CHAPTER-2

THE OROMO OF ETHIOPIA

As the subject of the case in point, the Oromo of Ethiopia should first be introduced in order to appropriately understand the particularistic nature of the value ideals of these people. Who are the Oromo people? How do they define and identify themselves? These are some of the questions that are important not only to know their traditional moral values but also to clearly understand the social, cultural and environmental settings in which these values had developed and been applied. Accordingly, this chapter attempts to introduce the Oromo people and their core distinctive features of identity such as geographical location, language, religion, common origin, Gada System and history.¹

2.1. Ethiopia, Oromo and Oromia

To explain the identity of Oromo it is pertinent to introduce certain basic and relevant facts of Ethiopia. Ethiopia covers an area of 1.14 million sq.km (944,000 sq. miles) and is situated in North Eastern Africa; bordering the Sudan in the west; Eritrea in the North, Djibouti and Somalia in the east and Kenya in the south. (The Unique Ethiopian Millennium, 2007: 2)² It is a country endowed with immense natural and cultural diversities. Besides being a rich mosaic of nations, nationalities and peoples it is an ancient land famous for its diverse culture, tradition and values. Consequently, it is said to be a museum of nations, nationalities and peoples (Ibid: 8). Witnessing that this is the reality of the country Levine writes, “...Ethiopia is a country of extraordinary ethnic diversity...” (1974: 20)

2.2. Abyssinia and Ethiopia

Since the terms Abyssinia and Ethiopia are extensively used in this work it is very important to show the denotative meaning of the two in order to avoid the confusion that may arise in their usage. Very often, the two terms are used interchangeably. Some people think that Abyssinia is the ancient [classical] name of the present Ethiopia, and Ethiopia is the modern name of Abyssinia. Viewed as such, the two terms mean or name the same territory and people at different times, and hence they are synonyms [save the time of their usage]. But, there are reasons to think that the two terms are not synonyms, nor do they equivalently mean the same thing. Put in precise words, they do not have the same meaning. In his book, The Making of the Oromo Diaspora: A Historical Sociology of

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Forced Migration, Mekuria Bulcha makes a clear distinction between the extensional meanings of the two terms. According to him, the name ‘Ethiopia’ refers to the modern state and territory of the country. In the true sense of the word, Ethiopia as an Empire was created at the end of the nineteenth century when the Oromo land and also that of the other which were previously independent were incorporated to the Empire through conquest. As noted by Bulcha (2002: 12) the name “Ethiopia was not in common usage until the 1940s.” In an attempt to report the historical event that brought this country to existence Bulcha (2002: 12) again writes, “The creation of modern Ethiopia involves not only the conquest of the Oromo but also the subjugation of the other previously independent peoples and territories by the Abyssinian state between the 1870s and 1900.”

The name Abyssinia refers geographically to almost the northern part and ethnographically to the Semitic-speaking peoples of the now Ethiopia. In order to specifically figure out which peoples were referred to as ‘Abyssinians’ Bulcha (2002: 12) states in the following way: “The Amhara and Tigréans are Semitic-speaking people and call themselves “Habesha” (“Abyssinians”) in contrast to the Cushitic-speaking Oromo...” and others. Abyssinia was thus the country of “Habesha” or Abyssinians. That means Abyssinia does not refer to all peoples and territories beyond the northern land of the Semitic–speaking peoples, whereas Ethiopia denotes all the peoples and territory of the present country, and hence by far larger than Abyssinia. Ethnographically, the word “Abyssinia” refers to a deeply rooted social and historical identity. Orthodox Christianity and monarchical rule defined the religious and political culture of the people of Abyssinia.” (Bulcha. 2002: 13) It also refers to the Christian state which conquered and annexed the Oromo land and that of others so as to create the modern Empire of Ethiopia; whereas the word “Ethiopia” denotes all the Semitic, Cushitic, Omitic and Nilotic speakers and their homeland as a whole.

2.3. Facts about the Physical Features of Ethiopia

Topographically it is the land of natural contrast, ranging from the depth of the Dankil Depression, which is at least 148 meters below sea level (the lowest dry land on earth) to the high rugged mountains over 4000 meters. (The Unique Ethiopian Millennium, 2007: 3) Endowed with enormous natural resources of flora and fauna Ethiopia is a home of many endemic woody plants and wild life species. Consequently, the country is designated as one of the twelve centres of world biodiversity. (Ibid: 24)
Coffee is one of the crop plants that Ethiopia contributed to the world. It is the origin of coffee *Arabica*. (Ibid: 22) The country is the origin of many trans-national and big rivers as a result of which it was known as the water tower of East Africa. It is referred to as such for it has several big rivers including the legendary Blue Nile. The potential that exists for irrigation and hydroelectric power generation is immense and almost untapped.” (Ibid: 24)

Historically Ethiopia is one of the regions of the world where the ancient civilizations first flourished. Scripture and many other written documents witness that Ethiopia is one of the few countries with a long recorded history. Replete with numerous incomparably unique features, this ancient nation has fascinating history, has its own number systems and alphabets, calendar and several unshared qualities.(Ibid: 1) “Ever since the establishment of UNESCO in 1970 for the registration of world cultural heritages, Ethiopia is one of the leading Sub-Saharan African Countries by contributing precious assets for the world. So far, it has eight heritages registered under the UN organization.” (Ibid: 15)

Known for the preservation of its independence Ethiopia has a remarkable history. Levine (1974: 12) writes, “While people all over Africa were being subjugated by foreign powers, Ethiopians were winning victories over a series of invaders. From their victories over invading Egyptians in the 1870s, over Sudanese Mahdists in the 1880s, Ethiopia gained a reputation...” When the Europeans fiercely waged wars in order to scramble the rest of the world Ethiopia was able to defend its independence by defeating the Italian warriors twice. Consequently it “was the only African country that preserved its independence through the heroic battles of forefathers gained in 1896 at Adwa and in 1941 over the fascist Italian soldiers. (Ibid: 19)

Although Ethiopia was the only African country that survived its independence, being helped by the Europeans it was also probably the only African country in which the elites of the minority were able to take possession of the majority, the rule of which was more cruel, sadistic and infertile than that of the European colonialism. Towards the end of the 19th century the Amhara rulers conquered and subjugated all the lands and peoples beyond their territories. All the evils that were planted by the first conqueror, namely Emperor Menelik II, were further strengthened by the subsequent rulers. This gave rise to
intermittent uprisings, violence and civil wars that have tragically devastated the country. Still Ethiopia has not secured a dependable political platform.

The estimated total population of the country, at the moment, is over 77 million. (Ibid: 4) Although the state officially recognizes Christianity and Islam as the two major religions of the country, Waaqeffana of the Oromo people also has strong hold. As a multi-ethnic state, Ethiopia has a great variety of languages. Over 80 languages are spoken in the country with some 200 dialects. (Ibid) According to the *1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia* there are over eighty different ethnic groups in the country. While seven of these are with a population of over one million, all the rest are with the population below one million.

**Table 1 Seven Ethnic groups that have over one million populations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Total Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oromo</td>
<td>17,080,318</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>16,007,933</td>
<td>30.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tigraway</td>
<td>3,284,568</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalie</td>
<td>3,160,540</td>
<td>5.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guragie</td>
<td>2,290,274</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sidama</td>
<td>1,842,314</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walaita</td>
<td>1,269,216</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Source:** *The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia*

Oromo is demographically the largest ethnic group, being followed by Amhara and Tigre as a second and third respectively (See Table 1). Among more than eighty different languages being spoken in the country *Amharic* (the language of Amhara) is the largest [by 32.7 percent] whereas *Afaan Oromo* which is being spoken by 31.58 percent of the population is the second largest. Both Afaan Oromo and Amharic are also spoken as
second languages. Amharic is the second language for 5, 104, 150 (9.61 percent) people in the country whereas Afaan Oromo is used by 1, 535, 434 (2.89 percent) people as second language. (Ibid, 46, 48) Out of the total population of Oromo 12.8 percent use Amharic as their second language whereas from the total Amhara population 4.3 percent use Afaan Oromo as their second language. While Oromo is demographically the largest their language is the second, whereas Amhara is demographically the second largest their language is the first spoken language in the country. We will discuss about this disparity in chapter five.

2.4. Who are Oromo?

Oromo are one of the Cushitic speaking groups of people. A century has elapsed since Father Martial De Salviac in his book, The Oromo: An Ancient People, Great African Nation (1901: 7) has remarked, “The Oromo people are one of the least known peoples of the earth. At the same time the Oromo races says Elisee Reclu, by the number of population and the area of territory occupied is one of the most considerable in Africa.” The early history of East Africa, witnesses that Oromo have inhabited in this part of the continent starting from time immemorial. It was from this region that they spread south, north and westwards. Currently they are found in three neighbouring countries of East Africa- Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia. Legesse in his book titled, Gada: Three Approaches to the Study of African Society, writes, “In the historic annals of the peoples of Africa the Oromo hold a special position in that they are among the most expansive societies on record.” (1973: 7) This research, however, focuses only on the traditional moral value of the Oromo of Ethiopia found in six administrative zones of Oromia – i.e., Borana, Guji, West Hararghe, Jimma, East Wallagaa and West Shawa.

The Oromo people define and identify themselves as Oromo. The researchers have made an effort to trace to the etymological and literal meaning of the word 'Oromo'. All informants were asked whether it means a person, a place, a thing or an event. Few were not willing to answer the question for no obvious reasons. The majority, however, responded that it is just the name of these people. Just as other words mean or other names name objects or events, the word Oromo also names the Oromo people. Most informants emphasized that the word Oromo does not probably mean anything other than the specific ethnic group known as Oromo. More meaningful response to this issue, however, is the statement made by Father Salviac. He wrote that all the Oromo people claim to have the
same father whom they call Orma, from where the name Oromo or Ilm’Orma, son of Orma comes. (1901: 13)

Different responses were received to the question, “When did the word Oromo come into use?” Some informants agreed that it is difficult to give a precise answer to this question. Others argued that the word Oromo is as old as the history of the Oromo people. Ahera Bekele8 (2008), for instance, asserted that the name Oromo is as old as the nation itself. Many of this group of informants expressed the same idea in different wordings. “Our fathers told us that we were Oromo, and they themselves heard this from their fathers, grand and great grand fathers.”9 Thus the word Oromo has been in use ever since the time that these people started living as human community.

Although the Oromo people identify and call themselves as Oromo, they were also known as “Galla”. Who did name them as Galla, and what does it connote? Mohammed Hassen answers this, “The Oromo do not call themselves ‘Galla’ and they resist any attempt to do so.” (1983: 44) One of the key informants, Chaalaa Sori10 (2007) has the same response. He says that Oromo do not like this name. They hate it bitterly. It is a name given to the Oromo by the non- Oromo people. It is the word of insult although some say it is not. They do not even hesitate to kill a person who deliberately provokes by uttering the word ‘Galla’. What good reasons do Oromo have for protesting this name? “I do not really know the precise meaning of the word ‘Galla’” says Chaalaa, “but for sure I know that it is a word of contempt or insult. It is just like an incurable scar that perpetually causes severe pain.” It follows that uttering the word ‘Galla’ is tantamount to touching the injury that inflicts severe pains to any Oromo. Commenting on this Ahera says, “Oromo were called Galla by the Abyssinians particularly by the Amharas. Galla is not the name of Oromo” and it is because of this that “they do not want to be called Galla.” The Amhara elites use the word Galla to mean the “uncivilized, uncultured”.

In an attempt to explore the etymological source of the word ‘Galla’ many things were suggested. Some said that it was derived from the name of a river called “Gallana”, others argued that it was obtained from the name of a forest. And still there are others who held that it was derived from the Oromo name for camel, i.e., ‘Gaala’. Duubee Adulaa (2008), an informant from Guji says that the word ‘Galla’ means tall or big. But it means this, for things not for humans [in which language it means this is not mentioned]. Haji Mormor Abbasena (2008) from West Hararghe, however, traces the word ‘Galla’ to an
Arabic origin. In its Arabic context it means a hero who knows no retreat in a fighting - a gallant fighter who fights without any fear.” A literary source from Father Salviae (1901: 13) that fully supports the assertion of Haji Mormor is: “The name Galla comes from war song: it is an epic name, heraldry of their valour, approximately synonymous with ‘hidalgo’.”

But as Mormor argues, “Those who considered Oromo as their ‘formidable enemy’ used the word ‘Galla’ to mean cruel, merciless and barbaric.” From this one can understand how a good word could easily be infested with evil meaning. With the same tone Amsalu Temesgen (2008) from East Wallagaa argues that the word ‘Galla’ came into use after Oromo fell under the oppression of the Abyssinian rulers. It is these rulers and their clergies who named Oromo as such. The Amharic dictionary written by the Abyssinian clergies and elites defined the word ‘Galla’ as cruel, pagan, barbaric or uncivilized.’ This by itself is an evidence to prove that they were the ones who invented this word to name Oromo.

Whatever the origin of the word is, however, it remains connoting Oromo negatively. Thus what Oromo hate is not the word itself, but the meaning of the word. Words have literal and emotive meanings. Emotive meanings have the power to produce either positive or negative attitude towards the thing connoted by the word. ‘Galla’ is a derogatory word. As noted in the works of many scholars and also pointed out by informants, it means savage or uncultured, unkind, stranger or alien, or essentially inferior. We will discuss about the moral implication of the meaning of this word in chapter five.

2.5. The Oromo Identity Consciousness

The identity [In detail we will discuss about the philosophical problems of identity in chapter five. At this point we will explain it as it is commonly used or understood] of something, someone, or a group is explained and understood in relation to that of the others. Unique features are responsible for the identity of things or persons. They either include or exclude one from the other(s). Inclusion exists whenever there are other persons with whom one shares some features in common, and exclusion takes place whenever there are others with whom a certain group of people cannot or does not intend to share its distinctive features. Thus identity is a complex concept of inclusion and exclusion. There is a necessity of knowing oneself as either an individual or a group. Self knowledge is very important in order to find where one stands in the complex system of relations, and to

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guide one’s life in the right course. False knowledge of oneself is not only misleading but also dangerous. It is possible for one to think of him or her-self differently to what he/she actually is. Exaggerations or underestimations of identity undermine the reality of that identity. The genuine knowledge of one’s identity saves one from such distortions. “As a Ghanaian scholar has put it people need ‘certainty of whom they are’ if they are to determine their collective aims and objectives’. (Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 8)

In human context, identity is considered at individual or group level. How the identity of Oromo, which is *Orommuma*[^1], Oromoness be defined? What are the traits that make them different from others? The answers require a complex thought process. In an attempt to know her/his identity an individual may raise questions. Who or what am I? What makes me different from others? Do the distinctive features I have make me better or less than the others? Do I have any trait that makes me superior or inferior to others? What are the best or the worst quality I do have? What are the contributions of these qualities in making who or what I am? What discrepancy does exist between the qualities I ideally ought to have and those I actually have in reality? These are the questions that one raise to her/himself in search of her/his real identity. An Oromo identifies herself/himself as an individual person. As such she/he has a name symbolizing her/his identity. To some extent this name symbolizes the unique physical features and characters of the Oromo person.

As a human being an individual comes from or belongs to this or that ethnic group, or from/to both. The Oromo as a group of people also raise questions in their attempt to find out their group [collective] identity. Who are we? Why do we say ‘we’? Where did we come from? Where are we now? Who or what made us to be what or who we actually are now? What are our unique attributes? Owing to these unique attributes what places or positions are owed to us? What is the value of being Oromo either individually or collectively – in different aspects of life and interactions? Are our features of identity developed or suppressed? Self knowledge develops through the attempt to find answers for such questions.

Those features that one ethnic group has and others do not have constitute the identity or the particularity of that group. Or the distinctive features that essentially make one different from others constitute its identity. With the same logic, the identity of the Oromo as an ethnic group is made up of unique attributes that the group possesses in

[^1]: *Orommuma*
relation to the other groups that do not have those attributes. The Oromo have distinctive features that constitute their identity, or the features that make them who or what they are. *Orommumma*, Oromoness is the concept that designates the essence of being Oromo. It is composed of all the particular features that make Oromo different from all other ethnic groups in the country. Thus *Orommumma* is the name that expresses the identity consciousness of Oromo – it is the expression of the awareness of one’s identity as Oromo.

A person who is born to an Oromo parent or who has taken an Oromo identity is ethnically an Oromo although there is a possibility of changing it. One Oromo individual is different from the other Oromo individual, because he/she has peculiarities that the other does not have. A group of individuals identifies itself as Oromo because all the individuals constituting the group have (share) all the distinctive features that define Oromo. In other words, all of them share the qualities of being Oromo. The individuals in the group do not only possess the unique features that all Oromo do have but also the features that non-Oromo groups do not have. Then what are the features that mark the Oromo identity as people?

The word “Oromo” is the proper name by which Oromo both individually and collectively identify themselves. Informants are divided into four groups in response to the question, how do we know whether someone is an Oromo or non-Oromo? Some said by birth, others asserted by language, the third group contended by claim, and the fourth held that practical activities are the incontestable criterion. The first group claims that language is the determining factor for figuring out the identity of individuals. Dorsis remarks, “We know our selves as Oromo because we use Afaan Oromo. A genuine Oromo uses his/her language, and this expresses his or her identity.” (Lekepmte: 2008) Indeed language could be one of the multitudes of features in determining the identity of people, but not the sole one. Basically language is acquired, not inborn.

I hear, speak and write English not because I am from English speaking parents but because I was able to learn it. The mere fact that one is proficient in Afaan Oromo alone is not enough for him/her to become an Oromo. Put differently, speaking Afaan Oromo does not necessarily make one an Oromo. On the other hand, a failure to speak Afaan Oromo does not prevent a person from being or becoming an Oromo. If the position of these informants is taken for granted then it is possible for somebody who is non-Oromo to be
an Oromo simply because he/she is fluent in Afaan Oromo. Another person who is either by birth or claim is an Oromo but does not even speak a word of Afaan Oromo could be identified as non-Oromo simply because he/she does not speak the language. Thus language can be one factor, but cannot be the solitary criterion in determining the identity of the ethnicity of an individual.

Another group contends that identity is taken right by birth. The majority of the informants fall into this group. According to their contention, if one is born from Oromo parents or at least from an Oromo father that person is certainly an Oromo. This goes in line with Gemetchu’s claim, “ethnicity and identity are given with birth.” (Baxter, eds. et. al, 1996: 94) In an attempt to further explain the identity of Oromo Gemetchu again says, “An Oromo is born with Oromumma. Thus, the simplest definition of an Oromo would be that he/she is born of an Oromo father.” (Ibid) If I am not mistaken Gemetchu seems to say that a biological fact alone makes one’s identity or ethnicity, just as the informants of this group argue.

It is difficult to accept that the biological root of a person is what matters most in determining his/her identity. How or as whom a person identifies himself/herself is also very important. It is possible for a person who is biologically born Oromo to claim non-Oromo identity. Indeed he/she is an Oromo in blood and flesh. But could he/she be an Oromo if he/she denies the identity of his/her birth. This is the tested fact in our history – recent experiences have shown us that there were Oromo sons and daughters who had denied their Oromumma. They took the identity of non-Oromo and claimed to be so. The cause of this wrong identification will be discussed in chapter five.

On the other hand there could be a person who is born non-Oromo claiming to be an Oromo. This issue is particularly important today when a lot of rumours run through the crowd that some persons of high profile (in politics) are alleged to claim that they are Oromo when by birth they are not - for the mere fact that they speak Afaan Oromo. We mentioned this in order to make clear that this is not only an issue of possibility but also a matter of reality. There is no special apparatus that tests the identity-blood of a person’s ethnicity. Thus considering birth alone as a decisive criterion for determining the identity of any one’s ethnicity does not seem to be a viable one.
There is a third group that considers claim to be the most important to determine the identity of one's ethnicity. In an attempt to answer the question, ‘who is an Oromo?’ one Borana informant, responded, “Anyone who believes that he/she is an Oromo is Oromo.” (Doyyo, Yaabbello: 2007) In view of this, what counts more with regard to the issue under review is not the blood or language but the identity-consciousness, or the claim of the person in question. But this assertion too has a problem. It is possible for any non-Oromo, as already pointed out, to falsely claim the identity of Oromo.

In the contention of the fourth group, if one is born Oromo and fails to claim the identity of his ethnicity he is not an Oromo. And a person who is not an Oromo in birth but claims to be an Oromo simply because he is proficient in Afaan Oromo is not an Oromo. Particularly Borbor from Borana and Jemal from Jimma are in favour of this contention. According to Borbor (Yaabbello: 2007), Orommumma, Oromoness is acquired by birth and claim. A person who is born Oromo is Oromo. A person who acts and behaves as Oromo and at the same time claims to be an Oromo is Oromo. Anyone who adopts the Oromo culture and respects it is an Oromo. These are, according to Borbor, some of the things that make one an Oromo. In fact this contention does not make clear whether any of the mentioned traits or their combination makes the identity of an Oromo. In any way it could be different from those of the above groups only if it is not expressed in terms of “either... or”.

It is possible to be an Oromo either in words or deeds, or both in words and deeds. The most important thing is whether the person who has acquired Oromo identity (either by birth, adoption, assimilation or claim) is deep down an Oromo in terms of both words and deeds. If his/her Orommumma manifests itself through varieties of expressions, behaviours and deeds then he/she is an Oromo. A genuine identity is marked when deeds are performed in accordance with one’s own identity claim. Not any one who is born of an Oromo father or mother or both, not anyone who is fluent in Oromo language, but one who sincerely believes that he/she is born of Oromo parent(s) and claims as such is an Oromo. A person is an Oromo if she/he identifies her/himself as Oromo daughter or son, or if he/she unflinchingly believes in her/his Orommumma.

But what are the basic features that make the Oromo identity as an ethnic group? Those features which are mentioned above for the individuals cannot be enough for determining the identity of the Oromo as a group. The statement from Herbert S. Lewis
may provide a clue as to what attributes constitute the identity of Oromo people. He writes, "... the difference between the Oromo and others was quite clearly marked: by language, community, religion, way of life, sense of common historical origins." (in Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 46) These are the core points that constitute the Oromo identity as a group. Mekuria Bulcha defines this in a more precise and specific words. He writes, "Oromo national identity was characterized by a collective name, a myth of common origin, a shared historical tradition, a shared system of cultural norms and values, a common language and an association with a specific territory." (Ibid: 55) These specific attributes of Oromo are expressed and reflected in the life and personality of all Oromo individuals. An individual Oromo shares all the distinctive features of Oromo as ethnic group in common with other Oromo individuals.

Thus meaningful life could be attained, and successful development could be achieved only if sound knowledge of identity is acquired. Identity can be used for good or bad ends. The way people treat one another either advances or hinders the progress of identity. History has recorded what brutalities were committed by humans against humans in the attempt to destroy the identities of others in order to build up that of one’s own. Oromo, in their history, experienced this in the relationships they had with non-Oromo communities. This is immoral, because it is the act that made the identity of certain people in a way these people did not want it to be.

The moral or immoral quality of Oromo identity is not only determined by the actions and interactions they had with others but also by the actions and behaviours of the Oromo individuals or groups. How Oromo individuals or groups use or treat their own Oromo identity itself entails moral value. The way they use it in the light of the cause of the Oromo people as a whole itself has meaningful role in either promoting or harming it. If a person with Oromo or non-Oromo identity intentionally (for personal advantage) spoils the identity or the cause of Oromo then his/her act is immoral.

2.6. Oromia - the Oromo Land

"The cradle land of Oromo is where they are now- East Africa. They are indigenous to this region of the world." (Abera) The current administrative structure of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia is comprised of nine regional states, of which one is Oromia, (or Oromiya in Afaan Oromo). Oromia is the Oromo territory, land or
country. It is located approximately between 3° 24' 20" N to 10° 23'26" N, and from 34° 7'37" E to 42° 58' 51" E (Oromiya’s Almanac, 2007: 4)

Map 1. Ethiopia, Regional States sharing boundary in common with Oromia

In the East and north-east Oromia is bounded by Ethiopian Somali and Afar Regional States respectively, in the South and south-west by the Republic of Kenya and the Regional State of the South Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia (SNNPE), in the South west and West by Gambella Regional State and the Republic of the Sudan, and in the Northwest by Beneshangul-Gumuz Regional State and in the North by the Amhara regional State. “The region occupies 34.3 percent of the country’s total area and is contiguous with all but one regional state – Tigray.” (Ibid) Besides its undivided territory extended from east to west, north to south; it also has one administrative zone called
In general Oromia has "a total border length of about 5,700 km, of which about 600 km is the international borderline that it shares with Kenya and the Sudan; and 5,100 km with national Regional States" (Ibid) of Ethiopia. Addis Ababa (Finfinne in Afaan Oromo) which is the capital of the nation is found in the central part of Oromia. Geographically Oromia lies at the heart of Ethiopia, running almost from the east to the west; it divides the country into the northern and southern parts. Being at the centre is located between the Regional States of Amhara in the north, Afar in the north east, Somali in the east and south east, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia in the south, Gambella in the south west and Benshangul-Gumuz in the north west. For an Oromo Oromia is one of the basic features of identity. It is the territory that all Oromo sons and daughters share, and all non-Oromo in principle do not share. Oromo has the legitimate right to claim rightful citizenship.
2.7. Physical Features and Resources

It is necessary to briefly look into some physical features and resources of the land where people inhabit, because it has relevance to the moral life and activities of people. Whether a certain people treat others or are treated by others either morally or not is greatly influenced by what is available or unavailable in the natural environment. This is what creates the necessity of looking, at least in brief, into the physical features and resources of Oromia.

Oromia is one of the regions of the country relatively endowed with rich biodiversity of natural environment such as land, wild life, water, soil, forest, mineral resources, adequate rainfall and favourable climatic conditions. On the basis of legendary accounts forty percent of the total area of the country was covered by forest, a little more than half of a century ago. But today studies show that it is less than 2.5 percent. Oromia takes the largest share of the country’s remaining meagre forest resource. 42 out of 53 Forest Priority Areas of the country is found in the Region. The land covered by forest in Oromiya is expected to be 3.1 million hectares.” (Ibid: 17) Oromia and the other neighbouring regions of the country are believed to be the sites where coffee plants first originated. Millions of Oromo farmers are engaged in coffee cultivation. Over the past several decades’ coffee had been the major export crop, and still remains being one of the chief export crops of the country.

The region is, relatively, rich in water resource. Many of the great transnational and national rivers of the country originate from this region. The eight river basins, with 68 major rivers and 688 tributaries, that drain the region, yield an estimated annual average total runoff of 58 billion cubic meters...The region also has 12 major lakes (covering an area of 3135 km²), of which some are currently used for small scale fish production. (Ibid: 15) “More than 97% of the current hydropower generation in the country is from Oromiya Regional State.” (Ibid: 19) But the available hydropower is by far little when it is compared to the need and the immense potential that the country has.

Although Oromia is richly endowed with varieties of mineral deposits most of them are untapped, except gold and tantalite which are the most important metallic minerals under exploitation. (Ibid: 18-19) One may understand from this that the mineral sector remains the most insignificant part of the economy of the region and contributes only about one percent of the regional gross domestic product. (Ibid: 19) Endowed with
favourable natural environment Oromia is suitable for agriculture. Its immense ecological diversity makes it suitable for the cultivation of different crops. Most of its soil has good agricultural potential. The climate is highly influenced by its relief features that have a tremendous role in making the region favourable for habituation and development. Owing to the existence of varied climatic conditions, vegetative system and water bodies there are different wild animals, birds and reptiles, some of which are endemic to the region as well as to the country.

Oromo are traditionally friendly to the natural environment. That is why some natural resources are relatively conserved and preserved more in Oromia than they are elsewhere in the country. Just as they were called by M. Antoine d’Abbadie as “African conservatives” for the stability of their government, Father Salviac writes (Ibid: 20), “They are that also from another point of view. Their land is the one from all of Ethiopia which best preserves the gracefulness of nature.” That means Oromo, when they were fully governed by Gada system, were known not only in keeping the stability of their government’s system but also in conserving and preserving all life system in nature. “The Oromo do not deforest, only if the land is destined for cultivation, the branches are sufficient for the structure of their dwellings; dead trunks, small branches collected crackle in the fire place.” (Ibid) Although today this culture of respecting nature and its system has vanished in the larger area of the Oromo land relatively it is still that where there is concern and care for its protection.

2.8. Linguistic Feature

Language or verbal communication is perhaps one of the most important features in making humans different from other animals. It is again one of the essential features in determining the identity of one human community different from that of the other. From this perspective language holds a central place in the affairs of man. Not only it is the vehicle through which human cultures are shared and transmitted, but also it is an essential attribute of identity. *Afaan Oromo*, the Oromo language which linguistically belongs to the Cushitic family is being spoken by the Oromo of Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia. Probably that is why Father Salviac (Ibid: 13) remarks, “The language of the Oromo, harmonious, flexible and having great plasticity, appears to be after Arabic, one upon which the greatest number of individuals rely in the ‘Dark Continent’.”

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Oromo love their language, and they have been exerting all possible efforts to develop it despite the different atrocities and challenges they confronted. History has recorded that even those of Oromo who were enslaved and exiled to many Arab countries and cities remained loyal to their language, i.e. Afaan Oromo. Witnessing this Father Salviac (Ibid: 29) again reports that wandering all over the beaches of the orient, the Oromo remain faithful to their language that charms the ear of their masters. They speak it in the Arabian coasts, in some quarters of Cairo, Alexandria, Constantinople and other Turkish towns, as well as on the islands of Seychelles – where one can find small colonies of Oromo.

The development of language is either encouraged or discouraged depending on how the speakers are treated by the system of the country, the life style of the speakers and also by the way the speakers handle it. It is encouraged when the ethnic group that speaks the language is fairly treated in the economic, political, cultural and social systems and life of the country. It is discouraged when the ethnic group is deprived of having important place and role in the system of the country or when they lack an encouraging social environment in which they can develop it. It is the moral right of individuals or groups to use and develop their own languages; and it is the moral duty of the others to respect this right.

In their history there was no time when the Oromo staged any sort of threat to the language of any ethnic group. Commenting on this Chaalaa remarked that Oromo respect the language, religion and cultures of others; because they believe that these are the distinctive features for the identity of those others. You can go to any part of Oromia and check that this is the truth. Indeed there are hundreds and thousands of non-Oromo people who have settled amongst Oromo. It is possible to witness that they have retained their language, culture, religion or in general their identity. Unless they themselves do it no Oromo community or institution forces them to change any aspect of this identity. Oromo commit themselves to respect all the distinctive qualities of the others, because they believe that others should also have the same regard for that of their own.

But the Oromo language was one of the languages that had been under a serious threat of being destroyed. Although it is the desirable choice of the Oromo that all the traits of their identity are respected by others, they were severely threatened by the brutal subjugation of the Abyssinian rulers over the last one century. The Abyssinian elites who
monopolized the successive regimes of the country prohibited Afaan Oromo from being used for teaching, preaching, writing and official communication. This issue will critically be reviewed in detail in chapter five.

2.8. Oromo Religion

Religion is said to be one of the basic attributes of the identity of a people. This section attempts to shed light on what the traditional religion of Oromo is, how this religion makes the distinctive feature of the Oromo people, and what background it provides for their traditional moral value. Morality has a key place in the mission of religions. Almost all religions teach that humans should always do right although what is believed to be right depends on the doctrine of each religion. It is difficult to think of any religion that teaches its believers to inflict harm on other human beings. But human history recorded that the most brutal and bloodiest wars were made under the pretext of religious causes. Despite their noble ideas it is possible for humans to do either right or wrong, good or bad in the names and for the sake of religions. It is not religion that extrinsically uses humans for its own cause, rather it is man who uses religion as his own tool for his earthly cause. This reality is reflected in the history of Oromo religion.

There are three main religions that Oromo communities pursue today—Waaqeffanna, Christianity and Islam.

Table 2. The distribution of Oromo people pursuing different religions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religions</th>
<th>Orthodox Christians</th>
<th>Protestant</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>Muslim</th>
<th>Waaqeffanna</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>6,330,237</td>
<td>1,489,910</td>
<td>85,682</td>
<td>8,264,028</td>
<td>744,229</td>
<td>156,458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The 1994 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia

Waaqeffanna is the indigenous Oromo religion. Mormor holds that Oromo had Waaqeffann'a as their own religion even long before the appearance of the Holly Books, Bible and Qur’an. The Oromo word for god is Waaqa. The term Waaqeffanna itself is derived from the word Waaqa. The other two religions, i.e., Christianity and Islam are...
exotic. Christianity was introduced to the Oromo society largely after the conquest of the Oromo land by the Abyssinian Emperors, whereas Islam started to take root in some Oromo communities even before the mentioned conquest, through trade. Before the fall of their land into the hands of the Abyssinian Emperors Oromo were known neither as Christians nor Muslims nor Pagans. They were rather Waaqeffatota, believers in Waaqa. Thus Waaqeffanna is the Oromo belief in one Waaqa (god).

Some believe that Waaqeffanna is monotheistic in one sense, and polytheistic in another sense. Monotheistic because it is the belief in the existence of one supreme Waaqa, god. Polytheistic because it believes that one God exists in many forms. Basically Waaqeffanna is monotheistic, since it believes that Waaqa, god is one and the same reality although appears in many forms. “Practising monotheism, the Oromo people, do not tolerate that one expresses the slight doubt regarding the orthodoxy of their faith in the unity of God. They very highly protest in such case that there is and there will always be but only one God; Waaqa tokotu.” (Salviac, 1901: 143) The Oromo believer of Waaqa is known as Waaqeffata [pl. Waaqeffatota]. According to the account of Dagaagaa the other Oromo term for Waaqa is Rabbi.

Lambert Bartels, a missionary-anthropologist who devotedly made intensive and extensive studies on the religion of Oromo observed in his book, Oromo Religion, the word “Waaqa” has double meaning. The first means sky, i.e., the vault of the sky as we see it. The second means approximates what is meant by the English word ‘God’. (1983: 89) But for Bartels the Oromo word ‘Waaqa’ means more than what the English word ‘God’ means. In the English translation the word God means, “the supreme being, creator and ruler of the universe (Ibid), whereas the Oromo word ‘Waaqa’ means one supernatural being with many manifestations. Thus, according to Bartels, the word God does not suffice to equivalently mean what the word ‘Waaqa’ for Oromo means. Consequently he suggests that the word ‘divinity’ could preferably be used to equivalently mean ‘Waaqa’. After such thorough examination Bartels had given up using the word God as a translation of the word ‘Waaqa’, and decided to use the word ‘Waaqa’ itself throughout his book and works.

Chaalaa maintains that Oromo people believe in the existence of only one Waaqa. Qaallu and Gada taught them that Waaqa is the supreme reality beyond whom there is no other greater reality. This is further explained by Dewo (Gindeberet, 2007), who held that
Waaqa for Oromo is the creator and mover of the world. Look at this world – it is sustained without poles or pillars, and stretched without pegs. The reality that has the power to do this is the only one Waaqa. Look, again, at everything, it moves – it comes into being and passes away. Who or what has the power to move all these except Waaqa? Thus, according to the account of this informant, Waaqa is the ultimate creator and mover of the world.

2.8.1. Basic Features of the Oromo Waaqa

How do Oromo characterize Waaqa or Waaqayoo? Just as God of Christianity, and Allah of Muslim the Oromo Waaqa is omnipotent, omniscient, all good and perfect. In an attempt to describe the major features of Waaqa Dagaagaa holds, “Waaqa maqaa kumaan, God of thousand names. All people call him in their languages. Although all call him in different names Waaqa is one and only one creator.” Not two or more, but only one. In support of this Mormor says, “The Oromo people used to believe the existence of only one supreme creator, i.e., Waaqa, very long before the introduction of Christianity and Islam. Waaqa has created the sky over our head and the earth under our feet, and humans in between.” In an attempt to further describe Waaqa Mormor continues to assert that Waaqa is not give birth to [He is uncreated] and he does not give birth to [He is not a creature like us]. He does not grow old and never dies; rather he gives life to others and takes their life when he wills. He never commits cuubuu, sin. Even when he kills he does it for good, the good that is mysterious to us, but not to him.

With the same vein Dagaagaa holds, “When we pray to Waaqa we say ‘Oh Waaqa, the Lord of the world, you are all pure and perfect. If you kill you do not pay compensation, or you cannot be blamed for it. If you heal you do not ask a pay for your service.’ This informant was confronted with the question, “It is beyond our power to make him pay compensation, but why can’t we blame him?” His prompt answer was, “We believe that he does all what he does for good. The whole world is in his hand and mind. Nothing is beyond and above his capacity. We ask him to give us his light so that we can lead our life the way he wants us to be.’

Although Oromo people basically believe that there is only one Waaqa, they also admit that he has the capacity of being many. It is the one reality that becomes many, and it is again the many that becomes one. Just as Brahman, in the philosophies of India, becomes many things due to maya, the Waaqa of Oromo can manifest itself in many
particular things [in its divine nature]. On the basis of his observation Bartels reports, “We can say that, to Oromo, the traditional divinity is both one and at the same time also many. The supreme being whom the Oromo call ‘Waaqa’ is the creator of all things and the source of all life.” (1983: 14) The many divinities that emanate from the one divinity are called, for the Oromo, Ayana.

Almost all the informants asserted that Oromo always say “Waaqa guraacha garaa garbaa, God is blue-black that is capable of embracing everything.” Very often they are heard saying ‘Waaqni guuraacha’, Waaqa [god] is black or dark. Quoting from one of his informants Bartels writes, “… God is black, guuracha…” (Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 169) Some other people prefer to use the word ‘dark’ to black. In contrast to Christianity and other religions that portray God as white in colour the Oromo believed and believe that their god is black or dark. That means in Oromo religion, “Black identity is considered as a symbol of holiness and divinity.” (Alemayehu, et al, 2004: 35)

The point, however, is what reason do Oromo have for considering Waaqa as dark or black? Borbor contends like this: God is dark. You know why? We believe that god exists, yet we cannot see him. Can you see anything in the dark? You cannot. This does not however mean that things do not exist. Although we cannot see things in the dark still we think of their existence. Similarly we cannot see god because of his darkness, yet we believe that he exists. Melise and Duura (Dubliq, 2007) add, in the day light we see as many things as possible, but in the darkness we see one and only one thing – that is the darkness itself. Naturally darkness is everywhere during night. It covers or clothes the whole world. This is the other reason why we identify Waaqa with darkness.

Oromo ascribe the highest value to ‘black’ colour. Although they consider that all other colours are as important as black is, they give priority to black because of their religious beliefs. (Alemayehu, et al. 2004: 35) Since they believe that god is black, “there is always a mention of the black in Oromo blessings and rituals. (Ibid) Oromo are proud of their dark skin. They do not feel bad for having dark skin; rather they feel happy for their darkness because, according to their belief, it is the black god who has created all creatures, colours, and structures of the universe. Waaqa for the Oromo is inaccessible to human ordinary perception. With regard to this Borbor says, “We cannot see him [god] just as we do objects which are out there. What are accessible to human ordinary perceptions are particular things such as stones, trees, cows, men, etc. Yet we
unswervingly believe that he is the one and only one creator of this world.” Although as a supreme being Waaqa is inaccessible to human naked eyes and hands, in the light of Borbor’s account we know him because we are created not without him. We human beings with our little capacity cannot perceive Waaqa, but believe that he exists.

Chaalaa has a different opinion. He argues saying that we cannot perceive him does not necessarily mean we never know him. We know and we do not know Waaqa. We know him from his effect. The whole world is his creation. We do not know him because he is imperceptible. Bartels writes that the Oromo informants say, “In night time Waaqa comes down nearer to us, in day time he retires from us.” (In Brokensha, ed. 1994: 6) Human beings cannot see him during the day light yet as Bartels again quotes one of his informants, “We see Waqa better in darkness than in light. During the night he shows us what he really is: a mystery.” (Ibid) In the view of these informants people know Waaqa not as a corporeal entity extending in space and existing in time but as a spiritual being, or as a mysterious entity that could be understood from his effect through logical abstraction.

Yet another informant contends about the possibility of knowing Waaqa. His argument goes like this: We do not totally deny the possibility of knowing Waaqa. I know him a little. But I do not know him as much as I know you. I do not also think that you know him as much as you know me. You know that we do not even have a profound knowledge of this physical world that can even be perceived through our naked eyes. The fact being this, how can we expect that people can perfectly know Waaqa who is by far greater than this natural world? (Duube) In other words, it is impossible to know Waaqa as being in himself. While commenting on this Bartels writes “If we were able to know him as he is in himself, we would be like him: we would not be human beings anymore…” (In Brokensha, ed. 1994: 6) In general for the above informants being limited in so many ways, what people perceive and know as humans is something that is spatially and sequentially limited, something like us – not anything more than this.

Still there is another informant (Jaatani) who argues that we know Waaqa because he is in all of us. We do not need to go elsewhere in order to know him. Rather we have to turn inward to find him inside ourselves. The argument of this informant is strikingly cosmological. He further says that we have not created ourselves. We are not uncreated beings. Thus it is Waaqa who created us. Waaqa as a creator has the capacity to exist within his creation. Dagaagaa on his part says, “When we say Waaqa is in the sky, it does
Oromo believe that Waaqa is everywhere, the source of all life, and daangaa hinqabu, has no boundary. Adding to this Malise says, “We believe that there is a particular space for Waaqa. This is wrong. He is everywhere at all times. That is why he is able to see and listen to anyone and everything. We all have Ayana in ourselves - that is Waaqa.”

From the above considerations we understand that for these informants Waaqa is a universal reality. If somebody believes that Waaqa is everywhere then he/she cannot say Waaqa is here, but not there; or he is there not here. If we think that a particular object is here then it cannot at the same time be there. Analogously, if one thinks of god as a particular entity, then if he is here, he cannot listen to those who are there; and if we think that he is there he cannot see or attend those who are here. But if we believe on the contrary that Waaqa is everywhere then he is here and at the same time there, he is in one and all. In that sense, there is nothing greater than Waaqa.

Traditionally, God is portrayed as a particular being. It is a common belief that God is conceived as having human features. If we think that God has human features philosophically we are excluding him from having features of other non-human things. This makes him a limited being that is governed by the law of time and space. If God is believed to be a being having such qualities of the natural world, then God is not eternal, omnipresent and omnipotent. Probably it is to avoid this challenge that Borbor (Ibid) characterizes Waaqa as follows: We cannot define Waaqa as short or tall, thin or fat, male or female because no one of us has seen him with naked eyes. It is difficult to attribute a particular feature to something that is inaccessible to vision. We call him with masculine gender not because we know him that he is with such a quality but simply because of traditions and assumptions.

A challenge could be encountered in connection to this. If we know nothing about the particularities of Waaqa, then what reason do we have to believe in his existence? The reaction of Borbor to this question again is interestingly philosophical. He contends, I do not think that we need to see everything that we believe to exist. I have already mentioned that Waaqa is dark. We know the presence of darkness when we fail to see anything in it. No one can see Waaqa because of his darkness. We should not forget that we still know
that darkness. Probably that darkness is Waaqa. And also, there was time when our forefathers believed that Waaqa is truth. No one knows the image of truth. It is impossible to describe its shape, size, and weight or in general its dimension. This truth, according to our ancestors was Waaqa. Even today we have no better knowledge of god than what our ancestors thought him to be.” One can observe certain inconsistency in the narratives that Borbor gives above. On one hand, he seems to say that god is devoid of particularities, and on the other he contends that god is black or dark. Saying that something is without particularities and asserting that same thing has certain colour is contradictory.

There is debate among people as to where God resides. For some people God resides in the sky, heaven and for some others he resides everywhere. What do Oromo think of this? According to Dagaagaa traditionally the Oromo people believe that the kingdom of Waaqa is over there in the blue sky. But practically they believe that he is everywhere, and even he could be here in and with us right now. Borbor gives a statement that consolidates this: “I do not think that there is any limitation in this world to the being that has created it. He can be everywhere.” In support of this Dorsis asserts that no one knows a particular area where Waaqa is. But this does not mean he is non-existent. We believe that there is Waaqa not because we perceive where and who he is but because we know that he can hear and attend our prayers. I believe that this is possible for him because he is everywhere. He is with and within me, with and within you, and with and within all of his creatures at all times.

Waaqa, for the Oromo, has the capacity to see and hear whatever we do and say, and even he knows what good or evil intention is there in our mind or heart. Anything that happens anywhere in the world is not beyond his knowledge. This is possible because he is always in and with us. Bartels again writes about the response he received from his Borana informant for the question, “Why do you always lift your hands while praying to Waaqa?” The answer of the informant was, “Because we imagine him to be above us, somewhere in the sky... To tell you the truth, we Borana think Waaqa is in us. ‘We say Waaqa nu d’ale’ [Waaqa gave birth to us]. Aren’t we also in our children?” (Brokensha, ed. 1994: 7) This is to mean, just as we are to our children Waaqa is to us and in us.

While attempting to figure out one more point that makes the Waaqeffanna of Oromo different from other religions Borbor narrates that the other dominant religions have written books. These books are believed to be the Scriptures. They are composed of
the statements of God, if I am not mistaken. We can say they are about how God revealed himself to people. But in Waaqeffanna there is no written scripture. But still we believe that we know him as he revealed himself to our seers or sages. We believe that Waaqa has infinite ways of revealing himself to his creatures. Those forefathers who first made laws and systems for Oromo people were inspired by the power of Waaqa.

2.8.2. Morality and Waaqa

Religions and morality are very much intimate. In some cases their activities overlap. Both have the concern of promoting righteousness or goodness as opposed to wickedness or badness. In the Oromo culture Waaqa is the fundamental source of safuu, morality. According to this culture there are things that Waaqa likes and does not like us to do. He likes us to do right and good, and he does not like us to do wrong and bad. That means there are many moral duties that Waaqa has commanded us to do, and forbidden us not to do. For example, telling the truth, keeping promise, being honest, kind, and generous; taking care of others, saving endangered life, helping elders and people in trouble, loving children and taking care of them are some of the right and good things to do.

Dagaagaa says contends that Waaqa wants us all to be as kind and friendly, generous and truthful, loving and caring to all other human beings as much as we are to our selves. For example as fathers or mothers we would like our children to be loving, caring, and friendly towards others. We believe that we all are the children of Waaqa, and hence he wants us all to be good towards one another just as we want our children to be towards each other. He wants us to be good towards him, all of his creatures and to comply with his laws. Thus we ought to be persons of these and other good qualities.

All other informants share the same idea with Dagaagaa. Waaqa does not like people to do wrong and bad, or he does not want them to be unkind, cruel, liar, thief and the like. Hence as Jemal (Jimma, 2008) comments, “We ought not to be persons of such behaviours.” Wrong and bad actions or behaviours are harmful or injurious to life. For example according to most Oromo informants, telling a lie, betraying one’s own parents, brothers and sisters, people and country, friends and comrades; stealing, breaking promise, hurling bad languages at persons, being jealous of others, uncaring and unfriendliness are all harmful to the recipients. People ought not to have these behaviours or ought not to do these acts. Doing and exhibiting such acts or behaviours, in view of Waaqeffanna, is
religiously committing *cuubbuu*, sin and morally evil. These, more or less, according to Oromo belief, are the commandments of Waaqa. It is the religious obligation of any Waaqeffata, believer in Waaqa to obey or observe these commandments. Drawn from these is *Safiisu*, which is composed of the moral rights and duties of humans.

But what is the ultimate end of following the commandments of Waaqa? Why does Waaqeffanna teach and preach that people should always do morally right things? Is it to get salvation, to serve the good purpose of humanity, to please Waaqa, to gain an earthly reward for oneself, obeying the commandment of Waaqa is an end, or simply because doing good is an end in itself? People of some other cultures believe that human soul is immortal. Christians, for example, maintain that human beings ought to do right in order to attain salvation. But the Waaqeffanna of Oromo is different on the issue of the life after death. Different informants viewed this issue in various ways. According to Borbor the Borana people do not believe in the existence of salvation, or in the eternity of the soul. Nothing bothers them about that. Rather they think of the existence of *eekera*, the spirit of a dead person imaginable in the form of a ghost. Some of people say ‘If we do anything wrong the spirit of the dead person can see or haunt us, but we do not have the capacity to see it.’ The Borana have the tradition of putting a bouquet on the graveyards of one’s dead relative. They also offer a sacrifice once in a year. They know only this, and they do not think about life after death.

Other informants argued that the Oromo who believe in Waaqa choose to do right because of two things – pleasing Waaqa and securing happiness for human life. Jaatani is one of them. His contention goes like this: Our religion is largely an earthly religion. It has no much concern about the world which is believed to be beyond. It does not teach much about the heavenly life, eternity of the soul, salvation and redemption, hell and paradise. It is rather deeply concerned with the earthly life of man. It teaches love and care for one another, peace and tranquillity among people; brotherhood, justice and respect between nations and human beings. In an attempt to explain the core purpose of Oromo indigenous religion Dagaagaa says that the Oromo religion does not promise any other world from beyond. It rather teaches us that the only world that Waaqa has created is the *ardii*, universe that we belong to. We believe that Waaqa himself does not exist elsewhere but here in us and with us in the same world. Waaqeffanna does not put humans (the creatures) and Waaqa (the creator) separately. Not elsewhere or afterwards that Waaqa
rewards us for all of our good deeds, and punishes us for all of our bad acts, but only here and now in this life. Thus for Oromo the most important thing is whether the life that we live here and now on earth is worth living or not. Or what matters is not whether the soul is dying or living after the death of a body but whether we do good or bad in this life.

A close observation of Oromo prayers and blessings reveals that no where they raise the issue of salvation of the soul, or the eternity of life. What they pray for is the success and happiness of the secular life. Also they praise Waaqa for his benevolence. “Basically Oromo request Waaqa,” according to Borbor, “three things - to save them and the world from any calamity, to make them live together in peace and harmony and to help them do right or good.” All of them are demanded for the good of human life lived here on earth. Everyone is ought to do right and behave well not for the sake of the life to be lived after death, but for this life itself.

The most important thing that Oromo always and everywhere pray for to Waaqa is Nagaa, peace. “In every moment of prayer (morning and evening) peace is asked for by the community, and that action of praying together is understood as a public statement of peace.” (Aguilar in Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 190) Not only human beings but also all creatures and the natural world need peace, according to Oromo. “We need peace here and now. We have peace means there is a condition for us that makes other good things possible. If no peace even the richest person on earth cannot secure good life” (Amsalu). In view of this everyone should do a morally right thing primarily for the life to be lived here on earth.

But the opinion of Dewo is slightly different from the accounts the above mentioned informants. He holds that it is true that Oromo do not have a serious concern for the life to be lived after death. But he says “I do not also think that they totally ignore it, because I observe that they always say ‘iddo-dhugaa’, the place of truth. Somebody who has died is said to have gone to ‘iddo-dhugaa’, the world of truth”. If the world to be lived in after death is the place of truth, then by implication it is the world that is better than this material world. In this sense there are some Oromo people who think about the life to be lived after death, although not many in number and not deep in emphasis.

The little attention that Waaqeffanna gives to the eternity of life, however, is metaphysically open to critical contention. Waaqeffanna has not proven the non-existence
of life after death, nor its existence. Thus it would not be recommendable to undermine its existence without proving its non-existence, and ignore its non-existence without demonstrating its existence. How do the Oromo believers of indigenous religion respond when such arguments are encountered?" The issue of proof," reports Chaaalaa "is the problem of all religions. It is common to all beliefs in the existence of soul after death. We cannot prove the non-existence of life after death; and no one has proven its existence too." But there is one important thing that Waaqeffanna shares in common with other religions – the necessity of doing good here on earth. In conclusion Chaaalaa states, "Thus I say, let us first do and be good at where we are now. If we are good here we will get that goodness also there – if such a reality exists. If we do wrong in the life that we live now, then there would be no word of worship that saves us from having that evil there too."

This contention seems to be logical. Many other religions teach that men ought to do right and good in their earthly life that is believed to be less real, temporary, full of flaw and imperfections; in order to win the life that is more real, eternal, flawless and perfect. Waaqeffanna also teaches that people should always do well in the present life although it does not promise them another perfect world beyond this world. Compare two individuals. One who has deep concern for the goodness of life here on this earth and less concern for the existence of such life after death, and the other who has less concern for the goodness of the life to be lived here and now on earth and deeper concern for such life to be acquired after death. Which of the two is more moral [righteous] than the other? Although different answers could be received depending on the value orientation and the religious commitment of the respondents, it seems that the one who devotes to the goodness of life here on earth is more moral than the one who gives less attention to it in favour of the life to be lived after this one. The kind of life to be lived there is determined by type of actions and behaviours that the moral agent respectively performs and exhibits in this earthly life.

Pleasing Waaqaa is one of the other major missions of Waaqeffanna. What does it mean? What should people do in order to please Waaqaa? Traditionally the Oromo believe that Waaqaa does not need anything from humans. He is the Supreme Being, with the capacity of doing and having everything. Although self-contained he is still he wants to be pleased at what his creatures do and how they behave. Particularly humans who are created with the capacity of knowing what pleases or displeases him ought to do whatever
pleases him. Tamiru Yadeta (Ambo, 2008), an informant from West Shawaa reports that Oromo believe that their actions and behaviours please him in two ways- affirmative and negative ways. When they do good Waaqa gets pleased; and when they voluntarily refrain themselves from committing evils he again gets pleasure. It is just similar to a father or mother taking pleasure in the good performance of his or her kid. Waaqa gets pleased with the good character and deeds of his children. It is the same action or behaviour that pleases Waaqa that makes also people happy.

Yet there is another group of informants that seem to be of the opinion that men ought to do morally and religiously right because doing right is an end in itself. Jaatani is one of these. He states his view: In Oromo traditional religion we know no hell or paradise, punishment or salvation. We must do right not because we know that there is paradise to win, or because we understand that there is hell to be dumped into, but because it is our duty to always do right. This is the safest way that may please all, and may displease none.

Some people believe that Waaqa has created men equally, and others are of the opinion that he has created them unequally. What could be the account of Waageffanna in this regard? Has Waaqa created men as superiors and inferiors? With the exception of Borbor, almost all the informants have the same positions on the assumption and belief that Waaqa has created all humans equal. But for Borbor this can be answered both affirmatively and negatively. He responds, “yes, he has created them equally, and at the same time ‘no, he has not created them equally.” In his attempt to clarify his position he further contends that in terms of essence, Waaqa has created men equally – all have the quality of being human, nammmumma. No one is more or less human - all are equally humans. But in terms of physical and mental performance he has created them unequally, because some are strong and others weak, some are clever and others are not. In terms of the moral order we are all the children of Waaqa, and hence are treated morally and equally regardless of our difference. But in reality we are different.

Borbor’s contention invites a debate. Are strength and weakness acquired traits or inborn? There are differences that people are born with. For example, the differences of gender and skin colour are innate. No value is attached to these differences by nature. It is man who makes one difference have more or less value than the others. In the Oromo tradition it is believed that women are born less strong than men. In reality physical or
mental strength or weakness is not inherent to the nature of sexuality. Women are not born weak both physically and mentally. The weakness of women or the strength of men largely depend on their social environment. The value system of the society to which they are born and in which brought up makes their biological (natural) differences appear to be differences of value – by making one superior (stronger) and the other inferior (weaker).

A question was put to one Borana informant: “In Oromo religion there is no such a thing as Devil or Satan. But both Christianity and Islam sometimes accuse of Waaqeffanna as devilish. What is your account of this allegation?” In his attempt to answer this question Jaatani contends, we know that this is in fact the case. But there is nothing that makes our religion devilish. A religion is said to be devilish when it is against the law of the reality to be worshipped and against the good of mankind. We believe that our religion is the most blessed and peaceful one. In no way it makes us inflict harm or pain; rather it exhorts us to love, respect and take care of everything. It is absolutely free from unwelcome interest and bias. Those who hate our religion, do it out of sheer bias and prejudice. Sadly they hate what they ought to respect or love. Waaqeffanna does not even recognize the existence of devils or any evil spirit.

In view of the accounts of some other religions it is the devils that make people do evil things. But if Waaqeffanna denies the existence of devils, then in view of this religion, what is that which instigates man to commit wrongdoings? Almost all the informants who responded to this have the same answer to this question. They contended that men are fully responsible for their actions and behaviours. There is no invisible force that mysteriously makes people act or behave either this or that way. It is their interest that motivates people to do this or that. The merit and demerit of their acts or behaviours is judged by their inherent Ayana, the spiritual, creative force and particularized form of Waaqa. This Ayana pleases a person for whatever right or good he does, and makes his/her life unpleasant for whatever wrong or bad he/she does. In reality there is no such a thing as devil in the world that Waaqa has created. Particularly Jaatani says, “A devil or anything of that sort is the creation of human imagination, not of Waaqa.”

The assertion of this informant seems to be valid. Waaqa as all good being does not create Devil to which evil is attributed. In this sense Devil does not exist. If people insist that it exists then it must be a self-sustaining being. If this is the case then devil is independent of Waaqa. This contradicts the all powerfulness of Waaqa. To say it
alternatively, in that case, Waaqa is not omnipotent. Certainly all the informants, however, believe that Waaqa is omnipotent. From this it follows that devil does not in reality exist. But people still assume its existence because of their imagination. There are many imaginary things that exist in human mind. Devil is one of those things. It is the imaginary creation of feeble or evil mind that uses this imaginary being as a scapegoat for the failures, sins and crimes committed by humans.

According to the contention of these informants people who consider Waaqeffanna ‘devilish’ are wrong. One of them argues that one thing that makes our religion different is its pursuit of peace and tolerance. It does not spur us to physically or verbally attack the religions of others. We do not say to Christian or Muslim brothers and sisters ‘your religions are devilish and ours is divine.’ We do not also think that Christianity and Islam permit their followers to do anything wrong against other religions. It is only persons who do this out of their sheer interest and bias. The Oromo do not say “Stop practicing your religion and adopt our religion, Waaqeffanna,” because we do not think that our religion is superior to that of others, and also we do not believe that the religions of others are superior to that of ours. Regrettably we do not really know why the followers of other religions exhort and even threaten us to adopt theirs by abandoning ours. (Dagaagaa)

Indeed no one can reasonably say that my knowledge of God is more profound and rational than that of yours. Since people believe that God is omnipresent and omnipotent there could be infinite ways of communicating with him. Dorsis, a strong Waaqeffata [believer of Waaqa] states, “We believe and worship in Waaqa not the way we are pleased but the way he is revealed to us. We think that he might have revealed to us in different ways, and because of this humanity has different forms of religion.” This means in essence religions are the same, they differ only in forms. Dorsis continues, “I must confess that I have no good knowledge of other religions. But I think that there is no religion which is more peaceful, tolerant, and friendly than Waaqeffanna. Waaqeffanna, for me, is peace, harmony and grace.”

According to the observation of Chaalaa people do not have good reason in fighting with each other over the issue of religious diversity. He contends, “I do not think that we have different creators. We believe that there is only one creator for all of us and for the entire world as well. But we have different names for and diverse methods of
worshipping him.” Surprisingly people had made and are still making devastating wars on the diversity and issue of religions, although God, by definition never wills humanity to live in perpetual wars. “As far as I understand all the wars fought in the name of religions are” remarks Tamiru, “the outcome of human evil intention, not the result of God’s will. The attempt of reducing religions to one way of believing in one God has never succeeded for there could be infinite ways of believing in him. This is the conviction of a Waaqeffiata as a believer in Waaqa and Waaqeffanna as a belief in Waaqa.”

May be this is the belief that has made Oromo to be tolerant in adopting a new religion while keeping the traditional one intact. The argument of another informant goes like this: Religion is a matter of belief. There is no means to prove that one kind of belief in God is better than and superior to that of the other. If one kind of religion is true to its adherents there is no reason why the other could be false in its own domain. Duube comments, “We should appreciate religion that promotes life rather than one that thwarts it. We should respect religion that harmonizes diversity rather than one that attempts to reduce it to singularity.” Thus, for the Oromo, it is much more meaningful if humanity tolerates the diversity of religions rather than fighting over it. Any violence does not please Waaqa, because it is what is forbidden by him.

2.8.3. Qaallu and Ayyana

Religions of other cultures have places and institutions such as churches, mosques, temples and others. These are where religious worships and ritual rites and ceremonies are practiced. In view of this, what are the places and institutions of Waaqeffanna, where believers practice their religious belief and discharge spiritual obligations? Oromo very often make social gathering and religious practices in open air in the shade of big trees or forests, on the mountains or hillsides, on the banks of rivers or lakes and shrines. There are fixed days and places for the procession of any particular religious ceremony in a year. On those days believers go to these different places to say their prayers, to give thanks to their Waaqa and to receive blessings.

Apparently, today Oromo do not have religious experts or people with special training, concern and role for the application of the religious norms and principles everywhere and at all times. It is the personal experience and knowledge of the senior or elder believers that could be used as guidelines. Originally, however, there was a religious institution called Qaallu which was in charge of heading all religious practices. As
observed by Legesse, *Qaallus* are “men with the highest ritual authority, the men of 
blessings and men of peace par excellence. They are prohibited from bearing arms, 
shedding blood and making laws.” (2000: 121) These are purely men of peace and 
blessings. They are never and ever expected to get involved in any evil or vicious act.

The power or authority of *Qaallu* is hereditary – it unceasingly goes from father to 
son and from this son to grandson. That means *Qaallus* are given a life time authority. 
While the ruling officials of Gada councils change every eight years the *Qaallus* stay in 
office up until the end of their life. Oromo people pay pilgrimage to the *Qaallus*. The 
following statements of Bartels may explain the essence of this pilgrimage to the Qaallu. 

“Until the last decades of the nineteenth century, Matcha Oromo of the extreme West went 
on pilgrimage to the *Abba-Muda*, father or dispenser of anointment.” (Bartels, 1983: 64) 

Going to pilgrimage, according to the belief of Oromo, is one of the sacred tasks of the 
Waaqeffata, the believer of Waaqa. Since Qaallu was believed to be one of the hereditary 
high priests of the Borana Oromo pilgrims from the different parts of Oromo land would 
like to go there.

The original mission of Qaallu was meddled after Christianity and Islam were 
introduced to the Oromo traditional culture. Mixing it up with certain elements of 
Christianity special institution that claims the power of divinity and the capacity of 
communicating people with Waqqa was created. This is known as ‘qaaliti’, ‘qaalichaa’ or 
‘qaallu’, as reported by Dagaagaa. Indeed these are also persons – persons who claim that 
there are different spiritual powers that possess them in order to communicate with 
believers or followers. In witness to this Bartels writes, “To enforce their position” the 
qaallus “adopted certain Christian elements into their cult.” (1983: 123) He further 
explains, “Each *qallu* has several ayyana who possesses him at regular times and who, 
through the mouth of the qallu inform the people about the causes of their misfortunes. 
(Ibid)

Dagaagaa distinguishes Qaallu from *qaaliti* or *qaalichaa*. *Qaallu*, according to his 
observation, is a highly respected and revered Oromo man who acquired this sacred 
authority not through election or selection, but through heredity. But *qaaliti* or *qaalichaa* 
are persons who falsely claim that they have spiritual force. This is an institution of 
deception and exploitation. He argues that evils infested the Oromo people and their land 
after the spread of these *qaalichaa* amidst them. By disseminating wrong information
among the crowd and by telling false diagnosis for the different misfortunes of people they create suspicion or mistrust, hatred or hostility in people. The motives behind these vicious deeds are two. One is amassing a large amount of wealth for themselves at no cost. The other is putting people in perpetual fear and tension so that they remain loyal to the will of this qaaliti in seeking protection. The Qaallu does right and moral whereas the qaaliti does the opposite, i.e., wrong and immoral.

In the Oromo tradition Ayana is another important religious concept worth discussing. It is understood in two ways. The first one is i.e., Ayana the creative power and particular manifestation of Waaqa as understood in the context of Oromo indigenous religion and the second one, i.e., ayana is a man-made one. For the Oromo Ayana [spirit] is Waaqa embodying different things in particular form. It is not a creature, nor distinct entity rather it is how Waaqa manifests itself in the specific characteristics of man in general, and of every species of plants and every species of animals (Bartels, 1983: 14) in particular. According to the observation of Bartels Ayana is the particularized form Waaqa's creative activity. (Ibid) Or it is the way Waaqa manifests itself in particularized form. It is the one that becomes many in appearance, and it is the many that is substantially one. As stated in the book entitled, *History of the Oromo to the Sixteenth Century*, Ayana is a phenomenon of great importance in Oromo religion. It is believed that God created different creatures by different Ayyana (Spirit) (Alemayehu, et al., 2004: 36). It is the Ayana that determines the fortune and misfortune of a certain creature.

Indeed, there are two interpretations of Ayana. Some consider that they are believed to be different messengers of Waaqa, created by Waaqa to serve the good purpose between him and his creatures. As such they have power entrusted to them by Waaqa- the power to answer the questions and solve the problems of his creatures including human beings. Others consider that Ayana is the part and parcel of Waaqa. It is the undivided spiritual being that embodies everything. Every creature, no matter whether human or non-human, has its own Ayyana that emanates from Waaqa. Bartels writes while attempting to characterize it, “... Ayanas may be personalized, feared and, at times, invoked, but, in spite of this appearance of multiplicity, each one is also seen ultimately as a manifestation of the one divinity.” (Ibid: 14)

Oromo believe that all the days in a month, according to their ancient astronomical studies are the days on which Waaqa created all of his creatures. Each of the days of the
month, therefore, has specific name corresponding to a certain Ayana. Every creature comes into existence with the Ayana (Spirit) of its own, that stays with this creature throughout its life time. A person who is born on the first day of a month has a different Ayana from a person who is born on the second day of that month. “Every man has an Ayana who guides and guards him. If you kill a man you must make peace with his Ayana.” (Bartels, 1983: 120) Ayana has no beginning and an end. When the creature dies its Ayana remains undying, very similar to the soul that is believed to leave the dead body and continues to exist from eternity in the western culture. It exists before and after the creature for which it is the Ayana; or it exists from eternity.

The word ‘ayana’ is also used in a different sense and context. Some people claim that they have ayanas (spirits) that sometimes possess them, and are believed to have a divine power of saving and punishing people, depending on their loyalty. In this context the concept of ‘Ayana’ is abused just as that of ‘Qaallu’.

2. 9. Gada – the Comprehensive System

Oromo are rich in cultural varieties of which Gada is one among them. Dagaagaa asserts that Gada is the symbol of Oromo identity. According to Marco Bassi, “Gada is a generation-set system typical of the Oromo people in Ethiopia and neighbouring countries.” (in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 15) In precise words he remarks, “Gada is certainly a very strong symbol of Oromo identity.” (in Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 150) In deed the core of the Oromo culture is Sirna Gada, Gada System. It is believed to be the basic sociocultural institution that symbolizes the Oromo identity. But what does Gada System exactly mean? Is it a religious belief, political system, or knowledge? Scholars of different disciplines attempted to define Gada System in various ways. For some Gada is some sort of a ritual practice, for others it is more of a religious thought. Still there are others who consider it as an Oromo calendar. Again there are people who think of it as a political institution. It is implausible to explain Gada as either ‘this’ or ‘that’, since it accommodates all the mentioned. For convenience we can classify it into two - as a concept that refers to the scheduled period of time [Oromo calendar] and as which comprehensively denotes philosophic, political, social and moral views of the Oromo people.

Oromo have a sophisticated calendar of their own. When Gada is used as a concept of time it refers to an eight-year period in which one legitimate Gada class rules over a
society. In Borana Gada is still used as a calendar with reference to which the time when an event took place can be recollected. Thus time is one of the important concepts in the Gada system, and the System itself is explainable in terms of the method Oromo use to keep time. For that matter, for the Oromo, Gada literally means time in one sense. Individuals either separately or collectively are expected to perform specific duties and responsibilities according to a given set of time. Different kinds of ritual ceremonies, social arrangements, political and economic activities are all scheduled. All are sequentially arranged in terms of the Gada period.

Many researchers and writers appreciate Oromo calendar as unique. Legesse says, “The Oromo calendar is a great and unique invention and has been recorded only in a very few cultures in history of mankind.” (1973: 279) He further explains that the only other known cultures with this type of time-keeping are the Chinese, Mayans and Hindus. (Ibid) One gada period consists of eight years. When the term of office of one gada system is over then the next gada class comes to this office. Traditionally the Oromo have been using gada period to count years. If for example, a Borana is asked what his/her age is, then he/she answers by saying three gada which means 24 (3x8) years.

Gada is not only the great and unique invention of Oromo as a calendar but also a social, moral and political system based on democratic values. Bulcha writes, “For centuries, the democratic and egalitarian ethos of the gada system, the complexity of its structure and the extent to which it is embedded in the social, religious, political and military life of the Oromo people have fascinated a wide range of observers and scholars.” (2002: 12) The detailed account of the Gada System is beyond the scope of this section. The moral value of the Oromo society cannot, however, be understood without some reflections on this system. It is the bedrock of their moral life. More over for the Oromo gada is one of the most important symbols of their identity.

According to Jaatani, it is the highest social and value system that has made the Oromo identity. He reports that Borana people have a proverb to explain the scope of Gada: “Gaddabbii muumme lafaa, Gada muumme nama, just as Gaddabbii is the limit to the land, gada is the bound of humans [i.e., Oromo]. Gaddabbii is the boundary of the Borana land on the eastern part, beyond which they do not make a territorial claim. They have no legitimate right to claim the land which is beyond this limit. Similarly Gada is the supreme social and value system beyond which there is no other superior system. Jaatani
adds, “Gada is an integral system that accommodates the core aspects of human life and relationships. It is a social, political, moral and religious institution that defines how people should live together.”

Some people think that Gada is a religious belief and practice. This is true to some extent. Today people do not have valid knowledge of it. After the essential qualities that made it what it was were emasculated, Gada is left only with some ritual features—only in some areas. So it cannot be a surprise if people think of Gada as a religion. When it is considered in its original context, however, Gada is a comprehensive system that accommodates the values of all aspects of life and relationships. This was demonstrated historically by the place it had and the role it played in the cultural, moral, religious and social life of the Oromo society. Essentially, Gada is a philosophy. But one may ask what philosophy is it meant to be?

Legesse writes, “The Gada system is a system of classes (luba) that succeed each other every eight years in assuming military, economic, political and ritual responsibilities.” (1973: 8) According to this definition Gada is predominantly a social and political philosophy. This alone, however, may not define the Gada system. As observed by Bartels, “... the Gada system was more than a merely socio-political system. It was also a shrine for the Matcha’s traditional view of the world and their moral values.” (1983: 20) In view of this characterization Gada is not only socio-political philosophy but also philosophy of religion and morality. Baxter states, Gada is a cognitive system that “epitomizes what social relationships should be, not what they are. In view of this, Gada is a political philosophy and a theology.” (Bartels in Brokensha, ed. 1994: 2) Gada nearly accommodates almost all the basic branches of philosophy. To a greater extent it is a political philosophy, ethics (moral philosophy) and theology (philosophy of religion), and to a lesser extent it is metaphysics and epistemology.

Chaalaa maintains that Gada, for Oromo is the symbol of Oromumma, their identity. As the system of value that the Oromo cherish most, it is in the blood cell of every Oromo individual. For Oromo it is a source of pride. Definitely Oromo created gada, and gada in its turn had been making Oromo. It was created as a means for the establishment of the best way of life, and it made the Oromo a humble society with egalitarian and humane values. Commenting on this Borbor says, “Waaqa has created
man, the world and the truth. Man has created culture to abide by the law of the truth, i.e., Gada. Gada is the major component of Oromo culture.”

In an attempt to explain what Gada is, Farther Salviac (1901: 222) writes, “There it is a well complicated organization, it seems, but in itself very simple, and which reveals, in those who decree it, the wisdom and the foresight of a high civilization and a social philosophy not less admirable.” Gada System is a complex and practical system in which various political, social, philosophical, religious and aesthetic notions of the Oromo people are housed. Levine writes, “Indeed, the Gada system represents one of the most complex systems of social organization ever devised by the human imagination.” (1974: 131-132) As a system of thought Gada attempts to examine, explain, analyze, organize and establish a norm or value for the purpose of governing and harmonizing the relations of humans to one another, to nature and to Waaqa, god. Its purpose is not mainly to understand how, when, what and why these relations are there, but how or what these relations ought to be. Thus morality is the heart of Gada system.

Being a system, Gada is composed of various components. The whole components are based on the notion of what is right or wrong, good or bad for man to do or to be. The other components cannot exist in their own right unless they are based on the values of human actions or behaviours that can morally be judged. Gada decides, teaches and prescribes what is morally desirable (right or good to do or to be). It teaches that people ought to do right and avoid doing wrong, and to be good in character, and refrain themselves from being bad. This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

2.10. Brief History of the Oromo People

Oromo have their own history. It is full of actions, reactions and interactions. It can be said that wars [conquests] and resistances, expansion and contraction, migrations and assimilations, exploitations and dominations are the major contents of their history. At the bottom of these historical events there are morality and immorality, because the actions, reactions and interactions were made either in just or unjust motives, with right or wrong means. This section is concerned not with the detailed rather with the brief history of Oromo that is relevant to their identity and morality. Where did Oromo come from? Were they indigenous or strangers to the region where they are now? Controversial issues have been swaying among writers and scholars about whether the Oromo were indigenous or have come from somewhere.
Many of the Abyssinian historians wrote that the Oromo migrated from Asia and Madagascar to Africa through Mombasa (One of the Kenyan Ports), and spread north, west and east wards from 14th through 16th centuries. Other Ethiopian writers contend that Oromo came to Africa through Bab-el Mandab probably from Arabia and spread west, north and south wards. Yet there is the third version - it is that of the Ethiopian clergies, those who maintain that Oromo emerged out of Indian Ocean. The point is, whether these different assertions are established on the verifiable ground. These historians, writers and clergies did not have evidence or reference for the assertions that Oromo have come to Africa from Asia, Madagascar, or Indian Ocean. A statement about the origin of people without referring to any historical fact is no more than a fictitious assertion. These assertions, therefore, are epistemologically unscientific, logically unfounded and morally irresponsible.

On the other hand there is an anti-thesis of these assertions. On the basis of the evidence they were able to obtain from archaeological, anthropological, linguistic and historical sources many Oromo and expatriate scholars and other Ethiopians have proved that Oromo are the indigenous people to the place where they are now living. Bates contends that the Galla [Oromo] were a very ancient race, the stock, perhaps on which most other peoples in this part of Eastern Africa have been grafted. Oromo are one of the Cushitic speaking groups of people. Starting from time immemorial the Cushitic speakers had inhabited the North-Eastern part of Africa. Being one of these people Oromo have not come from elsewhere rather they are indigenous to where they are now - East Africa. It was from this region of the continent that they spread south, north and westwards. The summary of Donald Levine (1974: 78) witnesses this: “Although earlier scholars believed that the Galla [Oromo] migrated from Arabia by way of the Horn of Africa, a preponderance of evidence now supports the argument that the Oromo homeland was in southern Ethiopia...”

Bates writes that the Oromo are the largest of the eastern Cushitic-speaking group of peoples who are known to have lived in the Ethiopian region for thousands of years. They are also one of the major African peoples. (Hassen in Brokensha, ed, 1994: 44) For further elaboration he again states “We do not know when the Oromo evolved their separate national identity and language, but we do know that they are one of the indigenous peoples of southern Ethiopia.” (Ibid) Before they were incorporated to the Abyssinia Empire at the end of the
nineteenth century they were governed by their own Gada System. In all of its aspects Gada is concerned with the internal cohesion of the Oromo people and with peaceful coexistence with others. Quoted by Bulcha Baxter writes, “The principal purpose of gada was, and is, to maintain a united strength against outsiders and peaceful consensus, nagaa [peace] within.” (Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 51)

Expansion is one of the great historical events in the history of Oromo. Levine again writes, the Oromo “rapid spread over the area of present day Ethiopia and Kenya during the 16th century constitutes one of the great expansion in history; …” (1974: 78) In support of this Legesse (2000: 60) also writes, “…the expansion of the Oromo nation was one of the great events in the annals of African history…” The crucial point lies in knowing what

the motive of the Oromo expansion was. Levine (1974: 79) states, “In contrast to the Amhara expansion, the timing and the style of Oromo expansion were not calculated to extend political dominion. The Galla [Oromo] did not seek to gain recognition for a central authority, to collect tribute, or to impose a national religious culture.” One may ask then what were they after? Levine (1974: 79-80) answers, “Their expansion was triggered by two motives: a need to carry out ritually prescribed military expeditions against enemies and a search for new land to accommodate a rapidly growing population.”

The Oromo movement for which there are written documents occurred in the 1520s when they invaded Bale, penetrated northward to invade Fatigar and Shoa in the 1540s and 1550s. They branched out eastward and made a devastating raid in Harar in 1567. (Levine, 1974: 78) Another pushed farther to the north in order to invade the Amhara region and in the last decades of the century they went into Begemdir, Dembiya and Gojjam. (Ibid) Still another group or tribe of Orómo headed westward and invaded the Great Rift Valley, the Gibe River region, Damot and from there into Gojjam. (Ibid: 78-79) “In most of the territories penetrated during the sixteenth century, the Galla [Oromo] still remain” (Ibid, 79) either by retaining or abandoning their identity.

During their invasions the Oromo experienced differentiation. They were divided into numerous tribes. Some of them become Christians and adopted radically different culture (Ibid: 84), even abandoned their language; others became Muslims or remained with their indigenous belief. As Levine reports, some of the doubtless Oromo who remained to settle in Gojjam “were largely absorbed by the host people and are remembered today in Gojjam mainly through
records of Galla [Oromo] names in some parish genealogies.” (Ibid: 82) The Abyssinian writers and historians described the Oromo conquest and expansions as devastating phenomena. For instance Aleqa Atsme did not consider that the Oromo migration was a social and human phenomenon. Borrowing the idea of Aleqa Atsme an expatriate scholar Edward Ullendorf [a leading British linguist and Ethiopianist] and Prof. Mesfin W/Mariam [an Ethiopian geographer] echoed it in the same way (Legesse, 2000: 4 & 5 respectively). They called it a flooding river. But no statement in the works of other scholars that reported the negative effect of the Oromo conquest and expansion was observed.

Probably the Oromo expansion was the immense input for the creation of the Ethiopian empire. Levine observes“..., the expansion of the Oromo represents a novel element in the politics of the empire..., purely African force. And a remarkable force it was.” (Ibid: 78) The Oromo great expansion together with their good moral perception might have quickened effectively the building of the Ethiopia Empire. In immensely assimilating peoples of different ethnic backgrounds the expansion had played a great role for the creation of a nation-state. Particularly the peaceful, equitable and tolerant approach of the Oromo people might have paved a smooth way for the interpenetration of people. Even in wars Oromo never enslaved or subjugated those people whom they captured as their captives. Legesse (Bulcha in Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 54) wrote: Conquest, in the history of the Oromo has never given rise to sharp stratification between the conquerors and the conquered. The latter were given all the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. It violates Borana egalitarian ethic to describe the two halves as conquerors and conquered.

In fact wherever there is war some destruction is inevitable. But in Oromo context if such destruction occurs in wars it is because of its unavoidable nature, not because of the intention of the agents. The following passage from Mekuria Bulcha (in Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 54) summarizes how Oromo behaved towards people who confronted them in wars.

The overall process of assimilation and Oromization of non-Oromo seems to have been smooth and rapid, and the adoption of Oromo identity by new comers proved to be total. Thus, today it is impossible to differentiate between descendents of the once “proper” and assimilated Oromo groups.

The Oromo of Gada had military force that was very strong in terms of structure and
organization, but different from the sanding army of the present day. It was headed by a gada official known as Abba Dula, who was the elected official and commander in chief of the Oromo military organization. The duty of Abba Dula and the military organization was to defend the Oromo people and their land from external aggression. Particularly cavalry had very special role in the military system of the Oromo of Gada. Legesse (2000: 61) writes, “... Oromo had a very powerful cavalry that stood at the head of their military campaigns and had a devastating impact on their unmounted adversaries, as happened in Northern Kenya and throughout much of Ethiopia.” Since their horsemanship was “a highly developed and prized aspect of their culture” Oromo “had a great deal to do with their military successes over the centuries.” (Legesse, 2000: 61)

But eventually the strength of the Oromo military organization changed because of the internal and external factors. In explaining the external factor Legesse (Ibid: 64) writes, “The situation of Oromo warfare was fundamentally altered during the scramble for Africa when their adversaries acquired vast number of firearms”. For more than four centuries Oromo and Amhara were at wars. But owning to their geographical location, psychological make-up and the European scramble for Africa the Amhara ruling clique was able to manipulate the historical situations and finally subjugated the Oromo people towards the end of the 19th century.

Citing the works of Holcomb and Ibsa Bulcha writes, “The conquest of Oromo land by the Abyssinians, which started in the 1860s, and was accentuated as a by-product of the European scramble for Africa in the early 1880s, was completed in 1990.” (In Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 48) The Oromo nation and land that had ever been self-contained and independent before this event fell into the hands of brutal oppressors. In his attempt to describe what happened to Oromo after the conquest Bulcha gives us the following testimony: Menelik’s incorporation of Oromo land into the Abyssinian (Ethiopia later on) undermined the Oromo identity by attacking its institutions and symbols. Oromo political and religious institutions were suppressed and their offices ceased to exist. The leaders who survived the conquest were deprived of power and status ... as their office were abolished and replaced by a colonial administration and law.” (Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 55)

After the conquest of the Oromo land and its people, the Amhara rulers made the destruction of Oromo identity their own first historic mission. They did not want the Oromo to remain in themselves; consequently they launched an all-out attack in order to make Oromo their own making. According to the observation of Legesse (2000: 18), the “Abyssinian colonialists
despised the culture of the peoples they governed and they were more contemptuous of the
democracies than they were of the kingdoms and chiefdoms.” They used all political means,
economic resources, language, religion, education and military forces to de-Oromize Oromo.
That means they were not only contemptuous of but also destroyers of the cultures and values of
people historically subjugated to their rule.

Over the last one century Oromo have been waging struggle against the different regimes
of the Abyssinian rulers. Since 1900, “the Oromo have waged continuous struggle against the
Ethiopian state. However, for decades, the struggle was only sporadic and localized led by
traditional elites who lacked an overall perspective of the Oromo nation and were unable to
articulate its aspirations.” (Bulcha in Baxter, eds. et al. 1996: 48- 49) It does not seem that the
Oromo are comfortable even with the present ruling regime and party. As a result there are still
Oromo forces that wage struggle against the current Ethiopian state through both peaceful and
non-peaceful means.

Conclusion

In this chapter we attempted to sort out the major features that have significant roles in
constituting the identity of Oromo as an individual and people. The Oromo as an individual
person or as a group identify themselves as Oromo by their birth, language, claim, territory,
religion and history. Their identity is made through these features, and through this identity
these features are retained and developed. If somebody is said to be an Oromo, then he/she has a
legitimate right to share and claim these features and at the same time a moral responsibility to
keep and develop them.

Orommumma is not a mere symbol; it is rather an identity full of life to develop and to be
developed. There is good reason for exploring these features. Inherent to these features are
moral values as a guiding principle, or directive code. What Oromo did to develop these features
and what challenges they encountered in the process are the battlefields where morality and
immorality had made severe wars. The comprehensive system through which Oromo attempted
to develop these features and thereby their identity is known as Gada. This is the subject of the
next chapter.

References

Aguilar, Mario I. 1996. “Keeping the ‘Peace of the Waso Boorana’ Becoming Oromo


Asmara: The Red Sea.

Notes

1. To determine the identity of a nation, nationality or ethnic group scholars, researchers and writers use these features as parameters.
2. This is a booklet published by the Press, Ethiopian Ministry of Information (Addis Ababa, 2007) in connection to the Ethiopian Unique Millennium that was celebrated from May 2007 – September 2008.
3. Out of a large number of animal species 31 mammals, 16 birds, 10 reptiles, 30 Amphibians and four fish have been found nowhere except in Ethiopia.
4. The most famous pale anthropological sites found in Hadar (Afar) suggest that Ethiopia is most likely the cradle of humankind. This pale anthropological site, the remarkable monolithic stone obelisks in Axum (Tigray), the rock-hewn churches in Lalibela (Amhara), the Sof Omar Cave in Bale (Oromia), the Harar Walls in Harar, the Castles of Fasiledes in Gonder (Amhara) and other sites of research and religious institutions, cultural diversities and festivals make Ethiopia the place of wonders. 5. Amhara is one of the Semitic-speaking ethnic groups of the northern Ethiopia whose elites had dominated the political, cultural, military and religious landscape of the country starting from the end of the nineteenth century up until recently. Before coming to the dominant position the Amhara had been at wars with Oromo for over four centuries. Their first exposure to the Europeans helped the Amhara rulers to acquire fire arms in large quantity, which finally made them to win victory over the Oromo under the rule of Menelik II.6. The Almanac
was published by the Information and Website Department of Oromiya National Regional Government President Office, Finfinne (Addis Ababa, 2007).

7. The Author published the book in 1901 in French, Paris. This work of the Author was the French Academic Prize Winning work. It is translated into English by Ayalew Kanno, East Lansing, Michigan, USA in November 2005 and reprinted with the permission by Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau, Finfinne (Addis Ababa, May 2008).

8. An Engineer by profession and M. Sc. by academic qualification. Probably he could be the first person with the background of such academic qualification to take the gada office of his clan for eight years, observing all the details of ceremonies and ritual practices.

9. This is a common knowledge among Oromo elders. All the story, history, traditional and cultural value have been transmitting orally from the past to the present generations.

10. The researcher met this informant for the first time in 2005 while undertaking field research in Guji zone. He was then working as a head of the Culture and Tourism Office of the Guji zone. Since then the researcher repeatedly interviewed him.

11. This term is derived from the word Oromo. It expresses the identity of Oromo.

12. Unfortunately the researcher is unable to retrieve the source from which the author’s statement was obtained.