

THE GHOST OF BAHREY INVENTED IDENTITY, OROMO, HAUNTS ETHIOPIAN MUSLIMS



The supposedly 'Oromo' flag

From the sixteenth century, a lot has been written about Ethiopia's ethnic communities by mostly Westerners but unfortunately, the so-called Oromo's identity

is utterly 'invented' by anthropologists because the name, Galla and Oromo, have no historical roots, actually, no tribes by these names have ever existed in Ethiopia. It is Bahrey's book, 'The History of the Galla' in 1593, that brought these nametags into being, and it was compellingly blanketed over indigenous tribes. In fact, the seventeenth century German scholar, Job Ludolf, told his Ethiopian informant, Abba Gregorius: "...we gave them the name Gallans" (Ludolf 1682:81). On the other hand, there are numerous oral traditions that authenticate the existence of Boran and Barentu tribes but the notion that a creature named 'Oromo' has ever existed is unsolved mystery except Bahrey's account that vaguely says that he, Oromo, 'came out of the water'. The existence of a set of tribes that are collectively called 'Oromo' is "invention" because until recently, the term 'Oromo' was simply unknown to many ordinary people: people regarded themselves as being Boran or Garre or Gabra (Schlee and Shongolo 1995). Did Bahrey purposely distort the historical facts?

One cannot become deeply involved in the study of a language and a culture and remain just a detached "scientific" intellect. Interaction with people must generate involvement in their concern [1]. Bahrey was horrified with Ethiopian tribes' "readiness to kill ..., and brutality of their manners" [2] but the savagery behaviors were product of an antagonistic environment because "...raiding, warfare and territorial expansion have played an important role in this respect, particularly in Eastern Africa (cf. Haaland 1977 a & b). In short, Bahrey has created a non-existent ethnic grouping called 'Oromo' that is entirely based on skewed anthropological data. He portrayed them as barbaric foreigners, and Amhara's institutionalized bigotry against these tribes is due to begotten attitudes from Bahrey's book. The hatred towards these tribes is not primarily because of their ethnicity but their enormous population is seen as a looming threat to the Abyssinian dominance. The purpose of this article is not to disrepute an authentic history but to air the truth about the term, Oromo, which erroneously incorporates large tribal factions under one umbrella.

The so-called Oromo's history is not immune from research and analysis because it is unknown in the historiography prior to Bahrey's book. Anthropologist, Jaenen, has combed for the definition of the name 'Galla' within the perimeters of the indigenous languages, and arrived at this conclusion: The Galla who call themselves Oromo are uncertain about the origin of their names as are the anthropologists. Orma means a foreigner who is not a relative; *galá* is stranger who is a guest, *galla* is a stranger who joins a tribe; *gala*, an imperative, means 'go home'; *gala*, a noun, means one who goes home, also provision for travelling. The Galla language gives us no further hint. The history of the people is indeed nomadic strangers & guests who are seeking a home. Now they have found that home but they are still designated as guests (Jaenen 1956:172). And, the historians regard the name 'Galla' as '...European linguistic romanticism'.

The term, Oromo, had initially appeared in the European literature in 1893 [3], and it was never a subject of scholarly research because it has no structured, verifiable historical sequences, in other words, it is anthropologically insignificant. These tribes were simply told that they are Ilmaan Orma (the children of a stranger) by ancestry but the historical records including oral traditions invalidate the existence of father 'Oromo'. It was Asmarom Legese's fieldwork on Boran Gada system in 1974 that deceptively resuscitated the inventive history, and the nationalists have presented the Boran Gada system as the Oromo's history knowing that the Gada system only signifies Boran's historical continuity. For the activists, the Boran's Gada system became a historical landmark and an authorization to lay down the bricks in the creation of a non-existent tribal confederacy called 'Oromo'. The overall process of assimilation and Oromization of non-Oromos 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 descendants of the once "proper" and assimilated Oromo group. It suggested that "universalistic" nature of Oromo society and culture [Lewis 1965:38].

Gada cycle is an integral part of Boran's historical chronology, and due to this, it has never lost its ancestral identity. The time reckoning experts, Ayyantu, have formulated an ingenious method of recording the Boran history. A day in Boran calendar is called Ayyaana, a period of eight years is known as Jarra. The sum of 8 years times five ($8 \times 5=40$) is a Gada cycle also known in Boran as Gogeessa. Seven of the Gada cycle (seven rounds of Gada constitute 40×7) is known as D'aacci Gada, which sums up to exactly 280 years. It is precisely (i.e.) two rounds of D'aacci Gadaa (two rounds of D'aacci Gada constitute 280×2) is 560 years of Gada rule from the day that Gadayo Galgalo Yayya reinvigorated the Gada system in 1458. And in this successive timeline, Boran never referred to themselves as the descendants of 'Oromo'. It neither recognizes the term, Oromo, nor has it a meaning in Boran language, and it has absolutely no historical relation with Gada system. In fact, I have personally asked the current Abba Gada, Kura Jarso Kura, whether Boran is of 'Oromo' descent, he flatly refuted calling it "... a fictitious political rhetoric..." ^[4] and the other Boran elders were equally astonished about this claim.

For instance, due to lack of a common identity, in 1977, they formed an armed rebel group calling themselves Somali Abo Liberation Front (SALF) under the late gen. Waqo Gutu against Mengistu's regime. Similarly, in an Arabic pamphlet, Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) claimed to be the descendants of Yemenite people of 'Iram' (OLF 1984:13). The nationalists have employed Orommumma as a whip to provoke the repressed anti-Amhara resentments because the sole commonality amongst these tribes is merely anti-Abyssinian sentiments. It has quickly received a wide acceptance amongst the populace, not so much as an identity, but because of its 'revolutionary aroma'. Due to distinctive cultural and historical dissimilarities amongst these tribes, scholars like Mario Aguilar and Abdullahi Shongolo have concluded that a common identity acknowledged by all Oromo [tribes] in general does not exist. [4] Even with that dubious identity, I categorically support their search for liberty.

My primary concern about this fictitious nation is that the Muslims are so intoxicated with it to the point that Islam carries no importance at all compared to Oromo nationalism. Historically, it was the allied forces that toppled the Ottoman Caliphate 1918 by means of divide and rule which gave birth to Arab populist nationalism and Turkish nationalism etc., thus terminating the Islamic-based bond. Consequently, smaller subservient nations were instituted that are submissively receptive to Western guidelines however detrimental they are to the local Muslims. Accordingly, in Ethiopia, Muslims are mistakenly embracing Oromo nationalism in search of a sense of identity, a principle that has been a source of tragic consequences.

Nationalism is incompatible with Islam, both schools having two opposite ideologies, those two assume totally opposite poles in their spirit, essence, direction and goal. The Quran has explicitly rejected the basis of nationalism, and states that, language, color, and race are no criteria for unity and privilege. The only criteria are belief and virtue. A common ideology is the basis of the unity of the Islamic Ummah, not race, country, or even culture. The goal of nationalism is to create national units, whereas the goal of Islam is universal unity. To nationalism what matters the most is loyalty and attachment to the homeland, whereas to Islam it is Allah and religion. Nationalism gives authenticity to geographical boundaries, and racial directions, whereas Islam negates them. Nationalism inclines to limitation and race, but Islam assumes universal outlook. Nationalism attaches value only to the historical traditions, culture, civilizations, Ideas and historical figures of its own nation, but Islam's vision goes beyond the frontier, race, tribe, and nation. The progress of Islamic revolution did away with this idea and with tribal organizations; with tempestuous slogan of "There's no God but Allah", it made conviction and ideology prevail over all attachment to blood, territory, and language. The Prophet (S), founded universal society of Islam, actually brought various nations together and removed their tribal hues. [6]

I came across few books written about 'Oromo', and mostly, it is authored by nationalists who calculatingly bypassed the structured historical facts to mold sequence of events (from here and there) to establish a nation by any means including fraudulent hypothesis that is historically unfounded. For example, Mohammed Hassen of 'The History of Oromo of Ethiopia' passionately claims that ...these settled agricultural Oromo communities which existed before the fourteenth century were not part of the sixteenth-century pastoral Oromo migration. [7] Hassen's self-assertion is chronologically null and void because the term, Oromo, was originally invented by Bahrey in 1593, it had only appeared in the European literature in 1893 [3] , and in Ethiopia, it got a wide acceptance in 1993 solely because these tribes were desperately in need of a political slogan to counter the brutal Abyssinian led regimes. Unable to overcome the natural wish for involvement due to the environment's horrific context, the Western authors operated in sympathy-mode, and their research data has unquestionably affirmed the nationalists' phony claim. Right from the start of the workshop it was obvious that, though we all shared many assumptions and sympathies, the expectancies of the Oromo and non-Oromo contributors were not identical. [8]

In summary, my objection to Oromo nationalism lies in two fronts: firstly, confederate tribes called Oromo have never existed in the history prior to Bahrey's manuscript; the Boran's Gada system was misleadingly used as a backbone to Oromo's history knowing that there is no authentic shared ancestral genealogy amongst these tribes. Harold Marcus, a distinguished historian, has characterized the Oromo's history as "fabrication", he writes "...passionately engaged in the Oromo quest for political sovereignty, various authors seek to create a historical nation called Oromia and fabricate a glorious history for non-existent country" (Harold Marcus 1992:20). Secondly, Oromo nationalism has become a tool to degrade Islam because many Muslims are adopting it as a creed forsaking the Islamic faith.

Lastly, the aim of this article is to show the Muslims particularly the Ethiopian Muslims the Truth, a Truth that is overshadowed by Oromo nationalism; it is forbidden for a Muslim to abide or to die for other than Islam. Due to the West's so-called "War on Terror", we, Muslims, have a choice to make: either to lift the banner of Monotheism (Tawheed) proudly or live under the bleak future of nationalism. My dear brothers and sisters, please know that all actions have corresponding reactions. Allah said, "So, that those who were to be destroyed (for rejecting Islam) might be destroyed after a clear evidence, and those who were to live might live after a clear evidence, and surely, Allah is All-Hearer, All-Knower" (8:42).

Your brother in Islam, Hassan Jarso Kotola

Nagelle Borana, Ethiopia

[1] P.T.W. Baxter, Jan Hultin, Alessandro Triuzli. 'Being and Becoming Oromo' 1996 p.

[2] Bahrey, "History of the Galla" in Some Records of Ethiopia, trans. and eds., C. F. Beckingham and G. W. B. Huntingford (The Hakluyt Society, London: 1954), p. 111.

[3] [Oromo Archived](#) 30 December 2013 at the [Wayback Machine](#), Merriam-Webster (2014). Quote: "Origin and Etymology of Oromo, (western dialect) Oromo, a self-designation, First known use: 1893."

[4] I have met Abba Gada, Kura Jarso Kura in Arero town in 23rd of June, 2018

[5]. Günther Schlee (2002). *Imagined Differences: Hatred and the Construction of Identity*. LIT Verlag Münster. pp. 142–146. [ISBN 978-3-8258-3956-7](#).

[6] <https://www-al-islam.org/Islam-nationalism-ali-mohammed-naqvi/part-seven-islam-and-nationalism>

[7] Mohammed Hassen. 'The History of Oromo of Ethiopia' 1990 p.14

[8] P.T.W. Baxter, Jan Hultin, Alessandro Triuzli. 'Being and Becoming Oromo' 1996 p.10

