

Oromo Indigenous Religion: *Waaqeffannaa*

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Abstract: This paper discusses the African Traditional religion with a particular reference to the Oromo Indigenous religion, *Waaqeffannaa* in Ethiopia. It aimed to explore status of *Waaqeffannaa* religion in interreligious interaction. It also intends to introduce the reader with *Waaqeffannaa*'s mythology, ritual activities, and how it interrelates and shares with other African Traditional religions. Additionally it explains some unique character of *Waaqeffannaa* and examines the impacts of the ethnic based colonization and its blatant action to Oromo touched values in general and *Waaqeffannaa* in a particular. For further it assess the impacts of ethnic based discrimination under different regimes of Ethiopia and the impact of Abrahamic religion has been discussed.

Key Words: Indigenous religion, *Waaqa*, *Waaqeffannaa*, and *Oromo*

I. INTRODUCTION

Until the 1970s and 1980s Western scholars had maintained erroneous views about African indigenous religions, including the local concept of the Supreme Being (God, divinities and spirit). Judging African indigenous religions by their Western religious ontology, i.e. Christianity, Western scholars invariably describe followers of Africans indigenous religions as animist. Africans who they thought did not worship the Christian Supreme Being, but rather than worshiped idols, lakes, moons, hills and/or fabricated beings, were grouped in this religious category.¹

Africa is a large continent with diverse nations and complex cultures, languages and dialects. In spite of all these differences, there are many essential resemblances in their religious concepts and rituals. For instance, while different nations use different names to refer to the concept of God, nearly all of them conceive him as a supreme being across the continent.² In Nigeria, the Yoruba refer to this being as 'Olorun', meaning 'the owner of heaven' or 'the Lord of heaven', showing God as the author of all things visible and invisible. The Igbo call him Chukwu, meaning the 'source of being - the great one from whom all beings originate'. In Ghana, the Akan and Ga people use the term Odamankoma-He who in His grace has completed everything in heaven and

on earth. The Mande people of Sierra-Leone call him as Ngewo which means the eternal one who rules from above.³

Similar to these African nations, the Oromo believe in and worship a supreme being called *Waaqaa* - the Creator of the universe. From *Waaqaa*, the Oromo indigenous concept of the Supreme Being *Waaqeffanna* evolved as a religion of the entire Oromo nation before the introduction of the Abrahamic religions among the Oromo and a good number of them converted mainly to Christianity and Islam.⁴

Waaqeffannaa is the religion of the Oromo people. Given the hypothesis that Oromo culture is a part of the ancient Cushitic cultures that extended from what is today called Ethiopia through ancient Egypt over the past three thousand years, it can be posited that *Waaqeffannaa* predates the Abrahamic religion in its origin.⁵ It is a monotheistic religion that emanates from and based on belief in the Supreme Being of *Waaqaa*. To believe in *Waaqaa*, means to be loyal to his laws, acknowledge his wisdom as the creator and source of all lives. According to Oromo mythology, *Waaqeffannaa*, the Oromo God created all human beings. He cares for all creatures as he brought them into life and earth for the sustenance of life. He does not discriminate among human races too.⁶ In *Waaqeffannaa*, therefore, there is no need for intermediaries between the believer and *Waaqaa*. The religion actively promotes peace (*nagaa*), reconciliation (*araara*), love (*jaalala*) and harmony (*walta'iinsa*, *waliin jireenya*).⁷ *Waaqeffannaa* –an indigenous faith system of the Oromo people, is therefore, one version of the monotheistic

³Emeke C. Ekeke and A. Ekeopara, "God, Divinities and Spirits in African Traditional Religious ontology" *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences* 209-218, (2010):211-212

⁴Gumii Waaqeffattota Addunyaa (GWA) , "Waaqeffannaa," Gumii Waaqeffattoota Addunyaa, <http://waaqeffannaa.org/duudhaa-amantii-waaqeffannaa/> (accessed on December 10, 2013)

⁵Charles Verharen, "Comparing Oromo and Ancient Egyptian Philosophy," *Journal of Oromo Studies*, 15: 2 (2008): 3.

⁶DirribiDamisieBokkuu, *Oromo wisdom in Black Civilization*, (Finfinnee: Finfinnee Printing and Publishing S.C, 2011), 29

⁷Gumii Waaqeffattota Addunyaa (GWA) , "Waaqeffannaa," Gumii Waaqeffattoota Addunyaa, <http://waaqeffannaa.org/duudhaa-amantii-waaqeffannaa/> (accessed on December 10, 2013)

¹Emeka C. Ekeke, "African Traditional Religion: a Conceptual and Philosophical Analysis" *LUMINA*, Vol. 22, No.2, (nd):211-212

²J. O. Awolalu, "What is African Traditional Religion?," *Studies in Comparative Religion*; Vol. 10, No.2. (1976): 1-2

African Traditional Religion, where the followers of this faith system do believe in only one Supreme Being.

II. BELIEF AND PRACTICE OF WAAQEFFANNAA RELIGION

One of the difficulties of studying indigenous religions is the lack of written scriptures to fully understand the beliefs, rituals, liturgies and institutions. In the absence of written scriptures on indigenous religions in African continent, Western scholars approached the study of African religious from their own analytical categories of religion. Seeing only little similarity between their own world views and those of their subjects of study, they presented African indigenous religions as pagan and superstitious, often describing them as inferior, static and things of the past.⁸ In a rebuttal, however, African scholars of religion have posited that religious texts in Africa are “written not on paper but in people’s hearts, minds, oral history, rituals and religious personages like the priests, rainmakers, officiating elders and even kings. Everybody is a religious carrier.”⁹ On the basis of these sources, scholars have shown that African religions are dynamic, ever-changing and ever-adapting to social changes even after some converted to other faiths.¹⁰

Even though the literature on indigenous Oromo religion, otherwise known as *Waaqeffannaa*, is scanty, there is a consensus among academic researchers and local popular writers that *Waaqeffannaa* is one of the ancient indigenous African monotheistic religions.¹¹ Some prominent Oromo scholars and expatriate researchers have carried out research on this religion at different period of time. European missionaries, anthropologists have created a view of Oromo religion that is complex, elaborate and fascinating.¹² Recently, some Oromo religious leaders and local scholars have produced studies on *Waaqeffannaa* often with the general reader in mind.¹³

The Oromo people long ago recognised *Waaqaa* as the only Supreme Being, the Creator of everything. Hence, *Waaqeffannaa* as a religion of the Oromo people sprung out

of the Oromo concept of *Waaqaa*. According to Oromo mythology, their early ancestors were inspired by *Waaqaa* and guided by the *Seera Waaqaa* (the laws of *Waaqaa*), which *Waaqaa* granted to them.¹⁴

The concept of *Waaqaa* is conceived in Oromo as a divinity whose character can be manifested in multiple ways. He, the *Waaqaa*, is the source of all life and every power; supplier of every character to nature subsuming man; guardian of truth and justice.¹⁵ For the *Waaqeffataa* Oromo, it is only *Waaqaa* who can give life, send rain and create human beings. Hence, the moment of conception is perceived as a creative act of the Oromo divinity.¹⁶

Waaqeffannaa is therefore, a system of faith believing in *Waaqa Tokkichaa* (One God) by considering him as a source of life. It is the faith of Cushitic people including the Oromo who decided to lead their life according to the law and will of *Waaqaa*. They are mostly characterized by the love and respect they have for a human being; by their abhorring of all evil things including hatred towards persons and peoples as well as by their attempt to refrain from committing such sins as stealing, lying and murder. They believe that keeping the values, the culture, the assets, the virtues and the wisdom of *Waaqeffannaa* is their obligation.¹⁷ As Lambert Bartels described, *Waaqeffataa* believe that *Waaqaa* lives in the sky and the words for sky and God are the same. When man sins against *Waaqaa*, he goes away, but the earth remains. This has its own implication for Oromo religion. The earth is described as being a Mother. She is always with us. *Waaqaa* is like a father who could go away.¹⁸

According to *Waaqeffannaa*, *Waaqaa* is the source and guardians of all creatures. All creatures are ordered by his law, *Seera Waaqaa* (the laws of *Waaqaa*). Committing sins is considered as an attempt to disrupt *Seeraa Waaqaa* (the laws of *Waaqaa*) and the social order. *Waaqaa* is omnipresent. His presence on earth is revealed through rain, fog, and water.¹⁹ Oromo believe in *Waaqaa* and his religion is *Waaqeffannaa*. To *Waaqeffannaa* religion, the universe: earth, humans, water, sun, dusts, stars and etc as well as living and non living things are created by *Waaqaa*. *Waaqaa* is

⁸ John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 2nded. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1991), 17-20.

⁹ John S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nded (Oxford: Heinemann, 1992), 3

¹⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nded, 5

¹¹ “Theorizing Waaqeffannaa: Oromia’s Indigenous African Religion and Its Capacity and Potential in Peacemaking,” Oromo Press, <http://oromopress.blogspot.com/2012/12theorizing-waaqeffannaa-romias.html>

¹² See, for instance, the works of Father Lambert Bartels, Paul T W Baxter, Mario I Aguilar, and Gemetchu Megeressa.

¹³ Among these, the works of Dirribi Damissie Bokku and Maammoo Gadaa Daadhii can be cited.

¹⁴ Getachew Chamadaa Nadhabaasaa, “Waaqeffannaa: Testimony of an Indigenous Religion of the African Past and Present,” Afro Articles, <http://www.americanchronicle.com/Articles/60798>

¹⁵ Jemjem Undessa and Dhadacha Gololcha, *The Gada Democratic Pluralism with a particular reference to the Guji Socio-Cultural and politico-Legal System*. (Addis Ababa: RELA Printing Press, 2011), 271

¹⁶ Mario I Aguilar; “The God of the Oromo: A religious paradigm in the work of Lambert Bartels” *Journal of Oromo Studies*, Volume 12, Numbers 1&2 (2005): 61.

¹⁷ Interview with anonymous 3 on February 2014 at Naqamtee

¹⁸ Aguilar, A religious paradigm in the work of Lambert Bartels, 57

¹⁹ Aguilar, A religious paradigm in the work of Lambert Bartels, 62

Omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. Hence, *Waaqeffannaa* is a primal Oromo religion.²⁰

According to *Waaqeffannaa*, a person is totally responsible for all sins he/she committed while on earth. It attributes virtue of success, happiness, peacefulness, compassion, victory etc. as a direct consequence of man's close communion with the *Seera Waaqaa* (the laws of *Waaqaa*).²¹ *Waaqeffataa* is led by and obeys *Seera Waaqaa* (the laws of *Waaqaa*), which is called *Seera Shanan Walaabuu* (the five *Walaabuu's* law). These *seera Waaqaa* is called *Seera Shanan Walaabuu* because they are five in number from which other ordinary laws are formulated. These are *Seera Innoo* (the laws of Inno), *seera Irroo* (the laws of Irro), *Seera Tajoo* (the laws of Tajoo), *Seera Lato* (the laws of Lato) and *Seera Faano* (the laws of Faano).²²

With respect to *Waaqeffannaa* mythology, under the *Seera Waaqaa*, *Waaqeffataa* believe in ten truths. These are We believe in one God (*Waaqa Tokkicha*), We believe only in power and Wisdom of *Waaqaa*; Believe in meaningfulness of all creatures created by *Waaqaa*; Supremacy of human being over all creatures; Untainted nature of human being while coming to this earth; all human beings were born *Waaqeffataa* to this world; everybody should perform under the umbrella of *Waaqaa* to live in peace and order; *Waaqaa* do not punish anybody unless He show the truth way; We believe that from those created by *Waaqaa*, their vast majority were created for goodness and Instead of merely believing in *Waaqaa* one has to develop his/her knowledge of *Waaqeffannaa* through doing research.²³

There are five *Utubaas* (core) of *Waaqeffannaa*, which are serving as base for *Waaqeffannaa* religion. These are *Waaqa*, *Ayyaana*, *Nama*, *Waayyuu* and *Safuu*.²⁴ As earlier mentioned *Waaqeffannaa* evolved from *Waaqaa*. Thus *Waaqaa* is a focal point of *Waaqeffanna*. *Waaqaa* created all human beings graciously and with love. He loves all creatures as he brought them to this world and provides man with supreme power over other creatures. *Waaqaa* as a Supreme Being is believed to be a creator of all nature. He is the creator of all things in the universe. *Waaqaa* is the only one who can do or undo things on earth. The believers (*Waaqeffattootaa*) consider him to be omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. *Waaqaa* is not alpha and omega for He has no beginning or end, i.e. He is not limited in space and time. *Waaqaa* is believed to be a supreme instance of love, wisdom and peace. His plan and will for human being is always good. *Waaqaa* has got different names among different nations and peoples; his identity and character cannot be wholly comprehended by a human mind, but He is all in all a Supreme Being of righteousness. That is

why *Waaqeffataa* call and adore him as a divine Supreme Being.²⁵

Ayyaana is the way through which *Waaqaa* creates everything.²⁶ According to *Waaqeffanna*, for every nature, there is a given *Ayyaana* (Spirit) from *Waaqaa*. *Ayyaana* is considered as a mediator between *Waaqaa* and nature, as well as it is accepted as a manifestation of *Waaqaa's* will in them.²⁷

Safuu is a moral category, based on Oromo notions of distance and respect for all things. The concept of *safuu* is not merely an abstract category; it constitutes the ethical basis upon which all human action should be founded; it is that which directs one on the right path; it shows the way in which life can be best lived within the context of Oromo world view.²⁸

Waaqeffannaa has special respect for *nama* (human being). *Waaqaa* created all creatures of the universe with supremacy of human being (*nama*). Based on the *Seera Waaqa* of *Waaqeffannaa* human beings are empowered to use all things with protecting natural balance in accordance with *seera Waaqaa*.²⁹ *Waayyuu* are persons who know and obey the *Seera Waaqaa*, *Safuu* of *Waaqaa* and of earth. They are wise and patient people who are heard by *Waaqaa* if they pray to him. Sometimes they named as *Ayyaantuu*, who can communicate with the *Ayyaana* and give leadership to the believers in keeping the values, assets, norms and virtues of *Waaqeffanna*.³⁰

In *Waaqeffannaa* faith system, the *Waaqeffataa* celebrate various *Ayyaanota* (plural form of *ayyaana*- ceremonies) to offer thanksgiving for *Waaqaa* for his grace at different times based on virtues of *Waaqeffanna*.³¹ These *Ayyaanota* include *Ayyaana Taaboree*, *Ilillee*, *Ifaano*, *Irreecha*, *Ateetee*, *Birboo*, *Wadaajoo*, *Abbaa Oromoo*, *Buttaa* and *Coraa*.³² Those *Ayyaanota* have their own implications. For instance, Oromo practice *Irreechaa* ritual as the thanks giving celebration which is performed twice in a year, *Irreecha Birraa* (Spring

²⁵Maammoo Gadaa Daadhii, *Duudhaa: Waaqa nu Uumetti ni amanna, Ayyaana Dirreefi Laman Namaa ni Kadhanna.*, kutaa 2^{ffaa} (Finfinnee: HY international Printing press, 2013), 16-32, see also ___*Daaniyaa*, (Finfinnee, 6400), 150-156

²⁶Gemetchu Megersa, "The Oromo World-View," *Journal of Oromo Studies*, Volume 12, Numbers 1&2 (2005): 69

²⁷ ___*Daaniyaa*, (Finfinnee, 6400), 157-162

²⁸Megersa, *The Oromo World-View*, 70

²⁹ ___*Daaniyaa*, (Finfinnee, 6400), 162-168

³⁰ Dirribi Damisie Bokkuu, *Oromo wisdom in Black Civilization*, (Finfinnee: Finfinnee Printing and Publishing S.C, 2011), 127

³¹ AsebeRegassa, "Irreecha: From Thanksgiving Ritual to Strong Symbol of Oromo Identity," *Ayyaantuu.com* (2013), 1, <http://ayyaantuu.com/horn-of-africa-news/oromia/irreecha-from-thanksgiving-ritual-to-strong-symbol-of-oromo-identity/>

³² ___*Daaniyaa*, (Finfinnee, 6400), 227-259.

²⁰ ___*Daaniyaa*, (Finfinnee, 6400), 47

²¹ Interview with anonymous 3 on February, 2014 at Naqamtee, Ethiopia

²² ___*Daaniyaa*, (Finfinnee, 6400), 73-80

²³ ___*Daaniyaa*, (Finfinnee, 6400), 81-92

²⁴ ___*Daaniyaa*, (Finfinnee, 6400), 150

Thanks Giving) and *Irreecha Arfaasaa* (Autumn Thanks Giving), to praise *Waaqaa* for peace, health, fertility and abundance they were given with regards to the people, livestock, harvest and the entire Oromo land.

Irreecha is celebrating as an occasion for reciprocating *Waaqaa* past generosity in the form of providing praise, and also for offering communal prayer for the future. To celebrate the *Irreecha* rituals, the Oromo gather in places with symbolic meanings such as a hilltop, a river side and under the shades of a big sacred tree. Cite such places as evidence, some outsiders and detractors of Oromo culture and religion argue that the Oromo worship physical landscapes. Such conclusions emanate from misunderstanding of the significance of the ritual sites or from deliberate distortions for political reasons. In fact, the Oromo specifically reject any form of worshiping objects, saying that *Waaqaa* is the only God deserving their obedience. As Gadaa Melbaa put it, the Oromo “never worshipped false gods or carved statues as substitutes.” And this has been true throughout the centuries.³³ In the mid-17th century, the Portuguese Jesuit missionary, Father Manoel de Almeida reported that the Oromo were “neither Christians, moors nor heathens, for they have no idols to worship.”³⁴

The physical landscapes are chosen for their symbolisms. In Oromo worldview, for example, green symbolizes fertility, peace, abundance, and rain.³⁵ The Oromo are not fetishists. They believe in *Waaqa Tokko* (one God), unique universal creator and master. They see His manifestations in the great forces of nature, without mistaking them for Him.³⁶

The theme of *Irreecha*, national Thanksgiving Day, is to moving forward by restoring the Spirit of *Oromummaa* in which it aims to celebrate *Irreechaa* festivals to follow our tradition and religion in society, to create public awareness where Oromo cultural and religious issues will be discussed. This discussion provides a better understanding of Oromo culture and history, to pave the way for promotion of the Oromo culture, history and lifestyle.³⁷ Here I would like to make clear that although *Irreecha* has religious ritual attachment, it is not only celebrated by *Waaqeffataa* Oromo. At this Thanksgiving Day celebration, Oromo people from different parts and from other religious sects (non-*Waaqeffannaa*, Christianity and Muslims) come together and celebrate with joy and happiness. Therefore, *Irreecha* is a

³³Gadaa Melbaa, *Oromia: an Introduction* (Khartoum, 1988).

³⁴Manoel de Almeida, *History of High Ethiopia or Abassia*, in C.F.

Beckingham and G.W.B.Huntingford, eds, *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593-1646* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1954)

³⁵Regassa, *Irreecha: From Thanksgiving Ritual to Strong Symbol of Oromo Identity*, 1

³⁶Ayalew Kanno, *An Ancient People Great African Nation THE OROMO As recounted by Martial De Salviac*. (Finfinnee, 2008), 3

³⁷Gumii Waaqeffattoota Addunyaa, “Waaqeffannaa,”

social bond within Oromo people that brings them closer to each other.

III. WAAQEFFANNAA AS AN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

According to recent historical evidence, African Indigenous Religions are the oldest in the world.³⁸ These religions were in Africa for long time before the coming of Abrahamic religions. However, the missionaries of the Abrahamic religions succeed in converting some African people to their newly imported religions.³⁹ For a long period of time, African indigenous religions have been misrepresented by the strangers and detractors of African values. For African indigenous religions, early European explorers, investigators and Christian missionaries were among the most visible detractors. Often they used loathsome and unacceptable terminologies to describe the African values in general and African indigenous religions in a particular. Such terminologies are the high god of the primitive people, withdrawn god, polytheism, fetishism, idolatry, heathenism, paganism, animism, juju, mana, and ancestor worship.⁴⁰

In contrast, African scholars present African traditional religions as the aboriginal religious beliefs and practices of the Africans. It is the religion which resulted from the sustaining faith held by the forebears of the present Africans.⁴¹ African traditional religion is a heritage given to the Africans by the Supreme Being, who known by different name among African nations. He is universal and known by the people before the introduction of newly introduced religions.

Africans see the universe as created by the Supreme Being. This Supreme Being is the same as the Christian God. Although its name is diverse, Africans had never worshiped diverse Beings. This unique Supreme Being of African religions named differently across diverse African nations because of the fact that Africa is a large continent with multitude groups, complex cultures, and crowd of vernaculars.⁴² *Waaqeffannaa*, as a version of African indigenous religion, believe to this Supreme Being by calling as *Waaqaa*, the Oromo vernacular term.

³⁸Joseph S. Gbend, *The Impact of Colonialism on African Indigenous Religion*; (Makurdi: Benue State University),

³⁹Rotimi Williams Omotoye, “The study of African Traditional Religion and its Challenges in Contemporary Times,” (*Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies*, (IJOURLS) Vol.1 No.2, 2011):21-40, 1

⁴⁰Omotoye, “The study of African Traditional Religion and its Challenges in Contemporary Times “, 25

⁴¹J.O. Awolalu, “African Religion as an Academic Discipline” in Ade P. Dopamu et.al (eds) *Dialogue Issues in Contemporary Discussion*, (Akute: Big Small Books, 2007), 26.

⁴²Emeka C. Ekeke, “African Traditional Religion: A Conceptual and Philosophical Analysis,” *LUMINA*, Vol. 22, No.2, ISSN 2094-1188,): 4

IV. UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS OF OROMO INDIGENOUS RELIGION

Waaqeffannaa, Oromo religion (*Amantii Oromo*), is categorized under the monotheistic African indigenous religion. As an indigenous religion, it shares some communal belief systems with other African indigenous religions that show their peculiar quality from the newly emerged religions. Unlike world religions, African indigenous religions in general and *Waaqeffannaa* in a particular has no founders, reformers or missionaries.⁴³ *Waaqaa* is unique universal creator and human being is created by this Supreme Being. According to *Waaqeffannaa* mythology, one does not need to be a professional missionary to recognize the *Waaqaa*, who created the universe and empower man to administer the universe.⁴⁴

Waaqeffataa believe that life after death is a secret of *Waaqaa*. Accordingly, only *Waaqaa* knows what would happen after the earthly life. They don't believe that *Waaqaa* would come in the future to judge people and send the righteous to heaven and the sinful to hell. Unlike Abrahamic God, *Waaqaa* wouldn't come at certain time and leave this world at another moment. *Waaqaa* of Oromo religion is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. African indigenous religions, including *Waaqeffannaa* have no written and systematically codified scripture (holy text). *Waaqeffannaa* and its mythology are based on oral transmission. It is not organized and written on paper but in people's hearts, minds, oral history, rituals, shrines and religious functions.⁴⁵

Waaqeffannaa respect and believe in equality of mankind despite his/her culture, language, status, autonomy, and colour differences. For *Waaqeffannaa*, cultural values of all human societies have the same importance. The *Waaqaa* knows cultural entities of all societies. Therefore, it doesn't need to impose cultural values of certain society over the others.⁴⁶

Having a devout connection with ancestors in case of Oromo religion, the ancestors are blessed and celebrated for the good inheritance gain from them, but not worshiped. They have kept and brought Oromo ritual, cultural and historical heritage to the existing generation.⁴⁷

⁴³ John Mbiti makes writes that this is true across African religions, Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, 16

⁴⁴ Researcher observed during religious teaching at Galma Odaa Bisil, Malkaa Ateetee Buraayyuu and Hora Arsadii at different times.

⁴⁵ I observed this while attending their religious teaching at different Galma Waaqeffannaa and FGD at the study areas. For African religions, see, Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religions*, 17

⁴⁶ Interview with anonymous 1 at Galma Malkaa Ateetee (Buraayyuu) on April 2014

⁴⁷ Interview with anonymous 2 and 3 at Galma Odaa Bisil (Naqamtee) on February 2014

Another peculiar quality of *Waaqeffannaa* religion is its position on the omnipotence of *Waaqaa*. For *Waaqeffannaa*, since *Waaqaa* is the source of all creation in the universe, there is no other force or divinity which could contend his infinite power, wisdom and supreme authority. Unlike the revealed religions, Christians and Muslims, *Waaqeffannaa* does not believe in the existence of evil spirit, which they call as *Satan* power.⁴⁸

V. THE STATUS OF WAAQEFFANNAA RELIGION IN ETHIOPIA IN PRE 1991

Before the introduction of Abrahamic religion to Ethiopia and the conquest of Oromo land by Abyssinian colonizers, Oromo people were *Waaqeffataa*.⁴⁹ During the religious war (Christian vs. Muslim) of the 16th century in Ethiopia, the Oromo people were on neither side.⁵⁰ When both were weakened by the incessant conflicts, the Oromo penetrated into the heartlands of both religions. As the result of subsequent interactions with the Muslims to the south and Christians to the north, some Oromo became converted to the Abrahamic religions but the vast majority remained adherents of their Oromo religion. In the subsequent centuries, the Oromo in southern and central parts of Ethiopian continued to live sandwich between the Abyssinian forces expanding southward and the Muslim resistance from the south. For instance, Darrel Bates observed as "*The [Oromo] . . . of the southern and western highlands had suffered in their time from both parties, and were waiting in the wings for opportunities . . . to recover lands which had been taken from them*".⁵¹ However, this opportunity never materialized for the Oromo.

In fact, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Abyssinian rulers conquered Oromo land, imposed their culture and religion (Orthodox Christianity), and oppressed the Oromo people. The Abyssinians attempted various mechanisms to cutoff the Oromo from their political, social and cultural heritages to prevent their transfer down through generations. In other words, the conquest was followed by

⁴⁸ Interview with anonymous 2 and 3 at Galma Odaa Bisil (Naqamtee) on February 2014

⁴⁹ Horace Eric Gilchrist, II, "Haile Selassie and American Missionaries: Inadvertent agents of Oromo identity in Ethiopia," (MA Thesis, North Carolina State University, 2003), 34, see also Mohammed Hassen, "Conquest, Tyranny, and Ethnocide against the Oromo: A Historical Assessment of Human Rights Conditions in Ethiopia, ca. 1880s–2002," *Northeast African Studies* (ISSN 0740-9133) Vol. 9, No. 3 (New Series), 2002:15–50,

⁵⁰ Donald Levine, *Greater Ethiopia: The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 78

⁵¹ Bates, Darrel, *The Abyssinian Difficulty: The Emperor Theodoros and the Maqdala Campaign, 1867-1868*, (Oxford, 1979), 7

economic and cultural domination, including forced religious conversion.⁵²

Under imperial rule, the Oromo traditional religion was actively suppressed by imperial officials. In addition to land dispossession that Bates observed, the colonial officials were determined to achieve greater control by making Amharic and Orthodox Christianity the official language and religion respectively. In some instances, the Oromo were forcibly baptized into the Orthodox faith. For example, Harold Marcus writes:

On Menelik's orders, groups of five hundred [Oromo] were assembled and ordered to go to some nearby watercourse. Then the Amhara priest necessary for the occasion divides the group into two, gives those who are on the right the name of Walde Michael and to those who are on the left the name of Walde Giorgis; then he distributes meats lain by Christian hands. The [Oromo] and the Abyssinians who have witnessed this ceremony are profoundly convinced that it is a perfect baptism and that it imprints on the unhappy [Oromo] the indelible mark of the Christian.⁵³

To the practice of forced conversion, the Oromo responded by converting to Islam and Protestant Christianity. They embraced Islam as in protest and Protestant Christianity because they identified Orthodox Christianity with the oppressor. In a way, their conversion was not out of conviction but as a reaction to the Ethiopian colonization. As the result, Oromo conversion has never been complete disavowal of the Oromo religion. Lambert Bartels made this observation in his magisterial study of the Oromo religion. He writes:

Whether they (Oromo) became Christians or Muslims, the Oromo's traditional modes of experiencing the divine have continued almost unaffected, in spite of the fact that several rituals and social institutions, in which it was expressed, have been much diminished or apparently submerged in new ritual cloaks.⁵⁴

Though the Oromo converts to either Islam or non-Orthodox Christianity did not completely abandon their Oromo traditional religion. There has been more continuity of Oromo traditional religious beliefs, rituals and experiences into the

⁵²Mohamed Hassen, "Conquest, Tyranny, and Ethnocide against the Oromo: A Historical Assessment of Human Rights Conditions in Ethiopia, ca. 1880s–2002," *Northeast African Studies* (ISSN 0740-9133) Vol. 9, No. 3 (New Series), 2002): 19

⁵³Harold Marcus, "Motives, Methods, and Some Results of the Unification of Ethiopia during the Reign of Menelik II," *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Addis Ababa, 1963): 274

⁵⁴Lambert Bartels, *Oromo Religion: Myths and Rites of the Western Oromo of Ethiopia, An Attempt to Understand*, (Berline:Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1983), 15.

new religions than adoptions from the new religions. It seems the Oromo accepted the new religions in the context of their indigenous religion.⁵⁵

The Ethiopian government in the post-Italian period was even more blatant in its actions vis-à-vis Oromo religion. The place of the Orthodox Church was rendered enormously dominant by state support. Officials continued to assault on Oromo culture and identity thorough a policy of Amharization. Even Protestant missionaries were prohibited from using the Oromo language in their religious practices and from using the Oromo Bible in religious observances. Wherever they operated, missionaries were required to use only the Amharic language. According to a report of a British diplomat in Addis Ababa, "the Ethiopian government might use the missionaries as a minor instrument of Amhara imperialism in the Oromo and other colonial lands, because of the emphasis laid on the necessity for all missionaries to learn and teach Amharinya."⁵⁶

During the reign of Haile Sellassie (1930–74), the policy of Amharization was pursued with greater intensity with the goal of guaranteeing the dominance of Semitic culture and the power of the Amhara elite. To implement the government's policy of Amharization, Oromo cultural and religious shrines and places of worship were condemned as pagan relics, deliberately destroyed and replaced by the Abyssinian culture, Orthodox religious symbols, places of worship and cemeteries.⁵⁷ For example, the current Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Church of Georgis, in the center of Addis Ababa in Arada sub city was established at the site of a former Oromo Tulama's religious shrine. It was the place where Tulama Oromo celebrated *Irrecha Arfaasaa* (autumn thanksgiving day).⁵⁸ *Birbirsaa Hill* was the original name of the place which replaced by Amharic appellation Arada Georgis. This was a part of a program to destroy Oromo's institutions of self-government, social cohesion, cultural institutions, and

⁵⁵Ezekiel Gebissa, "Encounter of the Macca Oromo with Evangelical Christianity: A Look at the Meaning of Conversion," in *Philosophy in Africa Now: African Philosophy in Ethiopia*, edited by Bekele Gutema and Charles Verharen (Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Philosophical Studies, 2012), 121

⁵⁶VivecaHall din Norberg, *Swedes in Haile Selassie's Ethiopia, 1924-1952* (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African of Studies, 1977),77

⁵⁷ Mohammed Hassen, Conquest, Tyranny, and Ethnocide against the Oromo: A Historical Assessment of Human Rights Conditions in Ethiopia, ca. 1880s–2002, " *Northeast African Studies* (ISSN 0740-9133) Vol. 9, No. 3 (New Series), 2002):21

⁵⁸Leellisaa AadaaBantii , *Kudhaama Seena: Seena, Eenyummaa, Aadaa, Amantiifi Duudhaa, kitaabaa Iffaa*, (Finfinnee: ELLENI P.P.PLC, 6408), 62, see also Bokkuu , Oromo Wisdom in Black Civilization, 32

traditional religion. As a result of these measures, the Oromo population was decimated.⁵⁹

All of this was done in an attempt to make a unified fictitious Ethiopia under the guise of Abyssinian culture, in a particular Amhara culture and Orthodox Christianity. To achieve this goal, the regime pacified the Oromo. The Abyssinian culture, mostly the Amhara values and Orthodox religion, clearly taken as a symbol that portrayed Ethiopia. These exhibit the abandon of Oromo culture and religious rituals. The emperor expressed his disdain to the Oromo people and their cultural values at various public speeches during his reign. In a 1959 college speech he clearly expressed this sentiment as: “*The Amhara race must know that it has an obligation on its part to work in the technical field no matter at what level; to preserve the heritage of one’s honor and culture.*”⁶⁰ Accordingly, being Ethiopian meant being Amhara. The emperor continued to express the belief that being an Amhara and cliques of Orthodox Christian followers represented the qualities of being Ethiopians when he stated on 15 January 1965 public speech, “*Ethiopia, an island of Christianity, has made her own distinctive contribution to the Christian faith; forever since her conversion to Christianity she has remained faithful, her age-old ties with the apostolic church uninterrupted.*”⁶¹ According to this statement, except for Orthodox Christianity, no religious rituals were considered, desirable and permissible in Ethiopian empire.

Oromo people who worship only *Waaqaa* in line with their cultural values were not recognized as Ethiopians because their religious dogma and ideology was out of with the state religion. Consequently, the Oromo people, constituting close to half of Ethiopia’s population, were marginalized and suffered much in Ethiopian history.

Before the Dergue regime, all religions except Orthodox Christianity were marginalized and adherents of other religions had been treated as alien and strange by the Abyssinian rulers.⁶² This was particularly oppressive with respect to the *Waaqeffannaa* religion.

⁵⁹ Mohammed Hassen (2009), “Oromo nationalism, and the continuous multi-faceted attack on the Oromo cultural, civic and political organization,” (*Report from Oromo workshop and its after-effects 26-39, Chr. Michelsen Institute, 2009*): 27

⁶⁰ The Imperial Ethiopian Ministry of Information, “Haile Selassie, *Selected Speeches of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie First*,” (Addis Ababa: The Imperial Ethiopian Ministry of Information, 1967), 11-12. See also Horace Eric Gilchrist, II, “Haile Selassie and American Missionaries: Inadvertent agents of Oromo identity in Ethiopia,” (MA Thesis, North Carolina State University, 2003), 41

⁶¹ Horace Eric Gilchrist, “Haile Selassie and American Missionaries: Inadvertent agents of Oromo identity in Ethiopia,” (MA Thesis, North Carolina State University, 2003), 637

In its earlier phase, the Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 promised democracy in Ethiopia and to heal old wound that were created based on ethnic identity and religious rituals. The Oromo sought to reclaim their land, political and cultural rights, human dignity and the right to administer themselves. However, they had highly suffered under this brutal military dictatorship too. The Amhara military officers, who dominated the Dergue, systematically embarked on massacre of Oromo adults, murders and custody of educated Oromos. They intended to tear down Oromo in all aspects- politics, cultural, social and religion. As Mohammed Hassen stated thoroughly they sabotaged Oromo through destruction, displacement and resettlement program.⁶³

In 1974, the government officially declared through *Negarite Gazette*, which was published on February 28, 1974 (*State’s Magazine*), that Oromo people worshipped idols, lakes, moons, hills and/or fabricated beings, and pictured the religion as backward and the followers as uncouth people.

Protestant missionaries credited their own role in conversion of Oromo people from its indigenous religion to their cultured based religion. German and Swedish missionaries had attributed in Oromo conversion. Initially they succeeded through conversion of Macca Oromo of Wallagga. According to their mission, they are intended to free the Oromo from the domination of the devil and oppressive rule of Abyssinian colonizers.⁶⁴ Here they considered Oromo religion as devil spirit, which is non-existent in Oromo mythology. To abridge the process of Oromo conversion, they used different mechanisms. First they translated the bible into vernacular Oromo; second they negotiated with local people to resolve their difference and valued each others’ world view, religious and cultural values;⁶⁵ and third they approached to Oromo through provision of social service and swear to influence the political abuse against the Oromo people.⁶⁶ While they were providing social service, they propagated their doctrine and developed a sense of uncertainty to Oromo religion, *Waaqeffannaa*. Even though it is a primal monotheistic religion of Oromo people, *Waaqeffannaa* had been relegated in a backwater status or even banned for certain moments over the last century. These all past trends contributed for the current misunderstanding of *Waaqeffannaa* and for the challenges being facing by the adherents of this religion.

⁶³ Mohammed Hassen, “A Short History of Oromo Colonial Experience: Part Two, Colonial Consolidation and Resistance 1935-2000,” (*The Journal of Oromo Studies*, Vol.7, No. 1 &2, 2000):147

⁶⁴ Magarsaa Guutaa, *Abbaa Gammachis. Biography A Native of Oromiya: Enslaved, Freed and An Envoy of the Gospel (1856-1931)*, (Finfinnee: AteerGannoo Literature Society, 2007), 13

⁶⁵ Gebissa, *Encounter of the Oromo Religion*, 121

⁶⁶ Interview with anonymous 4 at Finfinnee, on April 2014

VI. CONCLUSION

Long before the introduction of Christianity and Islam, the Oromo people had their own indigenous faith tradition and belief system called *Waaqeffannaa*. This Oromo indigenous religion was suppressed under successive Ethiopian regimes even though it has been a longstanding tradition in Ethiopia that religion is a private matter. The Oromo religion was able to withstand and survive the challenges of heavy-handed government intervention because of it was indigenous and rooted in Oromo cultural universe.

Despite its indigenesness to Ethiopia, *Waaqeffannaa* has not secured religious status for more many centuries. Because of the endemic political injustice in pre 1991 Ethiopia, the Oromo people had lost their historical heritages, cultural values, political institutions, religious norms and even its identities. The political injustice of the imperial regime made Orthodox Christianity a state religion and relegated non-Orthodox religions in Ethiopia to marginalization and ill-treatment. A large number of the Oromo people were forcibly converted to the state religion. To resist forced conversion, some Oromos responded by embracing Islam and Protestant Christianity. All of these factors had prevented the *Waaqeffannaa* religion from achieving a status of religion at the state level and to develop an understanding and deeper knowledge of *Waaqeffannaa* at the societal level.

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