A Critical Review of the Political and Stereotypical Portrayals of the Oromo in the Ethiopian Historiography

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to make a critical review of the political and stereotypical portrayals of the Oromo in the Ethiopian historiography. For the theoretical and analytical purposes, the paper draws on the Marxist theory of representation. The fact that there is no one particular, unified and uniform portrayal of the Oromo is as important politically as why a portrayal is required. Even the Oromo academics have differences in this respect. While the majority of them express their pain about Oromo great antiquity thrown in as red herrings, some consider this as simple exclusivism and discursive premordialism whose value is less important in contemporary socio-political context of nation building. The European writers are also equally divided among themselves in their narratives about the Oromo. Some point out the effects of the long years of Amhara tight grip on Oromo national identity, while others emphasize the political side of citizenship, applauding the 19th century conquest of the Oromo as a resolute political fulfillment and in doing so legitimizing the continual suppression of ethnic rights. A critical look at the literature also suggests that each writer's or a group of writers' personal and political attitudes towards Oromo history, nationalism and ethnicity, which in turn is the result of each individual writer's subjective and ideological orientations within the wider historical and cultural context, affects the way they portray the Oromo. The paper shows the tensions of settling the Ethiopian historiography. It seems that the force of those who are condemning years of injustice are stronger than that of those who like to maintain the hegemonic relationships. My conclusion is that a better solution to the current ethnic problems of the Oromo of Ethiopia lies in breaking with explicit as well as implicit traditions of socio-political denigrations of the cultural and political identity of the conquered ethnic groups. This calls for the re examination of the traditional historiography of Ethiopia, which seals the history of the country as a completed project.

Keywords: Oromo, portrayals, Ethiopia, identity

1. A BRIEF NOTE ON THE SOCIAL, POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE OROMO

The Oromo are the largest ethnonation in the Horn of Africa. In Ethiopia, they constitute 40% of the country's total population and occupy the largest regional state of the federal state. The Oromo live largely in the Regional State of Oromia, the largest and the most populous of the nine regional states formed following the downfall of the Dergue regime in May 1991. A considerable

number of Oromo clans are found also in northern Kenya. The regional State of Oromia is located between 3 and 15 degrees north latitude, and 33 and 40 degrees east latitude. The following map of the Regional State of Oromia shows the numerical as well as geographical importance of the Oromo people in Ethiopia.

Figure 1. Map of Oromia Region at UN-OCHA.
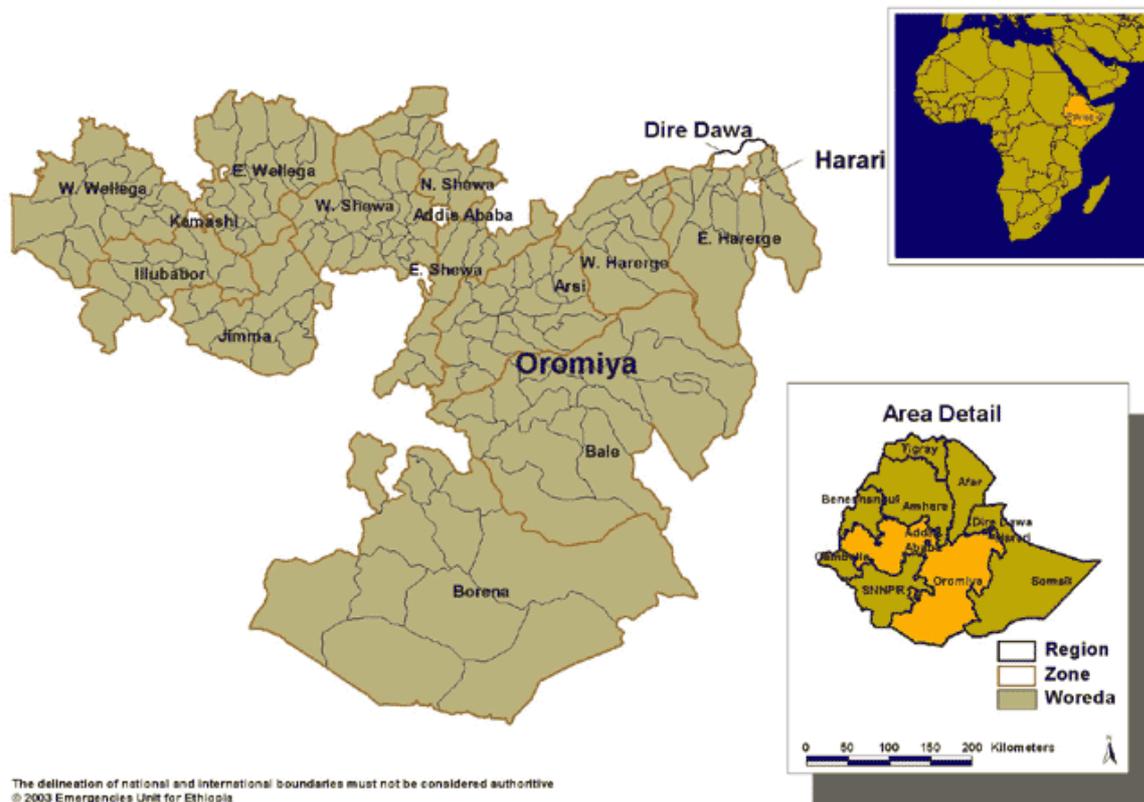
The Oromo speak *Afaan* Oromo (the language of Oromo), an Afro-Asiatic language and the most widely spoken language of the Eastern Cushitic linguistic sub-phylum. The Oromo practice three religions: Islam, Christianity and *Waaqeffannaa* (belief in *Waaq* or sky God). *Waaqeffannaa* is the Oromo version of the African traditional religion (Hussein 2004, 2005).

Most historians due to sheer historical limitation limit the Oromo appearance in the Horn of Africa to the 16th century. This was the time Oromo made a huge movement in the region. Some historians tell us that the Oromo were unknown people before the 16th century although they hardly tell us why they were unknown. The physical, cultural, soicio-political and religious identities of the Oromo clearly indicate that they are indigenous to the region. According to some scholars (e.g. Bates 1979), the Oromo were an ancient race, the indigenous stock, up on which most other peoples in the eastern part of Africa have been grafted. The Oromo movement of the 16th century played a major role in the internal dynamics of the Horn of Africa (Hassen 1990). The Oromo's current numerical preponderance in Ethiopia is partially the result of their social and demographic impact in the Horn from the 16th century onwards.

One thing that makes the Oromo the most important people in the African continent is their possession of the Gada system, the egalitarian cultural, political, economic and military organization that the Oromo have largely lost partially as a result of their adaptation of the monarchial system of governance since the beginning of the 19th century and notably due to their fall under the conquest of Menelik II at the turn of the 20th century. The Oromo Gada system is the most sophisticated socio-cultural organization ever known in traditional Africa (Legesse 1973). Legesse (2000: 195) stated that the Gada-based "Oromo democracy is one of those remarkable creations of the human mind that evolved into a full-fledged system of government, as a result of five centuries of evolution and deliberate, rational, legislative transformation." The Gada system was a complex institutional organization that embraced the Oromo peoples' political, social, economic and religious life in entirety. The Oromo had and still have many indigenous systems of teaching and learning, peace making, religious systems and worldviews. They have indigenous systems of co-operations, integrations and regulations. For example, a cursory look at the Oromo marriage system shows the people's need of strong relationships. The religious and cultural songs and other systems of expressions reveal the society's indigenous worldviews, religious systems, organizational principles and social motives (Hussein 2005).

Based on the information they got from Ethiopian imperial chronicles, some European writers rate the Oromo movement of the 16th century as a sudden and an aimless human stampede or explosion which the ravage nomads inflicted on the Christian Kingdom using as the opportunity the political gap created by the Muslim-Christian War during that time. Historical and ethnographic evidences demonstrate that the reverse is true. They show that the Oromo are indigenous people to the Horn and started their movement with well-developed indigenous systems of expansion that helped them assimilate those whom they met on their way (Blackhurst 1996; Hassen 1990; Zitelmann 1996). Hassen (1990: 20–21) makes clear that the main reason why the Oromo put huge areas under their control within a short period of time was because of their indigenous systems of integration and this was part and parcel of their expansionary plans:

> At this early stage in their migration the pastoral Oromo seem to have manifested unique characteristics of adaptability. They easily adapted to another environment and coalesced with indigenous people [those whom they found on their way], and at the same time they imparted their language and the complex gada system, which eventually replaced Islam of the conquered people…. The Oromo genius for assimilation quickly claimed any non-Oromo, defeated or otherwise.

The Oromo used their indigenous institutions and peacefully incorporated the non-Oromos into their social, cultural, military and political lives. One of these institutions is the *moggasa* (adoption) institution, which provided governmental protections for the many tribes that were cut loose from the protections of any political leader following the ruinous warfare between Christians and Muslims

(Curtin *et al.* 1995). The Oromo used the following ceremony to incorporate the non-Oromos into themselves:

> The adoption was undertaken by the Abba Gada on behalf of his *gossa* ("clan"). Before adoption, animal(s) were slaughtered and a knife was dipped in the blood of the victim and planted in the assembly, repeating in chorus what the Abba Gada had to say. "I hate what you hate, I like what you like, I fight whom you fight, I go where you go, I chase whom you chase, etc… This oath was binding and "unbreakable" on both sides. The adopted groups now became collectively the "son" of the *gossa*. The blood symbolized the brotherly unity of the *gossa* to fight for the rights and the cause of their new *gossa* (Hassen 1990: 21)

According to Hassen (1990), the Oromo regarded harmony and solidarity as a virtue that can help create an indissoluble unity. One current study of the Oromo echotheology (Kelbessa 2005) makes clear that the idea of Oromo unity incorporates harmony and solidarity between nature, God and humans. One important thing is that the Oromo system of adoption was accompanied with legal and moral protections for the incorporated ones against any feelings of superiority by the indigenous Oromo although the origin of the word *gabbaro*, a categorical name for the autochthonous people whom they assimilated, is yet unknown. The Hadiya clans of the Arsi-Oromo must have been incorporated in this way (Braukämper 2002).

In their *Conflict, Age and Power in Northeast Africa*, Kurimoto & Simonse (1998) made clear the impact of the Oromo Gada System and other social organizations on the other age set systems in northeast Africa. Braukämper (2002), Hassen (1990), Hussein (2004) and Trimingham (1965) emphasized the social and religious dimensions of the Oromo influence on ethnic groups living in the southern and southeastern peoples of Ethiopia.

The Oromo have indigenous calendar, which is based on skillful readings of the astronomical configurations of the moon and the stars. They have also indigenous systems of resolving social, economic and political conflicts. They have been using these systems to live in peaceful co-existence with neighboring tribal and ethnic groups and to negotiate or redefine their relationships (Edosa, *et al*. 2005; Watson 2001). For example, the Borana use their Gada leadership to avoid conflict over water resources. The wells are managed by a council of the clan group which includes a retired *hayyuu* (special counsellors or individuals who hold ritual authority to judge (Watson 2001)), the *Jallaba* (a local lineage of clan elder or special messenger (Homann *et al*., 2004)), the *abbaa Konfi* (trustee of each well), the *abbaa herregaa* (the coordinator of water use and maintenance) and other members of the traditional leadership (Edosa *et al.* 2005).

The Oromo egalitarian collectivism as contrast to the hierarchical Amhara religio-political system, and the general Oromo folk wisdom gives priority to the security and continuity of the society as a socio-cultural bond than to individuals. The Oromo oral arts and belief systems emphasize that the existence

of an individual is reliant on the stability and continuity of the society. For example, the Oromo proverb *Lubbuu jirtu hudduun xiixxi* (the anus sounds only while the soul exits) points out this worldview (Hussein 2005). This does not, however, mean that in the Oromo cultural traditions individuals have no place; it only means that the right, value and attribute of an individual is driven from and shaped within the larger society. Personal initiatives and action may not be discouraged in so far as they do not violate the socio-cultural standards.

2. THE MEANING OF PORTRAYAL AS USED IN THIS PAPER

I use the concept portrayal to capture the negative as well as the positive representations of the Oromo. The negative portrayal of the Oromo is basically rooted in the chauvinist and discriminatory policy of the Abyssinian ruling system. In short, under the Abyssinian ruling system the Oromo suffered not only political and economic deprivations, but also symbolic and cultural segregations. On the other hand, the Oromo reappraisal of their history, culture and political traditions is an aspect of the recent pan-Oromo consciousness and has its setting in the century old Abyssinian political domination on and suppression of the Oromo people (Spencer 1997).

The paper draws on Marxist perspectives for its interpretation of the academics' cultural, political, religious and social portrayal of the Oromo. It tries to understand oral and written texts about the Oromo within their historical contingency or situatedness. As I see it, portrayal is the process of expressing or denoting a particular idea or impression of a situation, a person, or an object by means of a words (discourse), figures, signs (symbols) with the intention of influencing opinion. Central to both Marxist and hermeneutical theories of interpretation is the view that the interpretation of a situation is invariably conditioned by the prior history of the impact of that situation (Hoy 2000). For example, one cannot effectively understand the Oromo national self-reappraisal today unless one carefully looks into the historical preconditions of the Oromo nationalism. Similarly, when one analyses a portrayal, for example, paintings, photographs, characters in fictional works, academic texts, oral literature, and advertisements, one must analyze it in terms of who is being depicted, the explicit or implicit intention behind the portrayal, the socio-political reality within which the portrayal has been embedded, and the tone of the signifying and or consigning practice. Thus I define portrayal as a signifying and consigning practice and use it to mean description or representation of the soicio-political life and experience of a people through socially and culturally based signifying devices. Portrayal, like other signifying practices, is constitutive and reflective of our place in the political, social, economic, religious and racial/ethnic configurations of our being. A person who portrays the other person or object himself/herself is a socially and historically constituted subject. From the Marxist point of view, one can see portrayals as

places where ideologies are figured, refigured, and debated, and as sites for the apparent mediation of power/knowledge differences.

Portrayal involves the constructions of both negative and positive reputations. Portrayal is realistic when it is based on factual information; it is unrealistic when it is virtually based on fabricated information. Individuals as well as groups may receive both positive and negative portrayals at a time. For example, a white commentator in a football or athletics tournament may praise a strong black performer in mere physical terms and may demean the performers' intellectual ability. An Asian athletes may be depicted by cultural stereotypes in a way that draws on the stereotypical representations of Asians as stoic conformists and as excessively hard workers who are zealously concerned with successes (Sabo *et al.* 1995). According to the critical/Marxist perspective of portrayal, those who are discursively marginalized are usually aware of the suppressing effects of the negative representations; they may know, for example, that negative portrayals limit their opportunity. However, they may not immediately react to the negative representations for they may lack the means to get rid of the system that suppresses them. The opposite side of this is that those who are beneficiaries of the oppressing system may fail to recognize the pain the system causes and tend to buy into the beliefs and practices that perpetuate the oppressive system. This is why proslavery propagandists openly and fiercely ridiculed the idea of emancipation and defended the continuation of the slaves' brutalized condition of life.

3. THE PORTRAYAL OF THE OROMO IN THE ETHIOPIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

As I mentioned above in passing, the Oromo have been suffering symbolic and cultural segregations within the Ethiopian Empire. The prejudice against the Oromo goes back to the time of their movement in the 16th century. It was starting from this time that the Amhara gave the name Galla to refer to the Oromo. The word Galla whose linguistic origins is yet uncertain is a pejorative portrayal used to stamp a badge of inferiority on the Oromo. The Oromo do not like to be called Galla. This is the name the Amhara rulers used to wage a psychological war against the Oromo. As a term, the word Galla carries an overtone of race and slavery, and the imputation of lack of civilization (Sorenson 1993: 60). The term Galla has been used as a smear campaign to frustrate, humiliate, and alienate the Oromo from their consciousness, and to render them strangers in their own country.

It is not surprising that over a period of time the term Galla has undergone changes both in its sense and sensitivity. To point out the relentless courage and determination with which the Oromo controlled the wide sweep of land following their expansion, the Amhara used the phrase *chakagn Galla* (cruel galla). Following the defeat of the Oromo at the end of the 19th century it was

common to hear *farii galla* (cowardly Galla), a psychosocial strategy of imposing superiority. Now, following the gradual increase in the pan-Oromo national/political consciousness, which is the result of the long years of their oppressions within the hegemonic Amhara rule, new categorizations like *zarayna galla* (racist galla) and *xabbab galla* (narrow galla) have become pervasive (Debella & Kassam 1996).

The negative construction of the Oromo, as I pointed above, goes back to the 16th century, when the Oromo, using their socio-political institutions, made a fast and irresistible expansion, a history that enabled them to control the present Oromolanad. Abba Bahrey, whose report about the Oromo is considered as the most dependable first hand information, stated that he "began to write the history of the Galla in order to make known the number of their tribes, their readiness to kill people, and the brutality of their manners" (Cited in Hassen 1990: 1–2). This shows that somebody (Abba Bahrey here) starts to write the history of the Oromo primarily to make explicit their brutality, backwardness and their overall impact.

The Abyssinian chroniclers (most of whom were court historians and monks) were at the centre to disseminate antipathy against the Oromo. One of this was Alaqa Taye whose portrayal of the Oromo is outwardly negative. He stated that the Oromo migrated from Asia and Madagascar and reached the region via Mombassa. In his book, *An Introduction: Geography of Ethiopia*, Wolde-Mariam (1972: 16) cites Aleqa Atsme, the early 20th century Ethiopian chronicler, who portrayed the Oromo movement of the 16th century in the following way. "If the Amharas in Gojjam and Dembia and the Tigrians did not confront them with sufficient strength and stop them, the Galls, like a flooding river, would have spilled over Egypt. The Amharas stopped this great human flood and prevented it from outside Ethiopia." There is no wonder that Wolde-Mariam himself reduced the Oromo demographic impact on the whole Horn of Africa "as a nomadic, destructive and purposeless force" (Wolde-Mariam 1972: 17).

The European as well as the Ethiopian writers of the 20th century followed the footstep of the Abyssinian chronicles and depicted the Oromo expansion as a purposeless flow of rivers. In contrast, they magnified the Christian campaign against the Oromo as a purposeful operation that redeemed Ethiopia from centuries of seclusion from the rest of the world. Buxton (1970: 28) writes that taking advantages of the general chaos caused by the Muslim wars, Gallas flooded into the southern marches of Ethiopia. Some Ethiopists point out right away that the Oromo movement of the 16th century brought the reign of darkness on the Christian Kingdom. For example, Ullendorff (1965: 75) argues: "Not until the advent of King Theodore in the mid-nineteenth century does Ethiopia emerge from her isolation. Only then, in her rediscovered unity under the Emperors John, Menelik, and Haile Selassie, does the country finds its soil and genius again, its spirit and its sense of mission." It is paradoxical that Atsme gives us the biblical and diluvian portrayals of the Christian rulers as righteous people who saved not only themselves and the civilization of their ancient

Christian Kingdom, but also the Egypt from the *tsunamic* devastation which the violent onrushing tidal wave of the Oromo could have brought about (Hultin 1996: 86–87).

Such a negative portrayal of the Oromo overshadowed the Oromo cultural pride and socio-political contributions in the Horn of Africa. According to Hassen (1990: 2):

> In such writings [the negative portrayal] the Oromo were never credited as creators of an original culture, or as having religious and democratic political institutions which flowered in patterns of their own making and nourished their spiritual and material well-being. On the contrary, unsubstantiated myths and untruths were created and Oromo were arbitrarily degraded to a lower stage of material, as people who needed the "civilizing mission' of their Abyssinian neighbors.

The Amaha ruling class looked up on the Oromo society from a position of superiority. The Amhara viewed themselves as possessing sociocognitive supremacy over the Oromo and other conquered peoples. According to Hassen, the propagation of the superiority of the Amhara culture and religions over that of the Oromo is an ideological stance that has heavily drawn for its survival on the colonial psychology and whose prime goal is to perpetuate the Oromo subordination within the Ethiopian empire. Hassen argues that

> the new Ethiopian ruling class, typified by Emperor Menelik… found it necessary and profitable to denigrate the Oromo people, their culture, and their history in all ways great and small. This ruling class especially perceived the danger of the larger Oromo population to its empire. Consequently, the ruling class systematically depicted the Oromo as people with out history, and belittled their way of life, and their religious and political institutions (1990: 2).

The Ethiopian clergy's skewed constructions blinded the traditional scholars of Ethiopian history in general and the Oromo representations in particular. Thus, these scholars waged their reductionist and Eurocentric verbal assaults on the Oromo. Lipsky's (1962: 13) portrayal of the Oromo was:

> The Gallas were at a much lower civilization than the peoples whose lands they invaded. They contributed little in the way of material arts, and their penetration diminished the effective response of Ethiopians to the crisis through which they were passing. They in fact were among the main factors contributing to the isolation and depression of the country confirmed in the seventeenth century.

In the same way, Ullendorff (1965), in his book whose objective he asserted was "to present a balanced picture of Ethiopia to the reader" diminished the Oromo to the lowest point of ignorance and disgrace, and unhesitatingly portrayed them as archenemies of the ancient Abyssinian civilizations. As the following

quotation clearly shows, he associated the Oromo to abominable nature in the following way:

> The Gallas had little to contribute to the Semitized civilization of Ethiopia; they possessed no significant material or intellectual culture, and their social organization differed considerably from that of the population among whom they settled. They were not the only cause of the depressed state into which the country now sank, but they helped to prolong a situation from which even a physically and spiritually exhausted Ethiopia might otherwise have been able to recover far more quickly (1965: 73).

From the quotation one can conclude that Ullendorff portrays the Oromo as social evil that disrupted the continuity of the noble Christian empire and drew a reign of darkness over Ethiopia, a time of isolation, stunted intellectual development and xenophobia (Sorenson 1993). There is no wonder that one can see the representation of the Oromo as destructive agents even in more recent works. Braukämper (2002: 13), for example, states "the Oromo (Galla) migration in the second half of the sixteenth century *abruptly discontinued* the *indigenous historiography* concerning southern Ethiopia in both Arabic and Ethiopic. Moreover, the expansion of *this people* was the main reason why the Islamic principalities *were completely extinguished*, and their memory is only kept in the oral traditions." Braukämper (2002: 18) continues to point out the cultural inferiority of the Oromo. He states "the Oromo, like the Somali, were predominantly a nomadic people who possessed no tradition of stone architecture, and state organization."

Abir (1968) provides us a confusing data about the Oromo. At one place he represents the Oromo as deeply disunited people, as a people with out ideology and strangers just seeking a better land to settle in. Abir states that one of the major reasons why the Oromo failed to establish hegemony in Ethiopia in the 19th century was due to their foolish abhorrence of the use of firearms (revolutionary instruments) which the quick and witty Tigrians and Amharas benefited from and thus ultimately defeated the Oromo. At another place he gives a witness that the Yaju Dynasty, well organized as it was challenged the Christian Kingdom during the *Era of Princes* or *Zemen Mesafent*.

Eurocentrically and chauvinistically limited Western writers give us contrasting portrayals about the Oromo. Ullendorff (1965) soils the Oromo down by representing them as savage and destructive people with out history and culture. On the other hand, allured by the structural and functional sophistication of Oromo Gada system and the corresponding indigenous calendar, Haberland (1963) stated his doubt of the possibility/originality of such sophistication in Africa:

> Two important questions remain unanswered. First, is the gada system an Ethiopian invention, or must we seek its origins outside Ethiopia? Second, how did the Gada system come to be adopted by the Gall? …it is arguable in view of the extremely simple archaic pattern of galla culture

as a whole that the complicated nature of the gada-system makes it appear a foreign element, like the calendar, whose foreign origin is unquestioned (cited in Legesse 1973: 282).

This utterly ethnocentric doubt is the bye-product of the Hegelian view of the African continent as the continent of darkness devoid of human significance (Irele 2000). It is pure denial of Africa's contribution to the cultural and philosophical heritage of the world (Legesse 1973).

One aspect of the negative representation of the Oromo is the rating of their ethnonational questions as a false agenda founded on fabrications. Among writers who downplay the national questions of the Oromo these is Harold Marcus. Marcus rejects the existence of Oromo national identity/consciousness in general. According to him, attempting to build the Oromo nation state is equivalent to attempting to mold a glorious history of a nation out of scratches (Marcus 1991).

The base from which the traditional historians attacked the Oromo was rooted in the Abyssinian antipathies against the Oromo and in their uncritical propagation of the Greater Ethiopia image. The traditional and hegemonic portrayals of the Oromo are receiving rebuttals now. A number of scholars have recently refuted the image of the Oromo as strangers, outsiders, émigrés, or subjects. For the sake of category, I use the phrase counter hegemonic scholars to refer to scholars who have been challenging the hegemonic views that were dominant characteristic of most of the historical and ethnographic publications on Ethiopia. These scholars have challenged the negative portrayal as a pseudo-historical tradition rooted in faulty and inflexible general hatred that on its part is rooted in irrational narrow mindedness, chauvinistic antipathy and sense of exclusiveness (Zitelmann 1996). Gilchrist (2003) concludes that:

> The Oromo had a distinct culture that was as highly organized and complex as that of the Abyssinians, based on a distinct language,… distinct religion, and a democratic system of government (gada). Through the creation of the modern Ethiopian state the Abyssinians eventually subjugated the Oromo in a political system reminiscent of European colonialism in the rest of Africa.

These scholars point out that the Oromo differed from Abyssinians not only in religion and world outlook, but also in their social and political organizations. These scholars attribute the general cultural disintegration of the Oromo and the deprivation of Oromo scholarship to the Amhara suppressive rules. They also challenge the traditional historians' view that the Amhara's conquest of the Oromoland was a positive measure of unification and a fulfillment of God's call on Menelik to carry out the task of *maqanat* (civilizing and elevating) the barbarians. These scholars emphasize Gilchrist's (2003) view of the Oromo as a strong group of people having distinct social, political, religious, linguistic, and cultural history from the Semitic Abyssinians they have now formed a nation with. They also believe that the Oromo lost their cultural, political, religious and

economic freedom following their fall under the Amhara conquest at the turn of the 20th century. Among these scholars, Bulcha (1994, 1996), Hassen (1990, 1996), Jalata (1998) and Megersa (1996) and Sorenson (1993) to mention but few. These scholars blame not only the Amhara rule but also the European involvement in the suppression of the Oromo people. They believe that the Europeans favored the Amhara Kings and supplied them with modern armaments, with the help of which the latter conquered the Oromo and other peoples of Ethiopia.

Hassen (1990) attempts to provide a balanced portrayal of the Oromo. While he points out the historical and cultural base of Oromo social and cultural organizations and the implication of the Oromo pressure on the current geopolitics of the Horn of Africa, he does not deny that the fall of the Oromo in the hands of the Amhara kings was partially attributable to the Oromo geographical expansion and the gradual decline of the political and military role of the Gada system following the Oromo's adaptation of the monarchial rule system, particularly in the Gibe states.

The counter-hegemonic scholars have been challenging the uncritical rating of the Oromo nationalism as an invention founded on a non-existing myth fabricated by Oromo intellectuals (Marcus 1991). For instance, Bulcha (1996: 49) perceives that the discourse of Oromo nationalism as a sham nationalism is an unjust evaluation of the Oromo national cause and as a view that has completely "mistaken the absence of centralized state in Oromoland in the past, for a lack of common identity." Based on the findings of Holcomb & Ibsa (1990), Bulcha (1996: 59–50) argues, " it was the Ethiopian empire and Ethiopian territorial nationalism which are of recent origins." Bulcha makes clear that "there is ample historical and ethnographic evidence to suggest that the Oromo have a common past identity as a people/nation." To strengthen his argument, Bulcha draws on Obieta-Chalbaud's (1986) sociological and historical conceptualization of nation as "cultural and linguistic community, whose ethnic conscience is clearly felt and espoused by the majority of its members, and which possesses a territory of its own" (cited in Bulcha 1996: 50).

A cursory look at some works on Ethiopian history and culture produced by Western scholars portray the country as a fixed, essentialized and a solitary state. They applaud the country as (1) one of the oldest states in the world, (2) a nation that defeated a strong European colonial power and escaped colonialism, (3) a nation that has a long history of Christianity, (4) a nation that is home to different ethnic stocks, (5) the only sub-Saharan African nation with its own writing system, (6) the home of the legend of Queen of Sheba and the Solomonic dynasty, (7) the setting for the mythology of Prester John and (8) the cradle land of humankind. All of these while they added to the swelling pride of the Christian antiquity, really masked the depth of the socio-political problems in the country, particularly the long-aged political and economic victimizations of the Oromo and other ethnic groups in the country.

The traditional scholars of the Ethiopian history celebrate Menelik II's conquest of the Oromo and other peoples at the end of the 19thh century as a

purposeful mission whose immediate result was the bolstering of "Ethiopia's position as an independent African power" and the ending of the pre-conquest intertribal strife and slave trades (Levine 1974: 26). Those who do not agree with the elevation of the Ethiopian position as a paragon of virtue in Africa argue that it is a mere fabrication rooted in orientalist narrations of Ethiopia as an immaculate ancient land (Sorenson 1993: 40). The political and ideological root of such a glorified image of Ethiopia as *one of the oldest states in the world with an impressive* and *uninterrupted history of independence* that goes *back to the millennium before Christ* (Nahum 1984: 559, emphasis mine) is now being evaluated as an invention or discursive attempt to convince the world of the 'biblical monolithicness' of Ethiopia and to legitimize the hegemonic hold of peoples' rights (Holcomb & Ibsa 1990; Sorenson 1993). Nahum's romantic representation of Ethiopia contrasts to Ullendorff's and Lipsky's accusation that the great Ethiopian history was interrupted by the Oromo invasion. For the Amhara rulers, one ingredient of this glory is the elevation of Amharic as the national language of Ethiopia and the homogenization of other peoples into the supposedly superior Amhara psychology to maintain the unity of Ethiopia. Viewed from the perspective of power reductionism (Huntington 1996; Levenson 1958), the view of Ethiopia as a monolithic country and the Ethiopian peoples as a monolithic gathering is impinging. The main reason why the dominant group puts a hegemonic hold on a victim's cultural identity is to put its own institution in place. For example, the Oromo failed to develop their language into written language due to the undemocratic policy of Amharization, which the Ethiopian governments adamantly followed in the name of maintaining the unity and integrity of Ethiopia (Bulcha 1997; Gilchrist 2003).

The counter-hegemonic scholars' rebuttal does not target only on the Western scholars loss of sight of the pre-20-century existence of the Oromo as an independent nation and the depiction of the Amhara conquest as a civilizing agent, but also on other few Oromo scholars' misapprehension of Oromo recruitment in the Amhara military and political hierarchy. Among the Oromo scholars who have the view that the Oromo secured an influential place in the ruling systems of the Ethiopian kings is Gudina. In his attempt to argue against the counter-hegemonic scholars' view that the Amhara domination of the Oromo have the same sense and sentimentality with that of the European colonization of Africa, Gudina (2000: 1509–1510) says the following:

> There are some facts of history to which the Oromo nationalists have to reconcile with. The British queen never married a Ghanaian, a Nigerian or a Kenyan, but Ethiopian kings were marrying the Oromos. Tewodros, Menelik and Haile Selassie are the best examples. In the same token, the Ghanaians, the Nigerians or the Kenyans never dreamt to become kings and queens of the British empire under whatever type of assimilation, but the Oromos assimilados were able to become kings and queens of imperial Ethiopia. The best examples are Iyyassu, Haile Selassie, King Michael of Wollo and King Takle-Hymanot of Gojjam.

Gudina (2003) reemphasized his view that the Oromo were equals with the Amhara within the latter's political edifice and seemingly argued in favours of seeking solutions for the Oromo problems within the *united Ethiopia* than in other options, for example the formation of an independent Oromo state (Sorenson 1993). Gudina failed to notice that the Amhara rulers starting from the second half of the 19th century and even before that used intermarriage as a strategy to conquer the Oromo. His ideological parochialism is the masking effect of the hegemonic political calculation, born in the Amhara ruling system typically to continue the subjugation of the Oromo. Gudina seems to have failed to recognize that the intermarriage, which the Amhara arranged with the Oromo, overloads like Gobena Dache was primarily to serve their own political ends, that is to help them control the Oromo through an indirect ruling system reminiscent of the European colonialism in the rest of Africa (Gilchrist 2003).

Gudina's analogical connection (Ghanaian vs. British and Amhara vs. Oromo), which has lost historical and ontological base from the beginning, had already received rebuttals from other writers who had looked at Oromo-Amhara relationships from different perspectives. Hassen (1996: 74–75) cites Bulcha (1994) to show that the Oromo elites' recruitment into the Amhara ruling system was one of the strategies to speed up and consolidate the subjugation of the Oromo:

> The life of assimilated Oromo was often peripheral. In spite of their total submission to 'pressures for their cultural suicide and to the dominance of the Amhara over non-Amhara peoples in all aspects of life', they were seldom treated as equals by the Amhara. The Amharization of the Oromo and other groups was attempted "wit out integrating them as equals or allowing them to share poser in any meaningful way." As the "Amhara mask" they wore was often to transparent, assimilated Oromos rarely reached decision-making positions within the Ethiopian bureaucracy.

In his other work, Gudina (Gudina 2000) becomes a perfect witness as he admits that not all of the Oromos gained important place in the ruling system of the Amhara. The Oromo elites that were recruited into the Amhara ruling systems were largely from the Shawa Oromo who were neighbors of the Amhara and who adopted Orthodox Christianity from the Amhara. The Oromo generals of the late 19th and 20th century cleared the way for the Amhara kings to become emperors while they concurrently reduced the status of their own people to *gabbars* (serfs) alienated from the land of their ancestors. This simply means that one has to understand the Oromo political consciousness as well as the difficulty to transform ethnic-based nationalism to statehood within this complex historical duality (Gudina 2000).

The Oromo scholars who hold the view that the Amhara-Oromo relationship in the past was the relation of colonialism draw on the practical experience of the European-African colonial relationship. According to them, the only difference between the Amhara conquest of the Oromoland and that of European colonization of the African continent is that the Europeans were white and came

from Europe whereas the Amhara are the African people. The Amhara-Oromo domination is a colonial domination of one African people over the other. The second angle of their argument is that there is ample similarity between the legacy of the Europeans' impacts on the black Africans' consciousness, culture, politics and that which the Amhara caused on the Oromo.

One thing that readers should know about the Amhara ruling system is that although they have been its victims, the Oromo (the Oromo elites) participated both in the creation and perpetuation of the Amhara ruling system. The oft-mentioned Gobena Dache, the right wing of Menelik II, was one of those who hastened the incorporation of the Oromo and other southern nations and nationalities under the rule of Menelik. Given the role Gobena played in the military campaign of the Shoan king and later Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia, one can conclude that if it had not been for Gobena's formidability, Menelik would not have created the Ethiopian Empire. The Amhara ruling elites that followed Menelik II also managed to manipulate the Oromo generals to perpetuate their power. Through out the Amhara ruling system, there were a considerable number of Oromo elites who assumed higher political and military offices. Although they are the Oromo, they are still part of the Amhara ruling system that oppressed the Oromo. This complex situation of the traditional ruling system in Ethiopia has confused some Oromo political activists (e.g. Gudina 2003) and one should not be surprised when they say, just by looking at the political and economic advantages of individual Oromos within the oppressing system, that the Oromo had assumed important places in the Ethiopian ruling system.

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The paper attempted to point out the negative portrayals of the Oromo and the rebuttals they have received from what I called *counter-hegemonic scholars*. The paper is a critical analysis of academic publications on the Oromo social, historical and political identities. It indicated that the Oromo portrayals are situated within the broader sociological and political history of the Oromo in the Horn and in the political dynamics of domination and subordinations.

This paper has several implications for the political situations in Ethiopia. The ethnic portrayal, particularly the negative portrayal is a signal of an unhealthy social reality. The political and economic marginalization of an ethnic group and the deliberate denigration of the group's cultural and social identities is an aspect of a pathological social and political system that evokes ethnic/nationalist conflicts in pluri-ethnic or pluri-national countries like. A negative portrayal of an ethnic group is one of these. The other is the suppression of the linguistic, cultural, political and religious rights and identity of a person and a group on mere ethnic grounds. Some politicians in Ethiopia point out that the social reality of ethnicity in Ethiopia and the ethnic-based

federalism are invented to roughen social cohesions between peoples and to perpetuate the unfair rule of people. Their fear is that the ethnic-based federalism ultimately divides the country into artificial parts for easy political manipulations. These politicians call for de-ethnicized politics and political struggle for power. They state their fear that ethnic/national identities create feelings of antagonism. In actual sense, their intention is to completely close the file of ethnic questions. They believe that the Ethiopian people are unique people and the Ethiopian unity is unique in Africa. According to them political ethnicism has been recently implanted into the country by narrow nationalists who want to magnify the cultural, political, economic and linguistic deprivations which the past governments inflicted on peoples for their own political advantage. A number of African writers and thinkers share this instrumentalist view and assert that ethnicity is the turbulent, chaotic and violent social reality of post-colonial Africa invented and sustained by elites from Europe and Africa to keep the people divided for the sake of easy manipulation and dominance (Ake 2000; Aluko 2003; Owolabi 2003; & Ujomu 2001).

Various African evidences show, of course, that the political elites rely on their ethnic and tribal identities to both to compete for political power and to stay on the power. This problem occurs when individual political elites blinded by their narrow self-interests decide to use a drawn-out social strife as a strategy. This shows that in a pluri-ethnic society ethnicity is easily manipulated for evil political gain. My view is that ethnicity of itself may does not necessarily evoke feelings of antagonism towards other groups and it is the way it is manipulated that can cause a problem. Ethnic conflicts arise out of concrete historical situations and are shaped by particular and unique political, economic and stereotypical circumstances (Ake 2000). Experiences throughout Africa and the rest of the world show that the propensity for ethnic self-awareness and ethnic factions would be high in pluri-ethnic/pluri-ethnic nations where political elites deliberately suppress the ethnic identity of a group for their own political or 'ethnic' ends. The other problem is when ethnicity becomes the chief, if not the only factor in the struggle for political and economic power. In a situation where ethnicity becomes the leading factor in a struggle for political power everyone who knows that s/he belongs to the politically dominant ethnic group may consider himself/herself part of the ruling system and may explicitly/implicitly show their superiority over those who do not belong t their group.

The ethnic question of the Oromo has been motivated by the Ethiopian governments' structural and procedural deprivations of ethnic rights. There has been an obvious imbalance in material and discursive resources between ethnic groups. In the past, the government institutions and academic centres have been voraciously used to sanctify and perpetuate the imbalances. Ethnic problems, whether they are dormant or active, seek careful mediation. Otherwise what is taken simple and irrelevant can grow into big hostility. The Ethiopians who abhor nationalist questions should know that nationalism is the result of the political, discursive and administrative resonance of the Ethiopian history and

that the power asymmetries created in the name of national integrity and sovereignty should be balanced.

According to the liberal reconstructivist school of thought, checking administrative and attitudinal factors that violate ethnonational rights and thus provoke ethnic factions can alleviate ethnic problems. Imbalance in the ethnic groups' access to influential resources like language can deepen antipathies, as the experiences in other African countries show (Aluko 2003). If one language is favored more than other languages the ethnic groups whose language are not favored have lesser capacity to make their definitions of ethnic identity prevail; they can easily see the existence of asymmetries in social capital (Diez-Medrano 2002: 4) and get provoked for self-defense. The ethnic-based opposition to the exploitive and oppressive ruling systems of the Ethiopian governments long started in 1960s and 1970s and it is believed that the ethnic misruling of the Ethiopian monarchies provoked the ethnic self-consciousness.

Ethiopia is one of the countries in Africa where the ideas of national, linguistic, political, cultural, religious and national is being revised. Now, the tension between the forces of controlling and that of self-liberation is the political reality of the Horn. As the Amhara saying goes: *ba duroo bare man arrasa* (who has ever ploughed the land by the ox of the past). The old way of thinking, for example, the portrayal of Ethiopia's Greatness through symbolic use of objects and lives, and the political rigidity in the name of unity has now become a weak and shaky political strategy in the face of strong national consciousness in Africa and the rest of the world.

This paper suggested that the Oromo historiography and its disfigured image cannot be isolated from the historical resonance of the Horn. The most central message of the paper is that if Ethiopia has to continue as a modern nation, critical citizenship is required that ensures a 'true equality between its peoples.' It is difficult now to continue with the essentialist view of Ethiopia as the oldest nation in the world and as a land of bliss, wherein its nations and nationalities lived in equality. This was a false political discourse that has been used by the rulers to throw people together. Unity is more that throwing people together and making them pray in one language. The day-to-day evidences show that there are several conservative nationalists who have difficulty in accepting the reality that Ethiopia, which the conquest of Menelik II formed at the end of the 19th century, is an agglomeration of divergent nations and nationalities. This is true particularly when it comes to linguistic and cultural questions. There are educated Ethiopians who openly oppose to education policy that supports primary education through mother tongue. They hold the view that such a policy is a disintegrationary policy that spoils the glorified image of Ethiopia. This emanates from the failure (intentional or unintentional) to understand that uniform linguistic gives rise to an uneven distribution of linguistic, cultural, political and economic capital. In my view, the recognitions and maintenances of these linguistic, cultural, historical and religious divergences are essential and can keep the people together. The view that if you give a slave an inch, he will

ask for an ell, does not save Ethiopia from the disintegration. Ethiopia gets little also from a stubborn denial of the national and ethnic identity of people.

It is obvious that in Ethiopia because of concrete historical and political reasons, one ethnic one ethnic group attained political, economic, educational and cultural domination over the others. This simply means that ethnicity as well as ethnic domination is a social phenomenon. Kloss (1968: 72) mentions Ethiopia as one of the countries n the world where "the ethnic group speaking the dominant language has formerly subjugated the other ethnic groups." According to the writer, the other examples are, "the Afro-Americans now ruling Liberia, and the Spaniards whose tongue dominates public life in Bolivia. The groups [ethnic groups speaking the dominant language] have defeated and conquered those ethnic groups who to this very day have preserved their own languages and who still form the majority of the population. For Kloss (1968: 72), a country that has been formed the subjection of other previously independent ethnic groups is called subjection-based nation-states. Thus, one can speak of Emperor Haile Selassie's imposition of Amharic over the non-Amharic ethnic groups as *subjection-based linguistic homogenization.*

On a final note, I say that the Ethiopian historiography should be reexamined to gain a better understanding of the historical situations of the 19th century that prepared the material as well as the spiritual preconditions for the creation of the modern state of Ethiopia. Doing this may bring about a better understanding about the ethnic and national upheavals that are now facts rather than myths. Gilchrist (2003: 107) shares my idea: "The traditional scholarly approach of regarding Ethiopia as a monolithic culture centred on Abyssinian society has proven inadequate to understand the sociopolitical conflicts that trouble modern Ethiopia. One can put to an end the continuation of ethnic conflicts only through recognizing and respecting the rights of each ethnic group and their citizens. It is important to know also that the anti-democratic political traditions in Ethiopia (mainly Emperor Haile Selassie's aristocracy and the military government's dictatorship) have their roots in the colonial venture of Menelik II. This should not continue in this country. Zewde (1994: 156) puts the rigors of the Ethiopian political crisis in the past in the following way: "The Ethiopian past is replete with authoritarianism and dogmatism and woefully short on democracy and tolerance. Imperial autocracy, military dictatorship, Marxist-Leninist commandism-these have constituted the staple political fare of the Ethiopian people. There is in short no golden age to revive as far as democratization is concerned." This criticism implicitly calls for a new political order in the country. This is the point Hassen (1990) accentuated in the last page of his book. Hassen also calls for the rethinking of Ethiopian historiography to redress wrongs done in the name of the integrity and sovereignty of the Ethiopian state.

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