

Oromo's religious conversion in Ethiopia: Historical perspective

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Abstract

The Oromo are one of the indigenous peoples of Ethiopia who lived in the country for time immemorial. Nowadays, most of the Oromo are Christians (Orthodox, Protestant) and Muslim. Still, some Oromo adhere to their indigenous religion called *Waqefanna*. After the coming of Christianity and Islam, however, the Oromo abandoned *Waqefanna* and embraced either Christianity or Islam. The Oromo has undergone a major religious conversion over the past 150 years. While Oromo's history has undergone a remarkable phase of study in recent years, it has remained quite impervious to the anthropological field. Specifically, issues related to Oromo's religious changes have not been sufficiently studied, debated and historically reconstructed across many disciplines. The main purpose of this article is to document and overview the process of religious conversion in Oromo and how they were positioned in Ethiopian history until 1974. The current religious study, therefore, adds to the existing body of knowledge by presenting an outline of the Oromo religious conversion and its place before 1974. It discusses the Oromo religious conversion in Ethiopian history using oral and secondary sources. In fact, oral sources formed an integral part of the research due to insufficient written material on the previous history of Oromo until recently. The article shows that the religious conversion in Oromo took place as a means of resistance against the Ethiopian central government administration.

Key words: Religious conversion, Islam, Christianity, cultural change, Evangelism, Oromo and Ethiopia

Introduction and historical background

Ethiopia is a multi-national state with over 84 nations and nationalities¹ with their respective history, culture

¹ In this article, nation and nationalities refer to linguistically diverse and mosaic people of Ethiopia with their distinct language, culture, history and religion. Ethiopia is a federal state composed of ethnic based nine regions, namely, (1) Tigray, (2) Afar, (3) Amhara, (4) Oromia (5) Somali, (6) Benishangul-Gumuz, (7) Southern Nations Nationalities and People Region (SNNPR), (8) Gambella and (9) Harari, and two Administrative states (Addis

Etiyopya'da Oromo'nun dini dönüşümü: Tarihsel perspektif Öz

Oromo, çok eskiden beri Etiyopya'da yaşayan yerli halklardan biridir. Günümüzde Oromo'nun çoğu Hristiyan (Ortodoks, Protestan) ve Müslümandır. Yine de bazı Oromolar hâlâ Waqefanna adlı yerli dinlerine bağlıdır. Ancak, Hristiyanlık ve İslam'ın gelişinden sonra, Oromolar Waqefanna'yı terk etmiş ve Hristiyanlığı veya İslam'ı kucaklamıştır. Oromo halkı bu nedenle son 150 yıldan beri büyük bir dini dönüşüm geçirmiştir. Oromo'nun tarihi son yıllarda dikeyte değer bir çalışma aşamasından geçerken, antropolojik alana oldukça kapalı kalmıştır. Spesifik olarak, Oromo'nun dini değişimleriyle ilgili konular yeterince incelenmemiş, tartışılmamış ve disiplinlerarası şekilde tarihsel olarak yeniden yapılandırılmamıştır. Bu makalenin temel amacı, Oromo'daki dini dönüşüm sürecini ve bunların Etiyopya tarihinde 1974'e kadar nasıl konumlandıklarını belgelemek ve gözden geçirmektir. Bu nedenle mevcut dini çalışma, Oromo halkının dini dönüşümünün ve 1974'ten önceki yerinin ana hatlarını sunarak mevcut bilgi birikimine katkıda bulunmakta, sözlü ve ikincil kaynakları kullanarak Etiyopya tarihindeki Oromo dini dönüşümünü tartışmaktadır. Aslında sözlü kaynaklar, yakın zamana kadar Oromo'nun önceki tarihi hakkında yetersiz yazılı materyal nedeniyle araştırmanın ayrılmaz bir parçasını oluşturmaktaydı. Makale, Oromo'daki dini dönüşümün Etiyopya merkezî hükümet yönetimine karşı bir direniş aracı olarak gerçekleştiğini gösteriyor.

Anahtar sözcükler: Dini dönüşüm, İslam, Hristiyanlık, kültürel değişim, Evanjelizm, Oromo ve Etiyopya

and values. Oromo people are one of the largest national groups in Ethiopia and make up small scattered in Kenya and to some extent Somali region. In Ethiopia, they are concentrated in the south-central parts, with significant numbers in and around Harar and central Wollo in the northern region of Ethiopia.

Ababa City administration and Dire Dawa city council). For further information on Ethiopian groups ethnic groups, diversity and federal system, see Fessha (2016).

Concerning the Oromo of Ethiopia, Levine attempts to give a brief explanation. It reads:

The Oromo are the most widely dispersed of all the peoples of Greater Ethiopia. They comprise about a dozen of ethnic clusters distributed over ten provinces. Nearly all of them still speak commonly intelligible languages of a single East Cushitic language, Oromo language (Afan Oromo). The Oromo clans now differ considerably in religion, style of life, and local political organization, though all of them retain some features of their traditional patrilineal descent system (Levine, 2000, p. 87).²

Africanists have been engaged in a vigorous scholarly discussion on how and why world religions have spread at the expense of African indigenous religions for at least the last fifty years. The explanations are mainly based on two conversion approaches. The first, defended by Horton, assumes that Africa's conversion into the world or missionary religions originated from the continent's expanding political, economic and cultural boundaries because of its interaction and integration with the western world and colonial experiences. In this perspective, the increasing sociocultural experiences of Africans required a revitalisation of the broader cosmology and morality provided by the universal doctrines of world religions. It occurred when Africans moved from their previously isolated homogeneous society where local spirits ruled a larger world (macrocosm) by the Divine Being. In this context, conversion results from Africans' decision to follow a new cosmology; missionaries were merely facilitators of already ongoing changes (Horton, 1971, p. 85-108).

Fisher's model criticises Horton's approach for placing too much emphasis on the adaptability of indigenous religious belief and underestimating the role of external institutions, ignoring the fact that missionary religions create a re-shuffle of the broader worldview to move forward at its own pace (Fisher, 1973, pp. 27-40). Fisher maintained that conversion is a three-step phase

in which Africans outside of religions first 'isolate' then merge their old and new beliefs, and eventually bring changes to eliminate religious traditions that have been found to be incompatible with their core principles (Fisher, 1973, p. 27-40).

Others strongly oppose Horton's theory, arguing that it focuses on the predictable one-way religious transition (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987, p. 90-91), and it is too deterministic and absence of political and social influences that have a material effect on conversion (Ifeka-Moller, 1974, p. 56-61). Others still contend that African cultures have always been mindful of the Supreme God that the conditions necessitate (Idowu, 1973, p. 62; Mbiti, 1990, p. 78).

Later scholars tend to concentrate on Africans' own local histories like their cultures, ambitions, motivations and tactics rather than overemphasizing the macrocosmic context in order to better understand patterns in religious change. Sanneh, for example, claimed that conversion to Christianity requires a little change from an African religious viewpoint (Sanneh, 2003, p. 8). The other scholar is Peel, who not only saw how Africans embraced Christianity but also how Christianity became African during the integration process (Peel, 2000, p. 108).

Academic literatures on religious conversion in Ethiopia appeared unaffected by current debates in the rest of Africa and offers explanations for the conversion from local religious belief to monotheistic world religions (Trimingham, 1965; Crummey, 1972; Tamrat, 1972; Arén, 1978; Kaplan, 2004). Kaplan acknowledges in his analysis of the literature on the subject that conversion studies are not causal explanations, but rather explanations of the effects, motivations, trends and incentives of the key players in the change process (Kaplan, 2004, p. 373-392).

However, in recent years, a number of historians and anthropologists have raised significant concerns about socio-political and cultural frameworks of conversion. These studies view the conflict between the local population and government administration as a conversion in which the values and practices of religions clash; this is probably due to the nature of the conversion of religions, and even the preaching of the hybrid cultures that this entails. There are some studies on the conversion of Oromo to Christianity and Islamic teachings in southern and central Ethiopia (Braukamper 2014), the conversion stages in Oromo (Gnamo, 2014), and the conversion of Ethiopians from indigenous belief to Islam (Trimingham, 1965).

Theoretical and historical approaches are useful analytical tools in understanding patterns and processes, but no one particular model can explain the variety of ways in which individuals or group of people respond

² For many Oromo scholars, Donald Levine is seen as the first writer to deal with the issue of Greater Ethiopia and paved the way for new discourse between the established history of north and Anthropology of the south. His book "Greater Ethiopia" (*Talaqina Ityopya*), then, is dealt with the nations and nationalities of Ethiopia devoting a chapter to the history of Oromo. He discussed in detail the Ethiopian history synthesis out of Amhara thesis and Oromo anti-thesis.

to the entreaties of religious change. In this line of argument, Rambo noted, “no theoretical system has ever been able to combine all the salient features and forces operative in the critical encounter stage of religious conversion” (Rambo, 1993, p. 88). In the case of Oromo conversion to world religions, Aguilar (1995, p. 525-544) has shown that the conversion models of both Horton and Fisher are valid in explaining the experience of the Borana Oromo. This shows that the method to religious conversion should be diverse one in which various models serve as complementary to each other. In the writing of this article, only methods of using the interdependence of the collective memory and history of society that help understanding of the past (Miszta, 2003, p. 107), and the interviews served as raw data and were sometimes used to either verify existing historical facts or refute their validity (Vansina, 1985, p. 13-15, 192-193) was employed.

All Oromo people could be the possible informant candidates of the study. Since it was difficult to interview everyone about Oromo and their religious conversion, ten people were selected purposively in order to get the intended information within the objective and scope of the study. The informants background ranges from religious leaders to government workers, formal to informal (lifelong) education and local elders living in the central part of Oromia whose ages are mostly above 50 (their names, religions, places and dates of interview are given in respective footnote). Although some of my informants did not attend formal education, they are people widely recognized as having special knowledge of Oromo history and culture which they gained from life experience. In other words, the least literate by western standards, the informants were knowledgeable and informative about the history and culture of Oromo and therefore provided valuable information about their religious conversion (Dugassa, 2008, p.79).

Therefore, the article briefly discusses the conversion of Oromo in central Ethiopia to Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Protestant with the aim of exploring the conversion process of people who had an indigenous religion, *Waqeffanna*. It integrates many of Oromo and Ethiopianist scholars' findings; where I substantiate their findings with oral sources on many occasions, I view my contribution as complimenting their perspectives.

Location and settlement of Oromo in Ethiopia

I could begin my writing of Christianity and Islam in Ethiopia through searching at apparently contradicting ancient truths and modifications. The first is the Ethiopian country has long been hooked up hyperlink with Christianity on account that its advent within the 4th century whilst Aksumite king Ezana (320s-360 AD)

embraced Christianity. This early foothold of Christianity in Ethiopia prevents the coming and development of Islam. This is bonded when the Ethiopian empire gave Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity (EOC/Christianity) a sizable political role as a country religion prior to the 1974 revolution. According to Østebø, church and state relationships ban Muslims from Ethiopian politics, contained the growth of Islam in Ethiopia.

Historically Ethiopian Islam has found itself in the adumbration of the dominant Christian administration. The strong bond between the Orthodox Church and the state makes up the notion that Christianity and the government and has been defining elements of Ethiopian nationhood. Such belief brought about the perception of Islam as an opponent of the Ethiopian political arena. The government, on the one hand, presumed Islam as an external force challenges to Christian Ethiopia and, on the other hand, because the Ethiopian Muslims openly resisted cultural integration into Ethiopian identity. Despite the revolution of 1974 brought about the demise of state-church wedlock, the Muslims widely remained on the political and economic margin of society (Østebø, 2007, p. 1).

Second is Ethiopia was the first Christian country to accept Islam in the year 615 AD. Those who arrived in Ethiopia escaping the persecution of Quraysh, enjoyed their peaceful worship. Shortly the immigrants settled down in the new land under the care and camouflage of Negus, the just and the faithful ruler of Abyssinia. They started, for the first time since they became Muslims, to enjoy the test of freedom, safety and experienced the sweetness of worshiping undisturbed (Binsumeit, 2006, p. 3). King Al Nejashi hosted companions of the Prophet who escaped persecution in Mecca and give them a place to worship, built one of the oldest mosques named after his name, Al Nejashi found in the town of Wukro, 790 kilometres north of Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa (figure 1).

Both Christianity and Islam enjoyed a moderate history traced to the first half of the 4th century and early 7th century respectively. It seems that since then they lived in competitions and collaboration. One of the intensive competitions was in the sixteenth century when the Christian and Muslims fought a bloody war resulting in the damage of manpower and materials followed by the domination of the latter for fifteen years (1529-1543) and the recent Islam. However, the contemporary revitalisation of religious revival, the renewal of religious signs and the restriction of religious boundaries have paved the way for increased intra-religious relationships that inflamed watching on Islam both from the Ethiopian population and international spectators (Abbink, 1998, p. 109-124). Nowadays, for many Ethiopians and foreign authors, the recent boom



Figure 1. *Al Nejasbi Mosque in Tigray, Ethiopia (one of the first Mosques in East Africa).* Retrieved from <https://www.islamiclandmarks.com/various/negash-ethiopia> on April 3, 2019)

on Islam as development is seen as Islam in Ethiopia is becoming increasingly radicalised and labelled as a fundamentalism³ Islam scheme (Baye, 2018, p. 412-427).

In the pre-revolution of 1974, the history of co-existence and vacillation of the Abrahamic religion (Christianity, Protestant, and Islam) had three periods of development and in due course has negative results on respective peoples and autochthonous religions. The first phase started with the coming of Islam in the 7th century and continued up to the 16th century. During this phase, the Christian state managed to successfully restrain Islamisation in its domain. It seems that debates on religion started right at the start of Islam in the early seventh century when the first group of people who embraced Islam arrived in Aksum and continued to the sixteenth century. In Ethiopian medieval history, this can be referred to as Axumite *Hijira* (Østebø, 2013, pp. 1029-1060).

During this period there was a steady development of Christianity and Islam followed by either peaceful co-existence or armed disputes between religious and political groups. During this period the north Christian empire or sultanates of Muslims in eastern frontier expanded into their respective regions. The already existing historical contacts and the trade activity between Ethiopia and the Middle East were further increased and became more intense and flourishing with the beginning of trade relations in the Dahlak islands and Zeila. Both Braukamper (2014, p. 68) and Trimmingham (1965, p. 3) noted that Islam in Ethiopia made it is first

³ Ethiopia has been involved in various wars with its neighbours over the past two decades from the border dispute with Eritrea (May 1998 to June 2000), to military operations against Eritrea in Somali region. Religious mobilization around political agendas is a potential threat to Ethiopia's internal stability. For more information on the Muslim-Christian concord and conflict in East Africa and Ethiopia, see Steen-Johnsen, 2017

diplomatic through commercial exchange between the regional community and the Muslim merchants during the 10th century. Besides, a brief look at Gnamo (2014, p. 185) shows the Arab traders facilitated the peaceful spread of Islam in the Red Sea bordering regions in general and Ethiopia in particular thereby in Oromia region.

However, at the beginning half of the 16th century, relations between Orthodox Christianity and Islam became worse when the Islamic threat became more tenacious during the reign of *Imam Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi* (nicknamed *Ahmed Gragn*) who occupied the region through a war of conquest. He formed various Muslims groups and led a series of war to bring to an end Christian rule in the northern highland regions (Hultin, 1996, p. 81-91). In 1529 decisive battle between the troops of *Ahmed Gragn* and the army of Emperor Libna Dengil fought at Shembra Kure in central Ethiopia where the former came out victorious. It is said that the battle of Shembra Kure was one of the most humiliating defeats the Christian emperors ever suffered at the hands of Muslim leaders in the 16th century. Nearly defeating almost all Christians rivals *Gragn* established his 15 years rule in northern Ethiopia, in Dambiya near Lake Tana. It is strongly argued that *Gragn's* victory was credited to the introduction of new techniques and discipline of his army, which surpassed the Christians in training and intrepidity (Henze, 2000, p. 88).

Gragn had ruled Ethiopian and the Horn to 1543 when his army was destroyed by the Christian troops at the battle of Woina Dega where he succumbed to his death. Although the triumph of the *Gragn* was brief, the results of the war had brought about great changes in the regions (Henze, 2000, p. 89). The war presumably weakened the Christian and Muslim power and facilitated the peoples' expansion from south to north and vice-a-versa. Differently speaking, the war depopulated the regions whereby creating a space into which the Oromo population advanced swiftly without facing much opposition from either side. In the course of their movement, the Oromo who approached Muslims might have assimilated parts of the Islamic practices into the cultural mainstream and who approached Christian highland adopted Christianity (Hassen, 1985, p. 62). The second phase is the period from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries when intensive forceful conversions of Oromo from *Waqefanna*⁴ and

⁴ The indigenous religion of the Oromo before they embraced Christianity or Islam following their 16th-century movement. Nowadays, the majority of the Oromo are either Christians or Muslims. Some of them still adhere to their indigenous belief, *Waqefanna*- a religion based on a belief in one Supreme Being

Islam to Orthodox took place. It was associated with the time when the Oromo began to live in various parts of Ethiopia among diverse peoples.

When *Gragn* was crushed, the north-central regions of Ethiopia were not favourable to Islam. Further expansion was checked on one hand and Christianity recovered backed by the contemporary ruler. Peaceful Muslims, however, continued among the Oromo notwithstanding the prohibition by the Ethiopian kings especially emperor Tewodros II (1855-1868) and emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889). Historically the Oromo had a connection with Muslims through trades in the five Gibe Oromo states (Jimma, Gomma, Gumma, Gera and Limmu) many of them who had established relations with the *Jabarti* (Muslim traders) converted to Muslims. The Mahdist state of Sudan sent its agents to the Five Gibe Oromo states and tried to spread their religious teaching in the late 1880s (Gemed, 2002, p. 51-74).

The third and significant phase alludes to the period between the 19th century and the outbreak of the revolution of 1974. The main hallmark of this stage was the cooperation and intermingling of northern Christian and Muslim leaders over many years, where the cruxes of the matters were politics rather than religion. Ficquet (2015, p. 93-122), the foremost historian on Islam in East Africa, has strongly argued that this directly led to open hostilities between leaders and resulted in the forceful conversion of Oromo from Muslim and indigenous religions to Orthodox. First under emperor Tewodros (1855-1868), second during emperor Yohannes IV (1872-1889), third emperor Menelik II (1889-1913), the fourth and more crucially is emperor Haile Selassie I (1930-1974). The first two emperors who faced with Mahdist movement and Egyptian challenges to Ethiopia appeal for national harmony in the religious and political dimension against these external invaders. A former bandit, emperor Tewodros II began a major campaign to subdue and convert the Yajju (Warra Sheykh) Oromo to Christianity. Before this period, the Yajju Oromo had practiced autochthonous religious and notable numbers embraced Islam mainly because as a defense against being cultural adaptation and de-Oromonisation (Crummey, 1969, p. 457-469). It is also true that since the turn of the nineteenth century, the Christian Amhara kings were in continuous fear of Islam and Oromo control of Ethiopia.

Baxter (1978) asserts that wrongly but deliberately Amhara ruling class for their political benefit assumed

Islam and Oromo the great fear for the unification of Ethiopia. This false and wrong assumption and teachings sparked and subsequently resulted in strong relations between Islam and Oromo on one hand and strong resistance to the preaching of Christianity in Oromia on the other hand. As a result, for example, during the 1930s the Arsi Oromo largely become Muslim and rejected all values of Christianity and government administration system (Baxter, 1978, p. 283-296). During emperor Yohannes IV the northern Oromo, particularly Wollo, were compelled to accept Christianity and those who resisted faced extermination.

Churches were fast built to expedite religious conversion and adaptation policy. According to Bulcha (2005, p. 1-54) unless converted to Christianity the Muslims were ordered to leave the kingdom (state) of Yohannes IV. In 1878 at the Borumeda religious conference in Wallo he gave two choices to the Oromo people either to accept Christianity and undergo mass baptism within two to three years or to face expulsion in mass. The Oromo reacted in many ways to this policy. Accordingly, some of them accepted Christianity and got baptized only to escape from being killed while most of them had rejected to accept his religious doctrine and fled to neighbouring Sudan and joined the Mahdist movement.

Emperor Menelik II played, according to Marcus (1994, p. 86), a pivotal role in advancing the atrocity committed during Yohannes against the Muslim (Oromo) and even increased in some areas. Oromos' statuses were suppressed and Amharisation identities on Oromo become the core of his policy. Like his predecessors Menelik, with his powerful army, converted the Oromo to Christianity either by diplomacy or force (except during the five years of Italian occupation), the condition for the Oromo continued unabated. Emperor Haile Selassie after restoration to the throne in 1941, began a religious tolerance policy between Christianity and Islam and some of the Christian and Muslims Oromos were entered in the central government. Nevertheless, those Oromos who adhered to autochthonous religion were seen as "heathens." But this equitable policy seems that in the late 1950s and 1960s changed and Muslim Oromos faced menace from the empire regime (Bulcha, 2005, p. 1-54). In response, the Muslim Oromos uprising against the dominance of Orthodox Christianity over Islam erupted. This was seen especially in eastern Oromia where the shared religion of the Oromo and Somali rebels engaged in a serious of guerrilla war⁵ with Ethiopia until 1974.

God known to the Oromo as *Waaqa*. For them, *Waaqa* is the creator of the whole universe. The followers of *Waaqeffanna* are known as *Waaqefata*/ttu try to submit wholeheartedly to *Waaqa*. He/she respects *Sera Waaqa* (*Waaqa's Law*), accepts *Waaqa's* commandments of altruism for the benefit of mankind.

⁵ There is no doubt that local understandings of self-government and autonomy are part and parcel of the struggle of resistance to class and ethnic oppression by central government on the local Oromo. As a result, the Oromo in search of autonomous

Conversion and Evangelism in Oromia

The religion of the Oromo was remarkably transformed starting from the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century. Most of them abandoned *Waqefanna* and adopted Islam and petty number Orthodox, Protestant or Catholic based on whom they formed respective contacts. This conversion among the Oromo, according to Gnamo (2014), can be ascribed to two principal factors. The first was the introduction and development of Islam by the peripatetic teachers and traders, and the second one was the inclusion of Oromo into Christian Ethiopian state from the early 1880s to the late 1890s (Gnamo, 2014, p. 98). I have also gathered various evidence and views concerning the beginning of the protestant evangelist in Oromia. According to secondary sources, evangelical missionary started in Oromia in the first half of the 19th century by Church Missionary Society (CMS) one of the earliest Evangelical missionary societies in Europe (Eshete, 2005, p. 161). Although there is no record of this assertion nowadays, however, evangelism initiated by this group and spread to the people in far and remote areas in Oromia region. Some oral traditions even claim that the Oromo had long been converted to protestant missionary long before the advent of this group to Oromia, however, this is disputed by written sources.⁶ In any case, Oromo embraced slowly either Protestantism or Islam besides the forced conversion to Orthodox Christianity by the central government.

In the late 1890s, almost all Oromo were conquered and subsequently incorporated into the Ethiopian empire through the force of armies although some of them incorporated in to Ethiopia since the 17th century or even before that. This, in turn, brought about a profound change in *Waqefanna*, political, cultural institutions and national identity of Oromo. It is confirmed that after Oromo's conquest *Waqefanna* interfered and its practices outlawed, their local power shattered, their territory taken and divided, their property ravaged.⁷ Following Oromo incorporation into Ethiopian empire, emperor Menelik, abolished the political and administrative importance of the *gada* system all at once and consequently eliminated the Oromo parliament,

administration rebelled against the central government and joined Somali who at that time fighting for their independence against the European colonial rule and Ethiopia, too. For more detail on this information, see Tareke, 1991.

⁶ Interview with Tadesse Elu on 28 October 2017, Protestant, age 60, Batu town (Oromia).

⁷ Interview with Kufe Gemedo on 28 December 2018, Orthodox, age 88, Batu town (Oromia).

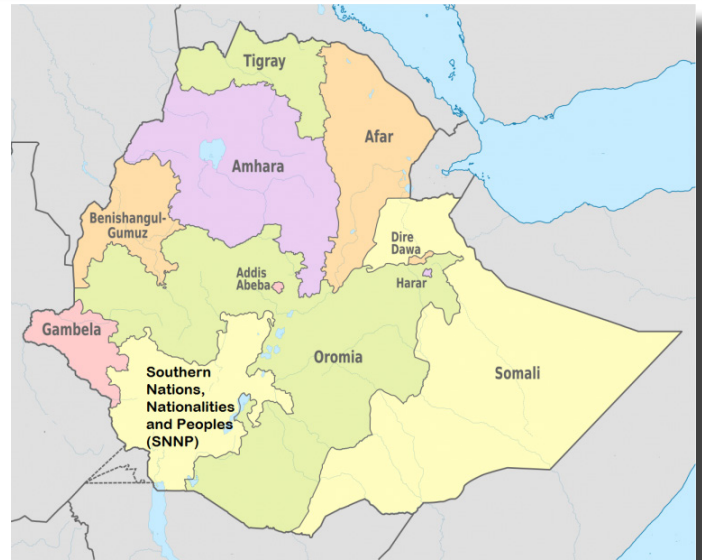


Figure 2. The map of Ethiopia and its regions. Retrieved from <http://www.ethiowisit.com/ethiopia/ethiopia.html> on February 3, 2019)

Chafe assembly (Dugassa, 2008, p. 45). *Gada* system is a democratic practice where all Oromos assume military, political and social responsibility in every eight years.⁸

Nowadays, the majority of Oromo people live in the central, east, south and west parts of Ethiopia, giving the name to the biggest state in Ethiopia: Oromia. According to the Ethiopian constitution 1995 (Article 47) Oromia regional state, where this research is conducted, is one of the nine regional states in the country. The Oromo, Ethiopia's largest nation, nowadays lives predominantly in a region that spreads across south-central Ethiopia from Kenya to the south, Sudan to the west, and Somalia in the east. Oromia region is famous for its natural resources and one of the most greens in the country (Figure 2). According to 2007 the population projection of the recent census, Oromia state accounts for about 40% of the total population. At present, the Oromo people are followers of different religions. The dominant and national religious composition is

⁸ *Gada* is a system where elected officials take power from their predecessors, assuming political, ritual, military and economic responsibilities every eight years. *Gada* is a social and political the institution worked to prevent abuse and political dominance in Oromo people. Under the *Gada* system the Oromo people enjoyed relative peace, stability, sustainable prosperity, and political sovereignty before annexed to the Ethiopian empire at the end of the 19th century. Before their annexation to the Ethiopian state, the Oromo people were independent and organized both culturally and politically under the *Gada* system to increase their well-being and protect their security and sovereignty. *Gada* system govern the overall life of the Oromo people. Although it is not known exactly when and how the *Gada* system emerged, historical and anthropological sources indicate that it existed as a fully-fledged system long before the 16th century. For more information on the *Gada* system, see Legesse (1973).

Orthodox 44%, Muslim 34%, Protestant 19%, Catholic 0.7%, indigenous 2.6% and others 0.6%. In terms of the settlement, however, it is estimated that the Orthodox Christians and Muslims make up about 68% and 24% of the population respectively and Protestants 7% in urban areas of Oromia (Feyisa, 2013, pp. 25-46).

In the first half of the 19th century, the CMS sent five preachers to Egypt; three of them to strengthen its ministry to the African churches, while the remaining two came to Ethiopia to support evangelism and reform. In 1829 the two evangelists, Samuel Gobat and Christian Kugler, arrived in northern Ethiopia originally aimed reforms with the Orthodox, evangelisation in accord with the teachings of salvation and canonical origin. Gobat returned home again for health reasons and later on, he succeeded to come back to Shawa Oromo with Johann Krapf to meet with King Sahle Selassie (1813-1847), ruler of Shawa. But the king stated his desire to have professional staff rather than preachers and told them to leave his realm promptly. Instead of leaving Ethiopia, the missionaries searched for other options to achieve their aspirations (Ujulu, 1999, p. 37-40).

Krapf became more enthusiastic in the Oromo when he studied and examined their living conditions such as culture, economy, and society. He learned Afan Oromo in which he was able to print materials on the language entitled, "An Imperfect outline of the elements of the Oromo language" in 1840. Thus, he became the first person to translate parts of the Bible into Afan Oromo. The king suspected him of becoming a hindrance to his subjugation of the neighbouring Oromo and he was halted from the entrance into Shawa in about 1842. This act of the king gave Krapf more possibility to spend time with the Oromos outside Shawa areas. The more he learned about them he happened to predict that 'in time might the Oromos become for Africa, what our Germany became for Europe' in terms of evangelism in the Horn of Africa, teachings, their role, and social impact once they converted to Christianity against the influence of Islam (Krapf, 1968, p. 74). Historically, starting from the second half of the 19th or so century, Oromo were converted to Christianity or Islam in large numbers and have experienced some changes following conversion.

In south-eastern Oromia, such as today's Arsi and Bale zones⁹, the Islamisation was preferred than

Orthodox Christianity. This was because the Arsi admitted Islam as a doctrine of protection against the invading Ethiopian Christian militia. Some scholars unveiled the extent to which the resistance to the Ethiopian Christian state encouraged many people to accept Islam. Many of the first to do so in the north and south Ethiopia were respectively the Arsi and Wollo Oromo. Particularly Arsi people had faced a social and political crisis that was unprecedented. This was a direct result of the war of conquest that Menelik fought in northern Arsi for about a decade (1882–1892). Armed confrontations, massacres and pillages with Christian troops during the war and their adverse economic and political effects did not draw the Arsi to the Christian Orthodox (Gnamo, 2014, p. 100).

In the early 1890s Onesimos Nasib, Aster Ganno, Daniel Dabala (Oromo evangelists) settled in the South-western Oromo having their base in Boji town involved in teaching the Oromo working with the Orthodox priests and preachers. Soon, however, social and doctrinal issues became argumentative and developed as the point of disagreement among protestant and Orthodox. Protestant converts, most of them being an Oromo, wanted to usually teach the Holy Bible in Afan Oromo (Jalata, 2005, p. 89). On the contrary, the Orthodox priests, who were chiefly from the Amhara societies, wanted to teach in Amharic (official language) and vigorously resisted the moves of the evangelical preacher. This tension lasted to present day unabated, however.

In the 20th century, there were some significant encouraging events, although short-lived, motivated the Ethiopian protestant and Muslim. The first was the advent of *Lij* Iyasu to power (1913-1916), where he was clothed in Muslim, constructed mosques and married to some Muslims (Steen-Johnsen, 2017, p. 105). It is said that *Lij* Iyasu sought to rectify the wrong works by granting equal chances to both Christians and Muslims in the empire and externally he formed an alliance with Turkey (Sohier, 2014, p. 51-74). The system of *Lij* Iyasu in Ethiopia concerning the Oromo and Muslim was more relief as compared to the past regimes. According to Zewde (2001, p. 124) in an attempt to make the Muslims feel ownership and shared values at home in their state, *Lij* Iyasu tried all he can to reverse the wrong past deeds committed on both Islam and Oromo. To this end, he established Mosques in Afar, Harar and another parts Oromia. Therefore, it is reasonable to provisionally conclude that the *Lij* Iyasu's reign was marked as progressive and inclusive where citizens treated equally and feel comfortable in their respective regions.

9 According to the current Ethiopian administration system zone is an administration unit below the region (state) and above the district. Accordingly, the hierarchy of current Ethiopia is Federal-Region (State) - Zone-District-*Kebele* (the smallest administrative unit).

Oromo during the Italian occupation (1936 to 1941)

This was one of the relief periods for the Muslims Oromo and Protestants in the country. The period of Italian rule (1936-1941) was the period of revival to the Protestantism and Islam and much deterioration to the EOC (Gnamo, 2014, p. 190). The Italian settlers tried to support the Roman Catholic doctrine. Their administrators aspired to check the influence of the Orthodox in the recently consolidated areas by rebuking the Orthodox as a tool of Amhara national domination. In this line of argument, Jalata indicates that “some Oromos regarded the Italians as their liberators from Amhara oppression, but they were suspicious of Italy’s real long-range aim” (2005, p. 37).

There is no doubt that the Italian banquet operations discoloured image of the Orthodox in the southern and south-central parts of Ethiopia. Although the Italians did not succeed in Catholicising Ethiopians, they initiated the way for the Protestant religion to get an upper hand due to exhausting position of the Orthodox. This vacuum resulted in the evangelical activities that brought about the conversion of tens of thousands of people in Oromia. Surprisingly, the Italians projected themselves as saviours toward the Muslims and henceforth gave them substantial support to freely enjoy and engage in their faith among the Oromo. This helped the Oromo to adopt Islam teaching already ongoing among them by Muslim scholars collectively called *ulama*.

Baxter (1978) clearly stated the circumstances in Arsi Oromo just before and after the Italian occupation argued that the widespread adoption of Islam by the Arsi of the Arsiland in the 1930s was a mass demonstration of anti-Amhara sentiment and rejection of all the traditions of their colonisers. This, in turn, reinforced the presumption of Amhara that Christianity was rejected by Oromo (1978, p. 283-296). This report is supported by oral sources. The Oromo informant in Arsi area remembered that during this period, Orthodox and Islam between enemies and friends have become an increasingly sensitive topic among the Oromo people on one hand and the Christian central state on the other hand.¹⁰ In Oromia, like everywhere else in the country, Italians favoured Islam through building Mosques, instituting Sharia courts. Italians employed such measures, according to Jalata (2005, p. 87-89), to discourage the power of the Orthodox which they see as a symbol of Ethiopian people unifying force.

Although Oromo experienced little lasting political or economic influence during this period, it was crucial

to deepening their religious identity and strengthening their resilience. The Italians were well aware of the situation of the Oromo or Muslim Oromo in particular and took advantage of it. The Oromo were long time marginalised from the political and economy of Ethiopia. The colonial policies of divide and rule were aimed at deliberately courting Muslim Oromo and to weaken and alienate the ruling Christians of Ethiopia (Bulcha, 2005, p. 1-54). When the Italians came to Oromia, most of the government officials fled, and those who remained were subject to acts of revenge by Oromo, causing the deaths of some landlords.

The Italian period witnessed the expansion of Islam, and the Italians’ emphasis on expanding infrastructure also increased opportunities for religious students to travel beyond Oromia in search of Islamic education (Levine, 2000, p. 149). The Italian era thus proved important to consolidate an indigenous religious identity, as well as the dream of belonging to something that transcends local and connects local Muslims to the wider Islamic world. Such sentiments were clearly expressed by one of Haji’s informants, as cited in Østebø who stated, “*bara xaaliyaanii ijaa banaannee*” (we opened our eyes during the Italian period) (2020, p. 68-69). It appears that the period strengthened their identity as Muslims, boosted their confidence, and sharpened their quest for change.

Muslims in different parts of Oromia had their *qadi* (local judge) who administers matters relating to social affairs such as conflicts and marriage. Even the Protestant Christianity is more effective than Orthodox and Islam among the Oromo since it is translated into vernacular language whereas the formers were transplanted¹¹. Following this act, those of Oromo in the pastoral areas and some small towns converted to Protestantism in large numbers. In general conclusion, the Oromo religion during Italian period was in favour of Waqefanna, Islam and Protestantism. The following oral information as roughly translated underlines this:

We pray to *Waaq* (God)
Our culture is restored
Christianity is removed from us
The Italians are better for us.¹²

It seems that this quote symbolises the happiness

¹⁰ Interview with Edao Haga on 28 November 2018, Muslim, age 85, Bulbula town (in Oromia).

¹² Interview with Haji Ahmed Mohammed on 28 December 2018, Muslim, age 80, Batu town (Oromia). In Afan Oromo he narrated as:

Waaqa keenna kadhanna
Aadaan deebitee ilaalaa,
Kiristaana (Ortodoksii) nurra kaasanii,
Nuuf wayya warra Xaaliyanii.

¹⁰ Interview with Edao Haga on 28 November 2018, Muslim, age 85, Bulbula town (in Oromia).

and deep understanding of those missionaries who had helped the common people to practice religion freely. They had implicitly an ambition of the religious freedom given by the Italian, which had been taking place because of their presence. Allowed all forms of teaching with the vernacular language, Afan Oromo, they used prayer, the means to teach at their disposal, in fact, which they used, as shown in the saying, in good belief and with a sense of the restoration of hope.

Post liberation period (1941 to 1974)

Evangelism reached its heyday in the post liberation years and the government acknowledges the teaching of the Bible in vernacular language as part of its educational system although sometimes it faced stiff resistance from Orthodox. Many congregational preachers founded and engaged in teaching the masses at the grassroot level and education activity in various parts of Ethiopia in general and Oromia in particular raised. This was because Emperor Haile Selassie blended these missionaries in his modernisation policy. Haile Selassie's modernization arrangement considered religion a critical component of the material and social life of Ethiopians. He looked to start modifications inside the Ethiopian Orthodox Church so that it may suit a few of the arrangements he was starting. One of the Emperor's basic mediation was making Amharic the preaching language of Orthodox Church. (Eshete, 2005, p. 155).

Following the liberation of Ethiopian from Italian rule (1941), Emperor Haile Sillasie (1930-1974) attempted to give a new face to the Orthodox at the national and local levels, and the old laws were restored through Orthodox support. Then, presumably, the Orthodox elevated to its old hierarchy of administration in the social, educational, economic and political status of the country. Prouty and Rosenfeld (1994, p. 201) and Abegaz (2018, p. 109) correctly argued that as the prestige, source of education and emblem of national unity, Orthodox provided the ideological justification for the existence of the monarchical system. In return, the government provides large subsidies of *gult* (land granted as fief) which benefited it substantially. As a result, by implication, the peasants were evicted from their *rist* (hereditary land rights).

The church was said to be at the zenith of holding and controlling one-third of the country's land until the outbreak of the 1974 revolution. The monarch also supported the Orthodox to engage in vigorous pursuit of evangelisation in all parts of the country. To this end, he announced an ill-advised government directive of 1944 which declared that all Ethiopian people should

be converted to the Orthodox faith.¹³ The decree of 1944 also recognised the missionary factor in Ethiopia and laid the conditions of foreign missionaries as well as mission state relations. The emperor took positive measure towards missionaries in the regions known as "open airs", in the word of Eshete, refers to southern Ethiopia (Oromia and Sidama). Eshete (2005) indicates:

According to the decree, the country was to be divided into two parts, "Closed Areas" and "Open Areas." The so-called "Closed Areas," which were the exclusive preserve of the Orthodox Church, were areas located mainly in the north and central regions of Ethiopia. Places designated as "Open Areas," mainly refer to the southern and the southwestern parts of Ethiopia, where the influence of the Orthodox Church was weak or non-existent. "Open Areas" also include the lowland regions of the east and north-eastern parts of Ethiopia where Islam was the predominant form of religion. In the first category, missions were also allowed to work provided that they engaged in activities that promoted social services. (p. 187).

From 1948 to 1964 the Emperor Haile Selassie established new churches to serve as a centre of preaching and conversion of the local people. He forbids any indigenous beliefs and practices and by doing so he came into conflicts with the local peoples.¹⁴ Places that the local people used for worshipping was soon replaced by the Orthodox churches. For example, in 1964 Kidane Mihret church in Batu town was established in a place where the Arsi Oromo gives thanks to their *Waaqa* through *Irressa* (thanks giving ceremony). The people were forced to undergo baptism and the priests and clergies spread water to the people after they are called to the Lake Batu shores for this purpose. There is a saying that goes on as "*Hin taame kiristinaan Badhaanee, Bishaantu sirritti itti hin facaanee*".¹⁵ Literally mean the Christianisation of Badhaane was in

¹³ Interview with Kajela Watiro on 07 December 2018, Muslim, age 71, Adami Tullu town (Oromia).

¹⁴ Interview with Kebeto Tola on 14 December 2018, Muslim, age 70, Batu town (Oromia).

¹⁵ Interview with Bekele Shanko on 01 December 2018, Protestant, age 55, Batu town (Oromia).

vain; because he was not baptised well. The close look at the saying shows that the Arsi Oromo living around Lake Batu openly refused to accept EOC. The name Badhaane is a common name among the Arsi Oromo. In the same pattern oral sources asserts that the people were prohibited from practising thanksgiving ceremony in their original religious places until the 1974 revolution. Even worse the conquered people were not allowed to use their language in any government offices, market places and schools.¹⁶

The majority of Oromo became Muslim after incorporation to the Ethiopian empire at the end of the 19th century; this is in an empire where Islam is not only seen as a secondary religion but also Muslims faced widespread discrimination in all spheres. Moreover, there was an important attempt to divide the Oromo people along religious lines. For example, Ethiopian ruling elites claimed to be the most civilized and tried to tell Oromo who converted to Christianity that they were more civilized than those who converted to Islam. In this context, Islam has become a kind of rallying point for Muslims, even an ideology of resistance against Ethiopian oppression (Gnamo, 2002, p. 99-120). Indeed, Oromo needed a strong ideology against the rooted state and the hegemony of Christian rulers. The introduction and spread of Islam among the Oromos were not directly related to war and armed violence. This Islam was tolerant and popular, so to say, and coexisted in harmony with the local/indigenous culture. While conversion to Islam implies acceptance of its basic doctrine, Oromo has managed to preserve a fundamental part of their culture and identity throughout the process of social change.

In the course of the Ethiopian state expansion to the Oromoland, as mentioned above, the EOC faith was being imposed upon the newly conquered people. The marriage between the EOC and the state enabled the expansion of both at the same time. According to an oral source, the mass conversion of Arsi Oromo around Lake Batu through mass baptism usually conducted near water bodies is one of such examples.¹⁷ Jalata (2005, p. 164) and Gnamo (2014, p. 188) mentioned that the Oromo people accepted EOC only to escape from persecution and imprisonment. They further argued that the results of opposition to accept the EOC were more severe among those people who put up the stiffest resistance against the Ethiopian army accompanied by the priests of EOC. Hence, after their defeat, the

peoples from Arsi Oromo, Walayta, Kaffa and Harar who fought gallantly were uprooted and sold into slavery and become *gabbar* (taxpayer peasants) their lands were taken away as punishment for their resistances.

In the post-1950s the Imperial regime engaged in a series of Ethiopianisation was given due attention and the de-Oromonisation process was accelerated through three means. According to my informant, these are: eradicating the Oromo culture and beliefs, prohibiting further education for the Oromo and changing their religion from either *Waqefanna* or Islam to EOC.¹⁸ These amounts, as Jalata indicated, to the colonisation of the Oromo by the Ethiopian government (Jalata, 2005, p. 180). It seems that these policies were effective until 1974 when the literacy campaign was allowed to all Ethiopian regardless of religion, ethnic background, economic status and political affiliation.

Baxter (1978), who has written many articles on Oromo and their causes, offers these accounts from the early 1970s. He argued that the Oromo must communicate in Amharic language or use a translator before an official or in court even between two Oromo in litigation. The Oromo pay some money for the interpreter in the court and this puts them at disadvantageous position economically, politically and culturally. The services including the sermon were given in Amharic, which none of the audience understood and then rarely translated into Afan Oromo, even in the church where the entire congregation were Oromo (1978, pp. 283-296). Preachers or priests assigned by the government from the Amhara ethnic group who never speak and even they don't want to speak Afan Oromo. This is to make Afan Oromo and Oromo people feel undermined and uncivilised and this propaganda was preached for a long time by the church.

Although the revised constitution of 1955 granted non-interference in the exercise of religious rites freedom including freedom of speech and expression (Articles 40 and 41), essentially it was an authorised charter for the strengthening of autocracy thereby elevating the person the king to sacred status. The close look at Article 4 of the constitution indicates that the emperor is sacred and his dignity is unchallengeable by his blood and righteousness. All respect and honour bestowed onto him with constitution and tradition must be respected. Rebel against the emperor is rebelled against God and hence will be punished.

Orthodox Christianity was given the official status of the only national state religion, Amharic was declared as the official language including in all recently founded protestant churches in Oromia and

¹⁶ Interview with Hirpo Gashiro on 29 July 2018, Waqefata, age 63, Gallo Hiraphe (Oromia).

¹⁷ Interview with Hora Feyisa on 28 August 2018, Protestant, age 70, Batu town (Oromia).

¹⁸ Interview with Haji Ahmed Mohammed on 28 December 2018, Muslim, age 80, Batu town (Oromia).

the southern region.¹⁹ It is very important to remember that at this stage people of Orthodox Christian Amhara were gradually settled with the help of the government in Oromo dominated region. Freedom of religion was limited, Afan Oromo's use for missionary, preaching, literature, teaching and writing was banned until 1974 Ethiopian revolution.²⁰ In Ethiopian history, until 1974, many Oromo were prohibited from practicing their religion, and Orthodox Christianity was imposed on them by the state. Some were imprisoned for resisting this plan and trying to take Oromo's case. The culture and language ban created a difficult circumstance for researchers who want to write about history and religion of Oromo, despite significant moves has been made in recent times.²¹

Conclusions

The introduction of Christianity in Ethiopia brought about profound changes in social, cultural and religious developments that have far-reaching effects on the Oromo. The EOC and Islam were introduced in the early 4th and 7th centuries respectively from the Middle East heralded a new phenomenon. The spread of Orthodox Christianity was made possible by the royal family. From the late 19th century to the second half of the 20th century, the Orthodox Church and the monarchy-imposed Christianity on the conquered people by force though rarely succeeded in winning the support of the masses. It is true that we have cases among the Oromo, as elsewhere, where Oromo accepted Islam as a resistance ideology against central government or adopted by peaceful expansion such as trade and preaching activity.

Historical interests may have to be research methods of extending and consolidating religion among the Oromo fusions as long-standing parts of greater Ethiopian history. The article has tried to discuss the religious conversion and evangelism of the Oromo people. In addition to providing cultural and historical information, factors that affected the Oromo religious conversion has been discussed taking Ethiopian history into account. The article may also equally help us to make some comparisons with the history of other people in east Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular.

¹⁹ Interview with Hussein Gelgelu on 07 August 2018, Muslim, age 66, Gowota (Oromia).

²⁰ Interview with Tadesse Elu on 28 October 2017, Protestant, age 60, Batu town (Oromia).

²¹ For more information on the challenges and problems that the Oromo people faced under Ethiopian consecutive regimes, see Jalata (2005).

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