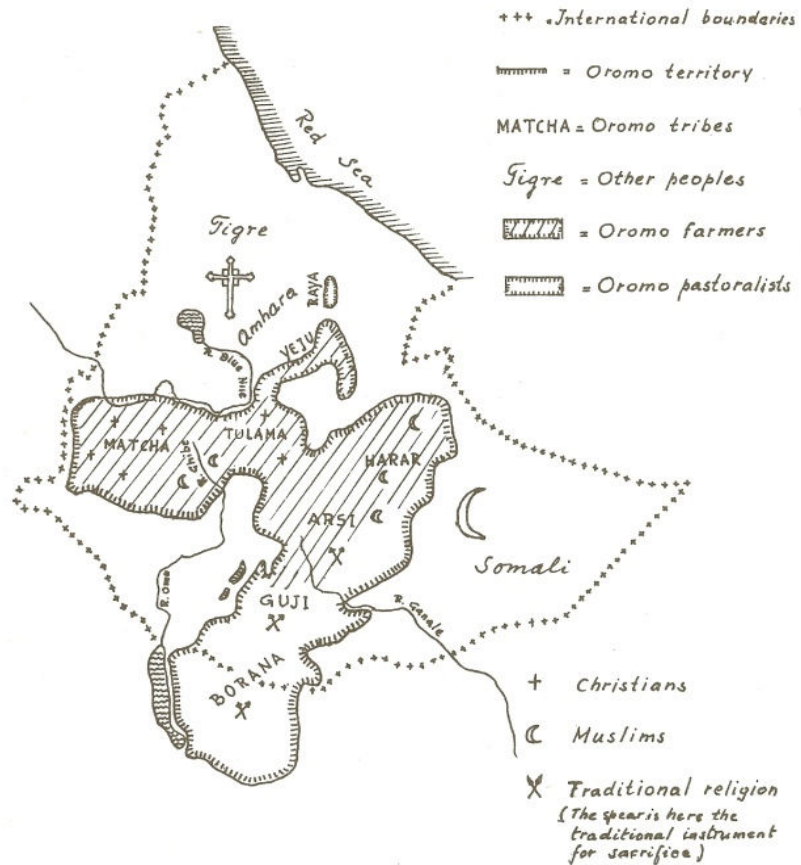
¹⁶⁸ Enrico Cerulli, "The Folk-Literature of the Galla." in *Harvard African Studies Volume III, Varia Africana III* edited by E. A. Hooton, Natica I. Bates, and Assistant Editor Ruth Otis Sawtell. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The African Department of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, 1922), 191.

¹⁶⁹ Oromo, Liberation Front. "Oromia Online." April 4, 2008.
http://www.oromia.org/Oromo_People_in%20Search_of_Just_Peace.htm (accessed April 4, 2008).

their identity through maintenance of their culture. By retaining their use of the *gada* system, and through incorporating aspects of their traditional religion into Islam and Christianity the Oromo did not become Amharaized as some groups did such as the Kemant and Agaw.

The Oromo are made up of multiple groups, but they are all connected through their language and shared history. Among the Oromo the cultural margins of individual identity, religion, and ethnic identity are so inseparable that it is difficult to draw a boundary between them. The Oromo culture is connected to its ancient past by its values and beliefs. As pointed out by

Gemetchu Megerssa, “Never in its history as a people has one of its constituent communities ever broken off its relationship with the



THE OROMO OF ETHIOPIA

Figure 8: The Oromo in Ethiopia

Image from: *Oromo Religion: Myths and Rites of the Western Oromo of Ethiopia--An Attempt to Understand.* By Lambert Bartels, Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1983.

common ancestry.”¹⁷⁰ This is supported by numerous primary sources from the 16th to the 19th century. Identity is formed both from how a group defines themselves and by how they are defined by others. This thesis has already discussed that the Oromo identified with a common historical identity. Historically the Oromo were also defined by how others viewed them.

Identity and culture are constructed elements of humanity. They provide mechanisms for humans to express themselves and to define themselves in relation to others. Identity can be expressed through material culture such as a certain hairstyle or the way a group builds their homes or communities. Identity can be expressed through other cultural systems such as religion, marriage customs, and social hierarchy. Oromo identity is expressed in all of these ways as well as many others. Historians have long used language as one way to connect people and verify a shared identity, and the various groups that self-identify as Oromo do share a common language.

The Oromo language was primarily a spoken language until the late 19th century. Enrico Cerulli put together a collection of Galla (Oromo) folk-literature which was printed in 1922.¹⁷¹ This text includes songs on historical subjects, love songs, cradle songs, material on rites of initiation, proverbs, riddles, and humorous prose. For example, one proverb says “ ‘If they cut my throat, they could not kill me, but with boiling water I am destroyed’, said the flea.”¹⁷² Cerulli goes on to explain the significance of this saying among the Oromo, “Against each

¹⁷⁰ Gemetchu Megerssa, "Oromumma: Tradition, Consciousness and Identity." In *Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries*, by P. T. W. Baxter Jan Hultin and Alessandro Triulzi editors, (Asmara: The Red Sea Press, Inc., 1996), 93.

¹⁷¹ Enrico Cerulli, "The Folk-Literature of the Galla." in *Harvard African Studies Volume III, Varia Africana III* edited by E. A. Hooton, Natica I. Bates, and Assistant Editor Ruth Otis Sawtell. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The African Department of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, 1922.

¹⁷² Cerulli, 194.

enemy, use the suitable weapon.”¹⁷³ Another interesting Oromo text printed in 1894, is *The Galla Spelling Book* which also includes many songs and was the source for some of the material in Cerulli’s work.¹⁷⁴ Shared language and shared literature are important aspects of a shared identity. The Oromo have maintained their linguistic distance from the Amhara state and by doing so have used language as a mechanism to retain their identity.

The Oromo had no written history until the late 19th century. Even so they were mentioned in government documents, military records, and travelogues prior to this time. These documents provide a general view of how the Oromo were perceived by their enemies the Amhara and by Europeans who visited Ethiopia. Most of these documents could in one way or another be connected with the Amhara because most of the Europeans who visited Ethiopia had a connection to the Christian Amhara based on a shared religious system. The Oromo lived in various areas, had differing social identities, and participated in various religious belief systems, yet they still maintained their identity as Oromo and a shared sense of historical connection. The earliest known text which discusses the Oromo is that of Father Jerome Lobo. The term Galla is used in these early texts instead of the name Oromo. This is a term that was only used by outsiders to identify the Oromo and was never used by the Oromo.

Jerome Lobo, a Portuguese monk, was born in Lisbon in 1593 and he was in Abyssinia from 1624-1633. He wrote a detailed log of his experiences in Ethiopia and his dealings with the Oromo. It is interesting to see how his attitudes toward the Oromo changed as he interacted with them. Having first landed in Mozambique, Lobo and his group later made their way to Abyssinia in the hopes of converting more souls to “proper” Christianity. The text discusses his

¹⁷³ Cerulli, 194.

¹⁷⁴ Onesimos Nesib, a Native Galla. *The Galla Spelling Book*, (Moncullo, Ethiopia: Swedish Mission Press, 1894).

experiences, but the only ones that will be focused on here are those that deal directly with the Oromo. Before meeting the Oromo Father Lobo makes the following generalization:

. . . the Galle, who first alarmed the world in 1542, have remarkably distinguished themselves by ravages they have committed, and the terror they have raised in this part of Africa. . . They practice no rites of worship, though they believe that in the regions above there dwells a Being that governs the world: whether by this Being they mean the sun or the sky is not known; or, indeed, whether they have not some conception of the God that created them.¹⁷⁵

There are a couple of general points that stand out in this description. Lobo had not yet met any Oromo and yet he had heard of their fierceness in battle.

It is important to note that during the time these documents were produced the Oromo were in a struggle with the Amharic kingdom to maintain and expand their territory and retain their independence. Prior to this some Oromo had settled and grew barley and raised sheep and cattle, while others remained pastoralists. It was not until the 16th century when they began to expand their territory that they took on the identity of a warrior class.¹⁷⁶ This reputation as warriors was a major component of the identity ascribed to the Oromo by the Amhara and as a result by the Europeans.

In order to contextualize this discussion a brief overview of the events immediately preceding the production of Lobo's text will be helpful. During the war between the Amharic Christian kingdom and the Muslims under the direction Imam Ahmad Gran (1529-1543), the Oromo who inhabited the area between the Muslim state of Harar and the Christian kingdom of the Amhara were devastated.¹⁷⁷ There were settled Oromo who lived in both the Christian and the Muslim areas, many of whom were forced to leave and migrate to the mountains. When this occurred, and as these two warring groups depleted their resources, the pastoralist Oromo who

¹⁷⁵ Jerome Lobo, *A Voyage to Abyssinia/by Father Jerome Lobo; translated from French by Samuel Johnson* (London: Cassell, 1887), 71-72.

¹⁷⁶ Jalata, 18.

¹⁷⁷ Hassen, 20.

lived on the periphery of this conflict were not severely affected. Once the Muslims had been defeated and before the Christian kingdom could regain its footing in this area the Oromo expanded into it. The Oromo “expansion,” then, was more of a move to occupy territory that was left empty by this conflict and not an outward attack on the Christian kingdom.¹⁷⁸ Lobo visited the area in the midst of this conflict as the Oromo attempted to hold onto the territory they had acquired and the Amharic kingdom attempted to retake what it had previously held and to expand its holdings.

Lobo relates that he was traveling with Keba Christos, (the date is not given but would have been between 1624 and 1634) an emissary of the Emperor Susneyos and his army when they came upon the army of viceroy Tecla Georgis who had revolted against the Emperor. This viceroy was accompanied by his own army and a contingent of about 300 Oromo and several ecclesiastics. The battle turned against the viceroy and his troops fled, but the Oromo fought bravely to their deaths.¹⁷⁹ This is just one example of numerous ones found in primary sources that extol the bravery of the Oromo. It is interesting that the name they assign to themselves is Oromo which means, as has already pointed out, “brave man.”

The only other two points that can be added from Father Lobo’s accounts that relate to the Oromo were that there were Oromo who were in alliance with the Amhara and that the Oromo were known as excellent horsemen. As he relates when he had one of his first encounters with the Oromo while traveling “we were incapable of considering the danger we were in of being immediately surrounded by the Galles . . . the viceroy attended us closely with his little army . . . his force consisting only of foot, and the Galles entirely of horse, a service at which

¹⁷⁸ Hassen, 20.

¹⁷⁹ Lobo, 129-130.

they were very expert.”¹⁸⁰ The Oromo were a formidable enemy to the Amhara and their skill with horses was one aspect of this identity assigned to them by the Abyssinians. According to Bahrey the Oromo began to use horses between 1554 and 1562.¹⁸¹ There is no concrete information as to where the horses were acquired, but the Oromo may well have taken them as booty from the Muslims and Abyssinians. The importance of horses to the Oromo and in relation to their identity is exemplified in the fact that the Oromo often took the name of their horse as their war title, as pointed out by Cerulli “Abba Givar was the war-name of Tullu, the king of Gimma . . . Thus Abba Gifar means the “lord of the dapple grey horse.”¹⁸²

The construction of identity by outsiders changes based on the time period or the particular experience of those constructing the identities. Europeans who visited what later became the modern state of Ethiopia created an identity for the Oromo based on their experiences. These identities were then translated into written documents, which became the source of information for those living in Europe. An example of the way these identities are shaped and how they change over time is exhibited in a discussion of the racial identity of the Oromo constructed by Europeans. Manoel de Almeida arrived in Abyssinia at the same time as Lobo in 1624. He was ambassador to Emperor Susneyos and was exiled in 1634 by Emperor Fasilides.¹⁸³ Only portions of his history have been translated into English and there are only brief accounts of the Oromo. The interesting aspect of Almeida’s description is when it is later compared to other European descriptions concerning ideas of “race.” Racial identities, like all identities, are constructed and Almeida sets up an interesting point of discussion concerning the construction of the racial identity of the Oromo. Almeida states, “Coming now to the history of

¹⁸⁰ Lobo, 117.

¹⁸¹ Beckingham and Huntingford, 117.

¹⁸² Cerulli, 18.

¹⁸³ Beckingham and Huntingford, xxii-xxiii.

the Gallas in greater detail, it should be known that they are a black race . . . They have good features and well made bodies, and today there are many of them who are copper coloured rather than black . . . They say that the reason is that they have intermarried with the Gafates . . . [who] are usually tall, spare, and not very black.”¹⁸⁴ Ambiguity becomes evident when this statement is compared with one made by James Bruce in 1768: “The Galla are generally of a brown complexion, though some who inhabit the valleys in the low country are perfectly black. . . Both sexes are below the middle size, but they are exceedingly light and agile.”¹⁸⁵ In 1869 Clements Markham described the Oromo thus, “they are fairer than the Abyssinians themselves; and old Tellez says that Galla means milk, because they were white men.”¹⁸⁶ Here are represented a cross section of the description of the “racial” identity of the Oromo. It varies from very black to white.

In 1868 Henry Blanc spent time in Ethiopia and was kept as a prisoner of Emperor Tewodros II (1855-1868). He recounts his description of the Oromo, which is of interest here as he discusses both the men and the women:

The Wallo Gallas are a fine race, far superior to the Abyssinian in elegance, manliness, and courage. . . . The Galla women are generally fair; and when not exposed to the sun, their large, black, brilliant, shining eyes, their rosy lips, their long black, and neatly-braided hair, their little feet and hands, their graceful and well-rounded forms, make them comparable to the fairest daughters of Spain or Italy.¹⁸⁷

It is interesting to note that each of these accounts were compelled to describe the Oromo in terms of their skin color and that the description is not associated with different groups of Oromo except in the case of Bruce. In the accounts there is evidence that each of the authors had

¹⁸⁴ Beckingham and Huntingford, 136.

¹⁸⁵ Bruce, 86.

¹⁸⁶ Clements R. Markham, *A History of The Abyssinian Expedition* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1869),40 .

¹⁸⁷ Henry Blanc, *A Narrative of Captivity in Abyssinia: With Some Account of the Late Emperor Theodore, His Country and People*, (London: Frank Cass & Co. LTD., 1970), 290-291.

associations with multiple groups of Oromo. As with most people, skin color varies within ethnic groups and this assignment of identity as “white” or “black” based on interaction with a few individuals in an ethnic group has more to do with the people assigning the identity than with the people on whom the identity is being placed.

The next aspect of Oromo identity that was ascribed to them from the outside that I would like to address is that of their legendary fierceness. Numerous accounts allude to this quality as a universal part of Oromo identity. For instance, Bruce points out

The Galla are reputed good soldiers for a surprise or sudden dash, but lack constancy and perseverance. They accomplish incredible marches; swim rivers, holding by the tails of their horses; . . . Iron is so scarce among them, so that their lances are only poles, sharpened at the end and hardened in the fire. . . Though their arms are so little formidable, their attack is very much dreaded. Probably the frantic howl which they raise at the moment they charge contributes materially to the panic that is often produced by their onset.¹⁸⁸

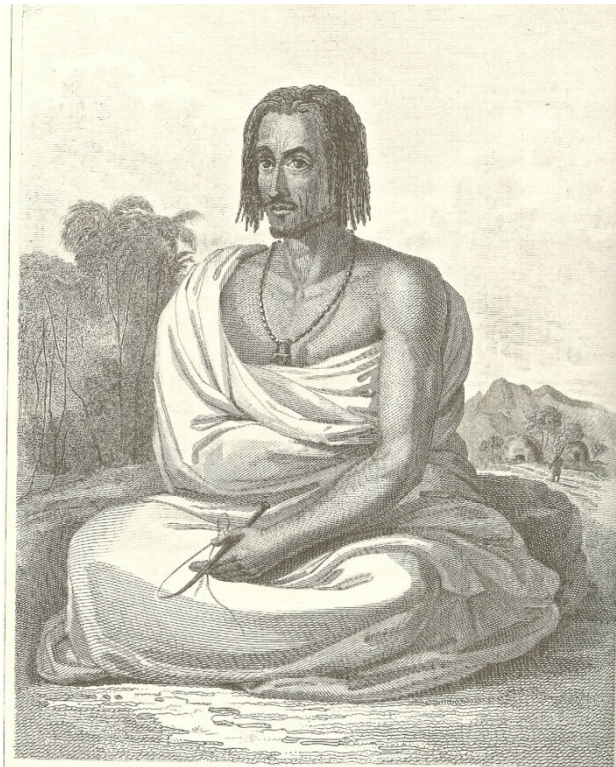


Figure 9 Berilla, An Edjow Galla, 1809.

Taken from *A Voyage to Abyssinia and Travels into The Interior of that Country*, by Henry Salt. Page 336.

The Oromo lacked firearms, but fought valiantly and struck fear in the hearts of their attackers. This description could probably be attributed to numerous ethnic groups that resisted the encroachment of imperialist powers into their territory.

Fierceness and a propensity to warfare was an identity that the Amhara and Europeans ascribed to the Oromo. Bahrey states that “all men, from small to great, are

instructed in warfare, and for this reason they ruin and kill us.”¹⁸⁹ An interesting contrast to this description comes from a Franciscan, Remedius Prutky, who was asked by Emperor Iyasu II (1730-1751) to form a mission in Ethiopia, “Just as the Ethiopians attack Sennar every year, so too they harry Schanckalle and Galla with particular bitterness: their inhabitants are regarded as rebels and in great numbers are slain, or captured and enslaved, old men and youths, men and women.”¹⁹⁰ The comparison of these two accounts points out the ambiguity of such reports in that they must be taken within the historical context. History was written by the powerful and those who resisted their control were described in ways that benefited those in power. Were the Oromo a fierce warrior group? During this time period they may well have been because of a need to defend their homes. Remembering that identity is fluid and changes, the Oromo identity of fierceness was ascribed from outside during from the 16th to the 19th century and they accepted this identity because of their circumstances. It was useful for the Oromo to be viewed as “fierce” because it instilled fear in their enemies.

It is worthwhile here to enter into a brief discussion of a different type of identity that was ascribed to the Oromo, that of loyal peaceful pastoralists. Often these contending identities were assigned to them by the same people. Again identity is not a singular event nor a static quality, identity is framed by multiplicity and changes often simply by changing circumstances in a very short period of time. When an Oromo warrior was fighting a battle the identity of a fierce warrior was accurate, but when this same warrior went home a day later the identity of a peace loving pastoralist would have been accurate also. Prior to the 16th century the Oromo were not identified as a “warrior group.” It was not until they experienced the devastation of being

¹⁸⁹ Bahrey, 126.

¹⁹⁰ Remedius Prutky, *Prutky's Travels in Ethiopia and Other Countries*, Translated and edited by J. H. Arrowsmith-Brown and annotated by Richard Pankhurst, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1991), 152.

caught between the Muslims and Christians that they acquired this appellation. When they began to expand into territory that had been held by the Abyssinians they became known as warriors.

The Oromo were an integral part of Ethiopia during this time and virtually every primary source which I had access to mentioned the Oromo. As pointed out earlier, contending identities are an important part of the discussion of identity and this holds true in regard to the Oromo during the 16th through the 19th century. Henry Blanc provides this description when comparing the Amhara and the Oromo, “If we compare the [sic] races still further and examine the morality and social habits of the two, at a first glance it would seem that both are licentious, both dissolute. But, on closer inspection, the degradation of the one is seen to be so thorough, that the other may claim, by contrast, something like primitive simplicity.”¹⁹¹ Blanc goes on to describe the Amhara lifestyle as “one round of sensual debauchery” and the Oromo lifestyle as having “preserved many of the institutions of their forefathers.”¹⁹² The Oromo are ascribed a more “moral” identity than the Amhara, in this case the Wallo described by Blanc are Muslims and the Amhara were Christians.

To round out this portrayal of the Oromo in their daily lives Plowden gave a very descriptive account. He discussed the general geography of the area of Goodroo where he spent time with the Oromo “sickness is little known, and few die save in battle or of old age. It is agreeable to the eye of the traveler, and rare, to behold none of those squalid objects of disease and misery, those swarms of beggars, that infest most countries, and a land where, if luxury and magnificence do not astonish his sight extremes of poverty are equally [sic] unfrequent.”¹⁹³ Again, much as Blanc described a “moral” balanced society, so did Plowden described an economically balanced society with little extreme wealth or extreme poverty. Bruce describes the

¹⁹¹ Blanc, 292.

¹⁹² Blanc, 292-293.

¹⁹³ Plowden, 307.

Oromo as a “considerable nation” whose social structure has “certain degrees of merit . . . a plebeian may rise to the rank of a noble.”¹⁹⁴ These accounts provide an alternate picture of the Oromo from that of fierce warriors, to that of settled societies with structured government. It is most likely that the Oromo were both fierce warriors and that they lived in structured social groups; both identities existed at the same time depending on the experience of the individual assigning the identity.

Through these accounts there are several aspects of Oromo identity that were ascribed to them from the outside. These include; their fierceness as warriors, their organized social structure, and their “heathen” religious identities. For the Oromo their social structure and their religious system were interdependent.

Oromo religion as previously discussed focuses on Waqa, is structured, and includes religious officials. Almeida in 1624 to 1634 says of the Oromo “All the Gallas are heathens, or rather, are neither Christians, Moors nor heathens, for they have no idols to worship and take very little account of God.”¹⁹⁵ Almeida obviously had very little direct dealing with the Oromo or he would have understood that they had an organized religious system woven into their social system. Bruce in 1769-1770, states that the Oromo do indeed have a religion, “The wanzey tree, under which their kings are crowned, is worshipped by every [sic]tribe; and they venerate the moon and several stars.”¹⁹⁶ In these early accounts the religious identity of the Oromo was outside of the Abrahamic religions, but in later accounts there are examples of a change in the assigned identity of the Oromo. Markham, in 1869, points out that the Wallo and Yadjow Oromo became Muslim, “These became Muhammedan soon after they entered upon their

¹⁹⁴ Bruce, 86-87.

¹⁹⁵ Beckingham and Huntingford, 136.

¹⁹⁶ Bruce, 87.

conquests, but the Galla hordes farther south were, and continue to be heathen.”¹⁹⁷ It is interesting to note that the Wallo and Yadjow are named as individual groups, while the Oromo that did not accept Islam or Christianity maintained a monolithic identity. Markham also noted that Raj Guksa, a Yadjow Oromo, who became the supreme power in Amhara became a Christian and many of the Yadjow followed his example.¹⁹⁸ These early accounts set up our discussion of Oromo religious identity and the syncretic nature of Oromo religious practice.

The Oromo of the Gibe highlands saw in Islam a way to exert power over the Christian state. By identifying with Islam they were able to use this religious system as a way to retain power over their own identities and to oppose the political power of their rivals. Even though they accepted a new religious system it was one that was syncretized to include elements of their traditional system. It was a system they chose, not one that was foisted on them by a more powerful state. Islam’s similarity to non-Abrahamic religious systems in creating a sense of community identity and its resistance to the Solomonic Christian state of Menelik II in the 19th century appealed to the Oromo of the Gibe highlands. This case study illustrates the use of control over one’s own identity to create or recreate an identity that has power to accomplish the goals necessary to meet the needs of the community.

As a result of the weakening of both the Muslim and Christian contingents after the *jihad* of Imam Ahmad ibn Ibrahim Gran, the southern highlands of Ethiopia were open to mass migration by the Oromo, who inhabited areas south of southern Ethiopia. In the latter half of the 16th century, the Oromo controlled most of south-eastern Ethiopia. The Oromo viewed Islam as a religion of resistance and became Muslim in order to show solidarity against the Amharaic

¹⁹⁷ Markham, 41.

¹⁹⁸ Markham, 46-47.

Christian rulers. Jerry Bentley points out that often religious conversion was less a matter of deep spiritual belief and more a matter of a way to gain social power: “It is certainly conceivable, or even probable, that pre-modern individuals often enough accepted alien cultural traditions in a thoroughgoing way and underwent a deep spiritual or psychological conversion experience. It was perhaps more common, though for pre-modern peoples to adopt or adapt foreign cultural traditions for political, social, or economic purposes.”¹⁹⁹ Bentley then goes on to point out that the prospect of economic or political alliances were “The most powerful incentives to conversion.”²⁰⁰ This is the case with the Oromo which converted to Islam. The Muslim trading communities in Ethiopia provided an economic incentive, as the Amhara allowed the Muslims freedom to conduct trade which the Oromo did not have. Politically, Islam also offered the Oromo another way to resist conversion. Bentley argues that even in these cases these “conversions” led “universally to syncretism rather than to outright, wholesale adoption of a foreign cultural tradition.”²⁰¹ For the Oromo the Muslims in Ethiopia had resisted the Amharic state and this was an appealing prospect as the Oromo too were in a pitched battle with the Amhara for control of their territory. By associating with the Muslims the Oromo expanded their identity so that they could be considered part of the Muslim community as well as Oromo.

Although the resistance was not always aggressive militarily, the relationship between Muslims and the Amharic state were the type desired by the Oromo. Another important aspect of associating with Islam was the sense of brotherhood and mutual support that resulted. The pride of belonging to this larger body, which is an important aspect of Muslim identity, was very appealing to the Ethiopians who adopted Islam. An example of this is presented by Levtzion and

¹⁹⁹ Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 7.

²⁰⁰ Bentley, 9.

²⁰¹ Bentley, 19.

Pouwels discussing the Islamic revival in the 18th century in Ethiopia: “Its most relevant aspect in Ethiopia and the Horn was the emergence of new brotherhoods founded by students of Ahmad ibn Idris (1785-1837).”²⁰² For some who had lived under heavy handed Christian rule, the self-respect created by the *Dar-es-Salaam* (house of peace) made a significant impression. As mentioned above, by the time it reached the interior, accepting Islam was not so much about a disconnection from local religious and cultural elements as it was about adding new customs that created a link beyond the local community.²⁰³

The spread of Islam among the Oromo in the Gibe region of Ethiopia offers some compelling elements for discussion. The Oromo who converted to Islam did so in order to expand their identity and to gain political and economic power through their association with Muslim traders. Unlike Christianity in Ethiopia, Islam tended to be spread by merchant clerics instead of warfare. In the second half of the 18th century Jabarti traders, from the al-Jabart region in Zeila, which was under Amhara control, established strong ties with the Gibe nobility based on commercial interests. The Muslim merchants were well informed about political events outside of the local area, new trade goods, and technological advances. Because of this economic connection and the sophistication of the Jabarti traders, the Gibe nobility were drawn to Islam and they gave the responsibility of teaching their children to the Jabarti traders. The Muslim teachers, by the 19th century, had cultivated the minds of the future leaders of the area. By the 1840’s the kings and nobility of the Gibe states, with the exception of Gomma, were Muslim. These kings spread Islam to the people under their jurisdiction.

²⁰² Levitzon and Pouwells, 233.

²⁰³ Spencer J. Trimingham, *Islam in East Africa*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 58-59.

Another important factor that assisted in the spread of Islam was the nature of the Islam being communicated. One of the strengths of Islam is its system of law. Sharia law is the body of Islamic religious law. It addresses aspects of everyday life and social interaction. It is less a codified set of rules than a consensus of the community leaders. As has been previously discussed, the Oromo *gada* system was partially a political system in which the *gada* grade set that was in leadership set the law and acted in a cooperative manner to make decisions. Sharia law was similar, but offered a much more structured format for legal interaction based on the written text of the Qur'an, the *hadith* (the sayings and doings of The Prophet), *ijtihad* (reasoning by analogy), and *ijma* (consensus of community or ummah). Backed by previous debate and interpretation, the *Sharia* (Islamic law) presented a strong and useful body of law that was stable.²⁰⁴ This was easily incorporated into the Oromo *gada* system.

In Ethiopia, Muslims did not use aggressive methods of conversion. They adapted to the Oromo culture, interacted with the people, and offered information in slow doses. The conversion of the Oromo in the Gibe region was slow and did not disturb their traditional values. “The psychological shock involved in the change of religions is thus reduced to the minimum. Islam does no violent uprooting . . . the new culture gives immediate values without displacing the old.”²⁰⁵ Islam allowed the Oromo to maintain their cultural and religious ritual, while identifying with Islam and gaining the benefit of this identification. The Muslims became an integral part of the community and conversion simply happened, it was not forced.

These inferences point out several important aspects of the relationship between Islam and concepts of identity and power. Islam, as represented by the Jabarti traders, provided a sense

²⁰⁴ John L. Esposito, *Islam the Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 78-84.

²⁰⁵ Hassen, 152.

of power and stability, through the *Sharia*. Because the traders had knowledge of the larger world, it was perceived as a “modern” religion when compared to the Oromo religious system, and it was the religion of merchants. This last aspect of identity was very important in Christian Ethiopia where not being Christian, during many periods of time, meant that a person could not own land. Being a trader offered a way to economic improvement without land ownership. In most cases the Christian Ethiopians did not impede the Muslim traders, but rather gave them considerable latitude. This was because of the lucrative nature of trade and its importance to the economic health of the dynasty and the ruler.

One aspect of Islamic identity that likely appealed to the Oromo in the 19th century was its status as a religion of resistance to Amharic control.²⁰⁶ By the end of the 19th century Menelik had almost doubled the size of his kingdom through violent and cruel military conquest. Some of the peoples who were desirous of resisting Menelik took up Islam in order to identify with a larger group in order to facilitate mutual defense against the onslaught of the Christian Emperor. The Arssi Oromo, who live south of Addis Ababa, were targeted in the early 1880’s because of their cattle holdings.²⁰⁷ This action caused the Arssi to associate Christianity with cruelty and injustice. The Arssi were aware that the Somali, who were Muslim, had a reputation for successful armed resistance. The Arssi converted in the hopes of associating with the Somali as part of the community of Islam. Although they were only minimally successful, the Arssi desired to associate with Islam because of the perceived power they would gain in doing so.

²⁰⁶ Jalata, 25.

²⁰⁷ Jon Abbink, "An Historical-Anthropological Approach to Islam in Ethiopia: Issues of Identity and Politics." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 11.2, (1998): 115.

The Harar and Arssi Oromo are primarily Muslim as a result of trade with the Muslim Somali and their dislike of the Christian Tulama Oromo and Amhara who took their farmland in the early 16th century. Christianity's influence was primarily spread through political control and this control by the Amhara facilitated the conversion of the Tulama Oromo and northern Yeju Oromo. As can be seen on the map at the beginning of this chapter, the Oromo who lived in the region bordered by the Amhara became Christians. There was significant inter-marriage between the Oromo and the Amhara.

Regardless of their affiliation with the Abrahamic religious systems, most Oromo still practice elements of their non-Abrahamic religion. As Bartels points out “. . . the Oromo's traditional modes of experiencing the divine have continued almost unaffected, in spite of the fact that several rituals and social institutions in which it was expressed, have been very diminished or apparently submerged in new ritual cloaks.”²⁰⁸ The *gada* system is one of the rituals that was continued by many Oromo regardless of their adherence to an Abrahamic religion. The details of this system are important because they illustrate the complexity in separating social function and religious ritual.

The *gada* system provided the Oromo with an organized societal structure for hundreds of years. It was recognized by the Europeans who interacted with them as well as by the Ethiopians with whom the Oromo came into contact. Before proceeding to a discussion of its importance to Oromo identity and its religious significance, providing historical references for its importance in Oromo society will be beneficial.

²⁰⁸ Bartels, 15.

In Bahrey's history written in 1593 there is a discussion of one element of the *gada* system, the *luba*. A *luba*, simply defined, is an age-set group that is circumcised at the same time.

They have neither king nor master like other peoples, but they obey the *luba* during a period of eight years; at the end of eight years another *luba* is made, and the first gives up his office. They do this at fixed times; and *luba* means 'those who are circumcised at the same time'.²⁰⁹

Later in this same text Bahrey goes on to discuss that it is through these ages-sets that time is reckoned,

Thus it was that he who was circumcised when the Galla began to invade the country of Bali was called Melbah . . . The second *luba* was called Mudana; his father was called Jebana. It was he who crossed the river Wabi. . . The fourth *luba* was called Bifole; it was he who devastated Dawaro . . . The fifth *luba* was called Mesle . . . This *luba* Mesle began the custom of riding horses and mules, which the Galla had not done previously.²¹⁰

As can be seen from this discussion Bahrey did not use years to discuss these events, but rather he used the time system used by the Oromo of discussing events related to the name of the ruling *luba* or *gada* age-set. A discussion of the names for the sets will be addressed later in this thesis. The age set name may denote an individual, but more likely it denotes a group of people as there was no king among the Oromo they were ruled through a group. Although each *gada* age-set would assign one of their group to be leader, this person was not seen as a king.

The republican nature of the *gada* system was such that, when working as designed, the groups were never under the rule of a set of leaders for more than eight years. Plowden provides another description of his understanding of the system.

Goodroo is, perhaps, a specimen of nearly as pure a republic as can exist . . . Owing to the republican nature of the system . . . A man who is well off in the world, and has a sufficiency of clothing, food, meat, and other luxuries, ploughs

²⁰⁹ Beckingham and Huntingford, 115.

²¹⁰ Beckingham and Huntingford, 116-117.

his own ground, reaps his own corn, guards his own cattle at pasture, and cleaves his own trees for firewood.²¹¹

Plowden then goes on to describe the way the different groups interact with one another based on the decisions reached during meetings between the ruling groups. The *gada* system acted as a government system, a social structure, a foreign policy organization, and a legal system for the Oromo.

The incorporation of the Oromo territory into the Abyssinian Empire undermined Oromo identity. An incident that occurred in 1884 described by Major W. Cornwallis Harris, a British military engineer, provides an illustration of the consternation the Oromo endured when faced with the power of the Christian Abyssinians and their British allies. In this incident, Major Harris was visiting the Christian Abyssinians and used rockets as a show of support. As a result, the Oromo (Galla) felt they had no recourse but to submit to Abyssinian rule. As stated by Harris “The Galla . . . who witnessed the explosion, ascribed the phenomenon to “potent medicines” and declared, that since the Gyptzis (British) could, at pleasure produce comets in the sky and rain fire from heaven, there was nothing for them but submission to the king’s command.”²¹² The Abyssinians military power was greater than that of the Oromo and they attempted to assimilate the Oromo who were very resistant to these efforts. Even when the Oromo converted they maintained their separate identity by continuing to follow the rituals associated with their Oromo religion. They used religion as a method of passive resistance.

The *gada* system is one of the elements of Oromo culture that survived. As pointed out by Marco Bassi, “*Gada* is certainly a very strong symbol of Oromo ethnic identity . . . something in which all Oromo are supposed to identify themselves because they recognize it as a root

²¹¹ Plowden, 309.

²¹² Harris, Major W. Cornwallis. "Ethiopia (Excerpt from The Highlands of Ethiopia)." *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* Vol. 55 (341), March 1844: 284. Accessed through <http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/ilej/> April 4, 2008.

feature of Oromo culture.”²¹³ The strength of this shared ritual symbol of collective identity was purged of any power by the Abyssinians, but it remains a strong symbol of solidarity for the Oromo. The importance of religious ritual is not specific to Oromo culture as pointed out by Talcott Parsons “These types of expressive symbols may be considered as manifesting and regulating the common moral sentiments or need-dispositions of the members of the collectivity. It is this type which . . . Durkheim regarded as the core type of religious ritual, the symbolic expression of the solidarity of the group. This gives a strong premium on performance of these symbolic acts in common, so that the sharing aspect is itself directly symbolized.”²¹⁴ The use of religious ritual to maintain cultural identity is valuable, even when the aspect of power is stripped from the ritual.

In the late 19th century, when the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II began to move to the west into the area inhabited by the Oromo, they were put under significant pressure to convert to Christianity. Menelik II, like previous Christian Amharic leaders, used the political and economic system to force conversion as a means to integrate the people under his rule. Amharic rule enforced several harsh statutes on the Oromo, including reducing the *gada* system to a ritual institution because the government set up a political structure that did not take into account the local ruling class. The *gada* system stood in stark contrast to the political system used by the Amhara. The Amhara had a monarchy and organized the people into class hierarchy. The Oromo, using the *gada* system, had an integrated classless system that was democratic in nature.²¹⁵

²¹³ Marco Bassi, "Power's Abiguity or the Political Significance of Gada." In *Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries*, by P. T. W. Jan Hultin, and Alessandro Triulzi editors Baxter, 150-161.(Asmara, Eritrea: The Red Sea Press, Inc., 1996), 151.

²¹⁴ Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*. (New York: Free Press, 1964), 396.

²¹⁵ Jalata, 22.

This limitation on the power and authority of the *gada* system had a significant impact on the social structure of the Macha Oromo, which used this system as a way to institutionalize their shared responsibility in community leadership. When the Amhara gained political control they gradually deprived the *gada* system of its power. If the Oromo converted to Christianity they were allowed to be landlords and work with the Amhara. If they did not, they were relegated to be tenants on the land that had once been communal property. The *gada* was much more than a political system for the Oromo, it was a religious and cultural institution that had a considerable effect on their daily lives, and remains an important aspect of Oromo culture. The removal of this system created a cultural vacuum for the Oromo. As has been discussed, the Macha Oromo continued to practice the *gada* system ritually regardless of its political power.

The Macha Oromo, like most other Oromo, used their religious ritual to maintain power over their own identity. They used the *gada* system, a system by which community leadership is passed from generation to generation, to strengthen their collective identity even after the political significance of the system had been removed by the state. This ritual which has both religious and social importance is a core element of Macha Oromo identity. The Macha Oromo, who continued to practice their non-Abrahamic religion, were able to retain power over their identity and those that chose to become Muslim or Christian incorporated aspects of their Oromo religion into their new belief system. The *gada* is a political system as pointed out by Plowden, but it has great religious significance included in it. The discussion below provides a brief description of a very complex system and shows the religious significance of some of the elements of the *gada* system.

The *gada* system is a way to pass political leadership of the community from one generation group to another. Mohammed Hassen, using the 1867 *Oromo Grammar* written by

Massaja, traces the etymology of *gada* from its root word *gaddisa* meaning shade or shelter from the sun.²¹⁶ This term also includes considerations of time and official power when associated with the system that bears its name. Time for a *gada* grade sets forty-years between the fathers grade-set and the sons, regardless of the age of the father at the time of the son’s birth. A member of a particular *gada* set can name their set and a sense of their age or generation is immediately associated with that term. For instance, if someone in the United States says they are “baby boomers,” people in the U.S. would immediately recognize that they were born shortly after World War II. The following table is a sample list of *gada* grade names, which differ from group to group.

Grade	Fathers	Sons
1	Melbah	Harmufa
2	Mudana	Robale
3	Kilole	Birmaji
4	Bifole	Mulata
5	Michelle	Dulo ²¹⁷

Simply by identifying one’s *gada* grade a significant amount of information is communicated, whether you are a father or son within the system, how long it will be before your group will be in leadership, etc.

The male members of the Oromo are classified into *gada* grades. The members of each set would then have the same status and perform their rituals together. The *gada*-grades represent the stages at which each group is in relation to their turn to lead the community. Each of the five grades has a specific name for both the father set and the son set, and these names repeat through the eight year cycle. The children of a single father all belong to one *gada* grade.

²¹⁶ Hassen, 9-10.

²¹⁷ Hassen, 11.

So for instance if a father has four sons, they would all be members of the same *gada* grade regardless of the age of the father at their birth or their age in relation to the ages of other males in the same *gada* grade. Since the son enters the *gada* grade that is forty years from the *gada* grade of the father, the father and son are always five generations apart. Thus age has nothing to do with the *gada* grade one belongs to.

There is no clear difference between the political functions of the *gada* system and the ritual function. Political power in the system is held corporately. There are officers selected, but these are only as representatives of the assembly and they are not permanent. The *gada* grade holds political power for eight years and then the next grade takes power in a ceremony known as the *Jarra*. Although the *gada* system is political, providing a governing body, it also is very ritualistic and has significant religious importance. The *Jarra* is a time of ritual activity and feasting. At the end of the transfer of power the Abba Gada (father of the *gada* power) passes off the *bokku* (wooden scepter) to the incoming Abba Gada and the change in government is accomplished. Then a ritual sacrifice is performed. As described by Hassen, “the new Abba Gada [sic] slaughtered his *butta* bull, and dipped a branch of green tree into the blood of the sacrificed victim and planted it in the assembly. The sacrificial blood symbolized the unity of the confederacy as brothers descending from a common founder, real or fictitious. The branch of a green tree represented peace, plenty, and fertility of Ilma Orma (the Oromo people).”²¹⁸ The ritual is performed on a mountain in order to be closer to *Waqqa* under an *oda* tree (the sacred sycamore tree), which is a symbol of integrity and truth.²¹⁹ As part of the ritual two men stand facing one another, kneeling with heads bowed and say the *saffu*.²²⁰ Lambert points out the

²¹⁸ Hassen, 15.

²¹⁹ Lambert, 335.

²²⁰ The *saffu* is a ritual interchange between individual creatures that accentuates their place in the cosmic and social order on the basis of their *ayana*.

religious significance of the *saffu* as related by Shagerdi Bukko an Oromo, “This *saffu* is like a prayer; while pronouncing it they pay honor to *Waqqa* by kneeling.”²²¹ For the Macha Oromo the *gada* system is much more than a political arrangement. It is a part of their religious identity and part of their community identity. This is a general description of the *gada* system, though variations exist in most Oromo communities. It is a component of the Oromo religious identity that remains regardless of their adherence to an Abrahamic religion.

The Oromo played a significant role in shaping modern day Ethiopia. They inhabited a large portion of the territory that later was included within the state boundaries of Ethiopia. Yet, they maintained a strong sense of being Oromo. Their religious system, social system, and language were all mechanisms they used to remain connected. The Oromo lived across diverse geographic regions in Ethiopia and in smaller distinct social groups. Some still practice the *gada* system as a cultural system although it no longer forms the backbone of their political organization. Many have become Muslim and Christian including elements of Oromo religious ritual into these Abrahamic religious systems. Most speak Oromo, but also they speak Amhara because this is the national language of the Ethiopian state in which they live. Taking into account this information the question arises, if they do all of these things how can they still identify themselves as Oromo?

They are Oromo because of their shared history, familial bonds, religious ritual, and social structure. Whether Christian, Muslim, or adherents to traditional beliefs, Oromo identity has weathered the pressures of time and political power. Their identity has changed over time from peaceful pastoralists to a warrior class. They have adopted new religious beliefs without abandoning their religious ritual. The Oromo still identify themselves as Oromo and they make up a major portion of the population of Ethiopia. The most important thing that constitutes

²²¹ Lambert, 337.

Oromo identity is that the Oromo identify themselves as Oromo and the mechanisms that the Oromo have used to express this identity are religious ritual and social structure.

“My sons, when you leave your old house because you have built a new one, don’t set fire to it. There are many little creatures in that old house. It is not good to kill all that life.”

Shagerdi Bukko
Macha Oromo

Chapter 5: Conclusions

The historical experience of the Oromo considered in this thesis demonstrates the use of religion and culture as mechanisms to retain identity. It has discussed culture and identity as terms and it has discussed how they relate to the Oromo. From the 16th century to the 19th century the Oromo used religious ritual and their social structure through the *gada* system as expressions of their shared identity. After careful observation I would say that the key to the unified identity that the Oromo have maintained for over five-hundred years of recorded history and by their own account a significant period of time before that is their shared history. Oromo history has shaped their identity from descent through a single progenitor to their shared identity as resistant to the Amharic state the Oromo are one nation because they have a historical connection. Their reputation as good horsemen, brave and able soldiers, as republican in their form of social political structure; these are all expressions of an identity that has been shaped by Oromo response to change over time.

The Oromo considered in this thesis are examples of the use of identity and religion to gain or retain social and political power. The Oromo used the *gada* system to maintain a sense of corporate identity and although it did not equate to political power it provided a vehicle for them to maintain control over their own identities. Over time the pastoral Oromo accepted the identity of a warrior class in order to facilitate their resistance to the Christian Amhara. The Oromo who became Christian or Muslim still incorporated aspects of Oromo religion, such as the *gada*

system into their cultural and religious identity. As Megerssa pointed out the Oromo have maintained a strong sense of identity regardless of geographic location or religious system.

As historians one valuable contribution that can be made to society is to discuss the roots of conflict and what mechanisms have been used in the past to exacerbate tensions or to alleviate them through maintenance of cultural identity. The importance of cultural identity as a significant force has often been overlooked in favor of economic or political concerns. Until recently its significance as a crucial agent of conflict as powerful as nationalism or class affiliation has been downplayed. Historiography has often focused on external hostilities and less on internal ones. However, forms of internal social tension within politically unified states based on cultural diversity have resulted in major confrontations. These clashes were also part of empire building as political hegemony was exercised over ethnically heterogeneous groups. In modern history the attempt by nation states to create a uniform national culture has intensified cultural and ethnic conflict.

Religion, culture, expressions of power, these are all ways that individuals and groups interact and initiate change in order to better meet their needs. That changes occur is the natural order of things. However, regardless of pressure, there remains a strong human capacity to find ways to maintain identity and power over that identity. Islam, Christianity, and Oromo religion are expressed as cultural systems as well as religious systems. Syncretism is an important aspect of the expression of all of these systems because of centuries of cultural contact. For the Oromo, identity is expressed through their religious tradition, through their shared history, and their language; it is an internal as well as external process.

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