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THE POLITICS OF LINGUISTIC HOMOGENIZATION IN ETHIOPIA AND THE CONFLICT OVER THE STATUS OF *AFAAN OROMOO*

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ABSTRACT

The suppression of ethnic identities in order to create homogeneous nation-states is an old strategy used by rulers of multi-ethnic and multi-lingual states. Perceived as salient markers of ethnic identities and as obstacles to the cultivation of the feeling of belonging and loyalty to the state by the policy makers, minority languages become the objects of suppression and replacement by the languages of the dominant groups. However, the attempt to homogenize such states, has, in many cases, faced both overt and covert resistance from the targeted groups. Ethnic opposition to linguistic homogenization is triggered by objective as well as subjective existential concerns. Putting the Oromo in focus, this essay examines the links between state language policy and ethnic conflict in Ethiopia. It sheds light on the history of Oromo literacy from the 1880s to the present decade and explores the role of language in the 'nation-building' strategies of various Ethiopian regimes. Furthermore, the essay addresses the socio-psychological and integrational consequences of, and Oromo response to, the language policies of these regimes as well as the intermittent attempts made by the Oromo intelligentsia to resist them and to develop and use *afaan Oromoo* as a medium for education, administration, mass media, and the arts.

THE OROMO, ALONG WITH several other peoples in the Horn of Africa were conquered by the Abyssinians during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and incorporated into the Ethiopian empire. The promotion of Amharic as a national language has been a consistent policy of various Ethiopian regimes at least during the last fifty years. Amharic, which is the language of the politically dominant ethnic group, the Amhara, and mother tongue of less than 20 per cent of Ethiopia's population was imposed on the other ethnic and linguistic groups without taking into account their sentiments and opinions. Furthermore, in order to avoid

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competition with Amharic, and subsequently achieve linguistic homogenization in Ethiopia, the use of other ethnic languages for publishing, teaching, preaching and administrative purpose was forbidden.

The Oromo language—*afaan Oromoo*—which is one of the five most widely spoken indigenous languages in Africa, is a *lingua franca* in the southern half of Ethiopia and northeastern Kenya, used by several ethnic groups as a means of trade and communication. In Ethiopia there are about 25 million native Oromo speakers.[1] In spite of its significance as a language of wider communication, *afaan Oromoo* (with the exception for oral communication) has been until very recently one of the prohibited languages in Ethiopia. Restrictions on its use have been minimized since the fall of the military regime in 1991 and *afaan Oromoo* has become a medium of instruction, administration and mass communication. In a matter of only a few years, it has established itself as a fast-growing working language. Today, Oromo publications are proliferating and we are witnessing a very rapid growth of Oromo literature. This essay is concerned with the contradiction between the homogenizing and 'nation-building' policies of the Ethiopian regimes on the one hand, and the interests of the Oromo people to maintain their collective identity on the other.

Historical and sociological background

Notwithstanding their existence as a distinct nation in the past, the Oromo share several basic cultural traits with the other Cushitic speaking peoples in the Horn of Africa. Like their Afar and Somali neighbours, the majority are Muslims. A significant proportion profess Orthodox Christianity like their conquerors, the Abyssinians (Amharas and Tigreans). Today it is mainly their language which differentiates the Oromo externally from their neighbours and which internally unites them. Because it is the main unifying and identifying element of the largest nationality in their empire, the Oromo language has, to varying degrees, been an object for proscription and sanctions by consecutive Ethiopian regimes for nearly a century. Since it embodies a different culture and symbolizes a separate identity, the Oromo language was (and still is) considered by Abyssinian elites, particularly by the Amhara, as an obstacle to the expansion of 'Ethiopian identity' and the growth of Ethiopian 'nationalism'.

Although the goal was to build an 'Ethiopian nation', Ethiopian identity is not considered as an amalgam of the identities of the various groups that inhabit the country. It was even argued that the Abyssinians 'alone embody and represent traditional Ethiopia' and their Semitic

1. Exact census figures are not available for the different ethnic groups in Ethiopia. Most scholars estimate the Oromo to be between 40 per cent and 50 per cent of the total population of Ethiopia which is about 55 millions.

languages 'are the virtually exclusive carriers of Ethiopian civilization'.[2] Therefore, to be accepted as Ethiopians, the Oromo were expected to completely forget their past, relinquish their culture and language and cease to be Oromo. The policy which promoted such identity, which is a euphemism for Abyssinian identity, is now totally rejected by the other ethnic groups in the country. The result is a growing self-awareness and development of collective consciousness among members of these ethnic groups.

Ethnic consciousness is fostered by, among other things, the possession of a common language, a distinct cultural tradition, and geographical territory which distinguish an *ethnie* or a nationality from all others.[3] Ethnic movements often begin as cultural and language movements. Such movements typically seek to alter state policies that discriminate against the ethnic languages and cultures; they can be intensively politicized when met by intransigence from the state. Since a particular language often becomes symbolic of the ethno-culture in which it is embedded and which it indexes, language often becomes a rallying symbol for the whole culture. In some cases linguistic suppression imposed with the pretext of nation-building has become a cause for armed conflict and the disintegration of the state.[4] In general, opposition to linguistic homogenization is incited by reasons that are basically existential and include concern about continuity of collective identity and disadvantages (economic and social) related to the imposition of a new and alien language. Linguistic assimilation of an ethnic minority into that of another group threatens its collective existence, because 'language is truly the archive and synthesis of human group's main historical experiences that have gradually been deposited in and incorporated into its vocabulary and structure'.[5] For a people, the effacement of their language creates discontinuity both in a cultural and historical sense. It is such discontinuity which anthropologists have called ethnocide. For both the affected individual and group, the threat of discontinuity is compounded with the loss of status and power in the multi-lingual social structure. The links between language, power and inequality are felt as members of the

2. The quotation is from Edward Ullendorf's book, *The Ethiopians. An introduction to country and people* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 3rd ed., 1973), p. 111, but it also reflects the official as well as the dominant group's view of Ethiopian identity before 1974.
3. Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication: An enquiry into the foundations of nationality,* (MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. 2nd edition, 1962), p. 173.
4. For example, Rustov notes that in Sri Lanka, the 'Sinhalese Only' campaign of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party in the 1950s led to an upsurge of militant Tamil sentiment which developed into a separatist Tamil movement in the 1980s. See Rustov, 'Language and Modernization, and Nationhood—An attempt at typology', in J. Fishman, C. Ferguson, and J. D. Gupta, (eds),*The Language Problems of the Developing Nations*, (John Wiley & sons, London, 1968) p. 104.
5. J. A. De Obieta-Chalbaud, 'Self-Determination of peoples as a Human Right', *Plural Societies*, **XVI**, 1 (1986), p. 63.

dominated ethnicity seek education, employment and social and political position in an environment where the culture and language of the dominant group are part of the criteria for their acquisition.

The struggle over the status of the Oromo language must be analysed with the above propositions in mind. We should also keep in mind that while the suppression of the Oromo language and identity has always been part of the centralizing and homogenizing strategy of Ethiopian regimes, its preservation has also been a major project for the Oromo, particularly for the politically conscious elements. Such elements have made, if not continuous, at least intermittent efforts to maintain the rights of using their language in all forms of communication, oral or written, despite frustrations by consecutive Ethiopia rulers. As will be described below, while all legal means remained continuously blocked for decades by the policy of Amharization, the Oromo became progressively involved in armed confrontation to regain their rights including cultural and linguistic ones. The result is that literacy in the Oromo language has developed in tandem with the growth of Oromo nationalism, particularly since the mid 1970s.

The Oromo language in print

As indicated above, to play an active role in the development of ethnic or national consciousness, a language must be written. It is also necessary to note that it is the literal languages of minority, as well as subordinated groups, which often become the target of homogenizing policies of states. Non-literal vernaculars spoken by rural populations do not usually attract the attention of rulers of such states. Literate Abyssinian culture and language could exist with non-literate Oromo culture and expand at the expense of the latter. But given the demographic weight that the Oromo have over their conquerors, its chance for success in a competition with literate Oromo culture was questionable. Therefore, *afaan Oromoo* began to face opposition from Amhara rulers and clergy from the day literacy was started in it. As I have described elsewhere, this antagonism existed long before the conquest of Oromia by the Abyssinians took place.[6]

Writing in the Oromo language began during the eighteenth century as Muslim Oromo scholars started to produce religious literature using both Arabic and Ge'ez scripts. By the beginning of the nineteenth century '*Afaan Oromoo* was the language of correspondence for all Oromo kings and it was also the language of education, law, high culture, business and government administration'.[7] The earliest written Oromo literature available is from the first part of the nineteenth century, by two Germans who

6. See Mekuria Bulcha, 'The Language Policies of Ethiopian Regimes and the History of Written Afaan Oromoo', *Journal of Oromo Studies*, I, 2 (1994), pp. 91–115.
7. See Mohammed Hassen, 'History of the Growth of Written Oromo Literature', in C. Griefenow-Mewis and R. M. Voigt (eds), *Cushitic and Omotic Languages* (Rudiger Köppe Verlag, Köln, 1996), p. 250–51.

produced an Oromo grammar and an Oromo–English dictionary and translated parts of the New Testament into the Oromo language.[8] However, it was through the works of Oromo evangelists, particularly that of Onesimos Nasib and his female colleague, Aster Ganno, that basic Oromo literature was created in the 1880s and 1890s and literacy was introduced into Oromia.[9] Historians have argued that Protestant translations of the Bible and Protestant sermons created for many European peoples a new literature which was accessible to the common man and thus helped to motivate a sense of nationalism.[10] The Oromo translation of the Bible, had some similar effects, particularly in the region of Wallaga where it was first introduced and received with great enthusiasm. But the growth and development of Oromo literature was stunted from the very beginning as Bible translation and the advent of literacy in the Oromo language coincided with the conquest of Oromia by the Abyssinians. Hence Oromo literature, as will be described later on, did not grow to have the impact that, for example, the expansion of vernacular literature had on the development of nationalism in Europe.

Although Onesimos Nasib's main contribution was the translation of the Bible and other religious literature into the Oromo language, he had also, together with his colleagues, compiled an Oromo dictionary and written and translated secular literature. These works became significant for Oromo literacy, in education as well as in raising Oromo cultural awareness; they became instruments for vernacular mobilization in Wallaga, if not in a political sense at least culturally as evangelists built village schools and taught Oromos how to read and write in their language. Many Oromos considered Onesimos Nasib's works cultural symbols to be embraced in order to preserve their identity which was being threatened by the newly imposed culture and language of the conquerors. This was particularly the case with leading Oromo families in Wallaga who apparently took some solace from the Oromo literature vis-a-vis the slight they had experienced due to the conquest and their subsequent cultural subordination to the Amhara a decade earlier. Although they had lost their independence and political power to the conquerors, it seems that they hoped to hold on to their language and culture. They saw a chance of

8. See, for example, Richard Pankhurst, 'The Beginnings of Oromo Studies in Europe', *Africa,* **XXX** (Rome, 1976), pp. 171–206.
9. See Mekuria Bulcha, 'Onesimos Nasib's Pioneering Contributions to Oromo Writing', *Nordic Journal of African Studies,* 5, 2 (1995), pp. 36–61.
10. H. Kohn, *The Age of Nationalism* (Harper, New York, 1962), p. 143. Urpo Vento writes that the significance of the publication of the Bible in Finnish 350 years ago 'for the Finnish literary language and the Finnish world view has been at least as great as the Kalevala's'. See Urpo Vento, 'The Role of the Kalevala in Finnish Culture and Politics', *Nordic Journal of African Studies,* 1, 2 (1992), p. 94. The Kalevala, a body of folklore and epic poems collected and compiled by Elias Lönnrot, is considered as the foundation for the emergence of Finnish national consciousness in the nineteenth century. The Kalevala is seen as the symbol of Finnish national identity.

linguistic and cultural continuity in the expansion of Oromo literacy which they encouraged and supported. The religious and secular literature of the evangelists became significant not only because they were the first ones in the Oromo language and were appreciated by the then submerged Oromo aristocracy but also because they were accessible to common people.

It was noted that 'Onesimos Nasib's books were the first eye-openers for the Oromo. They were read aloud in public gatherings; and those who could not read listened.'[11] It was in this manner that literacy came to western Oromoland for the first time and expanded throughout the region. The accessibility of literature to ordinary Oromos became a major concern to the agents of the imperial court. They saw defiance and rejection of the Amhara language and the Orthodox religion in the enthusiastic acceptance and support that the evangelists enjoyed among the local population. In 1906, they brought a complaint against Onesimos before the Emperor and the Ethiopian Patriarch in Addis Ababa. The Emperor prevented Onesimos from preaching and teaching.[12] In order to secure the expansion of Amhara culture and language and suppress Oromo political and cultural consciousness, the imperial court threatened the Oromo leaders with confiscation of property and imprisonment if they continued with their support of the evangelical movement. In his thorough study of evangelical pioneers in Ethiopia at the turn of the century, Gustav Aren has noted,

> It was evident that government officials in alliance with the clergy formed a powerful pressure group, which tried to enforce Orthodoxy as means of securing Amhara culture and combat Oromo consciousness, which seemed to have found an outlet in the evangelical movement.[13]

What Aren does not point out here is the fact that it was not only or even primarily the religious ideology of the movement, but the language (*afaan Oromoo*) which was the cause for the objection the Abyssinian *naftanya* (armed settlers), officials and clergy.[14] The prohibition frustrated the expansion of Oromo literacy for several years. However, after the death of Menelik II, who was the architect of the empire, and particularly from 1916 to 1930, the attention of important Abyssinian leaders was occupied more with power struggles over succession to the throne and less with the conduct and activities of their subjects in the recently annexed provinces.

11. Terfasa Digga, 'A Short Biography of Onesimos Nasib: Oromo Bible Translator, Evangelist and Teacher', BA thesis in History, Haile Selassie I University, Addis Ababa, (1973), p. 49. See also Nils Dahlberg, *Onesimus: Från Slav till Bibel Översättare* (Stockholm, 1932).
12. G. Aren, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia: Origins of the Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus* (EFS Förlaget, Stockholm, 1978), p. 427.
13. Aren, *Evangelical Pioneers in Ethiopia*, p. 427–28.
14. For a discussion of the predominance of linguistic concerns over religious ideology in the opposition of Amhara priests and officials to the Oromo Bible and the evangelical movement in Wallaga, see Bulcha, 'The Language Policies of Ethiopian regimes', pp. 95–97.

The situation gave some space to Onesimos and his colleagues who continued to expand their educational and religious work in western Oromoland. Consequently 'a surprisingly high degree of Oromo literacy has existed there since the early decades of this century'.[15]

Haile Selassie, who successfully emerged from the struggle over the imperial throne, embarked upon a policy of centralization after his official coronation in 1930. Consistent with his drive towards a complete centralization of the empire, he abrogated the relative autonomy that the two Oromo regions of Jimma and Wallaga had enjoyed before 1932–33; and the imperial court also had plans for linguistic and religious homogenization.[16] But before implementing such a plan, Haile Selassie's attention was totally absorbed by a new political crisis which was more threatening and immediate than the cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of his subjects. The crisis was a border conflict over a water hole at Walwal in the Ogaden desert with Italy which was then controlled by Eritrea and Italian Somaliland. The conflict culminated in full-fledged war in 1935 and the victory of Mussolini's army over the ill-equipped imperial Ethiopian forces. The Italians brought Ethiopia under their rule in 1936 and divided the empire into ethnic regions and introduced ethnic languages as the educational and administrative media. They built several schools which used *afaan Oromoo* and other ethnic languages as mediums of instruction in the respective regions.[17] Consequently, by the end of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in 1941, literacy in the Oromo language had made some significant progress.[18]

Upon his return from exile in England, Haile Selassie laid down a radical language policy for his empire. Although this policy can be seen as a continuation of the pre-1935 centralization and homogenization drive, a number of events seem to have influenced Haile Selassie's post-war language policy. Here it suffices to mention those events which were related to an increasing sign of sporadic resistance by the Oromo against Amhara rule, and the comparative linguistic freedom they had enjoyed during the Italian occupation. Just before he went into exile in 1936, Haile Selassie had faced a rebellion from the Raya Oromo in the north. Exploiting the crisis created by the war with Italy, a proto-nationalist movement called the Western Galla (Oromo) Confederation had

15. G. B. Gragg, *Oromo Dictionary* (African Studies Center, Michigan State University and Oriental Institute University of Chicago, Michigan, 1982), p. xvi.
16. See Margery Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia* (Faber and Faber, London, 1969) p. 308. Promised autonomy, the Oromo Kings of Jimma and Leeqa Naqamte (Wallaga) submitted to Menelik without fighting in 1882. During his reign Menelik kept his promise and the *Mootii* (royal houses) of two Oromo regions continued to rule their respective territories. Haile Selassie abrogated this accord.
17. Bonnie Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa, *The Invention of Ethiopia: The making of a dependent colonial state in Northeast Africa* (The Red Sea Press, Trenton, 1990), p. 196.
18. A. Sbacchi, *Ethiopia Under Mussolini: Fascism and the colonial experience,* (Zed Books, London, 2nd ed. 1989), p. 160.

attempted to declare independence from Ethiopia in that same year, but was stopped by the Italian advance.[19]

The experience the Oromo gained under the short-lived Italian occupation accentuated the cleavages between the Oromo people and their Amhara rulers. These gains were not only in the linguistic freedom mentioned above but also to property and civil rights. Italian rule abolished the privileges that Amhara rulers and settlers enjoyed over the Oromo since all the peoples in Ethiopia were treated, more or less, equally as Italian subjects. To win over the Oromo to their side, the first thing the Italians did was to eliminate the notorious *naftanya-gabbar* system under which the majority of the Oromo were deprived not only of their economic rights but also their social status and human dignity.[20] When this oppressive system was instituted by the Amhara rulers after conquest, most of the Oromo peasants and pastoralists were turned into *gabbars* (serfs) and their land was confiscated from them and given mainly to *naftanyas* (armed settlers, not only but mainly Amhara) who participated in the war of conquest, and to administrators, clergymen and other settlers. Hence, on his return from exile, Haile Selassie was confronted with an awakened and hostile Oromo population many of whom demanded independence from Ethiopia.[21] When informed of the decision made to restore Amhara rule over his people by British officials whose forces had just driven out the Italians, an Oromo leader told them: 'Today I feel like a sheep whose throat has just been cut, kicking for life, knowing I cannot live'.[22] The Oromo appealed to the British officers not to deliver them to the Amhara rulers.[23] For most Oromos, the restoration of Haile Selassie meant the return of the landlords who practically owned them. Experience of Amhara government was unbearable and the restoration of Haile Selassie strongly opposed. Consequently 'returning landlords are said to have found it difficult to re-assert their hold on their *gabbars*, many of whom had tasted the relative freedom . . . under the Italians.[24]

Oromo resistance to the restoration of Amhara rule even gained support from certain British officers who came to Ethiopia to help restore Haile Selassie's government, and also the British Committee on Ethiopia whose chairman wrote to the British Foreign Secretary that '. . . we have a moral duty to see that the people of the country are not oppressed and enslaved. When we are fighting for freedom in Europe, how can we restore the Gallas

19. P. Gilkes, *The Dying Lion: Feudalism and modernization in Ethiopia* (Julian Friedmann Publishers, London, 1975), p. 213.
20. Sbacchi, *Ethiopia Under Mussolini*, pp. 160–161.
21. See for example, Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, p. 379; Gadaa Melbaa, *Oromia: An introduction*, (Khartoum, 1988), p. 122.
22. Kenya National Archive, NFP Political, Records Miscellaneous, PC/NFD/4/1/3/, Nairobi, Kenya.
23. Kenya National Archive. PC/NFD/4/1/3.
24. Perham, *The government of Ethiopia*, p. 354.

[Oromo] and other subject races to Amharic tyranny?'[25] According to Perham, 'few questions at issue between the British and the Ethiopians during the first months of the liberation so disturbed the Emperor as the reputed wish of one or two Galla experts on the British side to defend a Galla cause'.[26] The seriousness with which Haile Selassie viewed Oromo opposition to his restoration is stressed by Alberto Sbacchi when he writes:

> During the same period, *Grazmach* Sera, an important Oromo leader, had spoken out for some measure of local Oromo autonomy. He was murdered in Adola, near the camp of a British political officer. He might be suspected of having tried to negotiate the independence of southern Ethiopia [Oromia] with British help.[27]

In 1941, Oromo opposition to the return of Amhara rule over Oromia was widespread and many people who were involved in it were treated in the same manner as *Grazmach* Sera or ended up in prison. In addition to giving capital and prison sentences to nationalist dissidents, Haile Selassie took a number of steps that clearly indicate his attempt, 'to prevent the development of strong ethnic loyalties where they do not already exist, and to supplement ethnic identification with allegiance to a central Ethiopian government and Ethiopian [Amhara–Tigre] traditions'.[28] One of the major policy instruments adopted by Haile Selassie to counter the development of consciousness among his non-Amhara subjects was linguistic homogenization of his empire. This attempt at linguistic and cultural homogenization of peoples by Ethiopian rulers since the end of the nineteenth century is generally known as 'Amharization', and was similar to the Russification of the Russian empire by the Czars. Haile Selassie saw in ethnic languages, and particularly *afaan Oromoo*, an obstacle to his 'nation-building' project. Hence, possession of Oromo literature was declared illegal, and existing works in the Oromo language were destroyed.

If the Italian occupation of Ethiopia gave the Oromo a short respite from the harsh rule imposed upon them by Amhara government and landlords, his exile during that period helped Haile Selassie to gain moral, diplomatic, military and financial support from the West which never questioned the legitimacy of his rule over his conquered subjects or doubted the morality of their own involvement on his side. Haile Selassie relied upon external military assistance to suppress uprisings which flared in several regions in the two decades after his return from exile.

External support to the Haile Selassie regime was not limited to the military and diplomatic sphere. Expatriate scholars, for their part,

25. Cited in Harold Marcus, *Ethiopia, Great Britain and the United States, 1941–1974: The politics of Empire,* (University of California Press, Berkeley), 1983, p. 23.
26. Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, 379.
27. Sbacchi, *Ethiopia Under Mussolini*, p. 224.
28. G. A. Lipsky, *Ethiopia: Its people, its society, its culture,* (HRAF Press, New Haven, 1962), p. 11.

rendered ideological support to Haile Selassie's politics of Oromo assimilation. Margery Perham argued that a, 'development of Oromo nationalism that would be so disastrous to Ethiopia' could be avoided if language and religion were used as instruments of assimilation.[29] In her widely read book, *The Government of Ethiopia*, she maintained that, 'The spread of Amharic, through its official use, and through the schools, will reinforce the process of assimilation amongst the Gallas [Oromo] and the other peoples'.[30] Perham believed that the imposition of Amharic on non-Amharas and particularly the Oromo would not create problems and that 'the process of their assimilation, if the ardour of . . . bureaucrats can be restrained, could be carried on almost painlessly'.[31] Christopher Clapham, who seems also to be sympathetic to the imperial ideology and its 'civilizing mission', regarded the Ethiopian Empire as 'an assimilatory system, in which initially conquered territories were gradually involved in the national policy through the spread of the Amharic language, Orthodox Christianity, and the political culture associated with the imperial court'.[32] There were even those who believed that the work of 'civilizing', (by which was meant assimilating), the Oromo was almost complete soon after the policy was formally implemented. Czeslaw Jesman, for example maintained that 'The double solvent of the Ethiopian Church and of the political institution of the Ethiopian empire . . . worked wonders on the Galla. . . . The Ethiopian formula of assimilating the Galla has succeeded. . . . The alternative, Italian [sic] formula of laying foundations for an articulate Galla nation has failed completely.'[33] Thus, the Oromo, as Ernest Gellner has aptly remarked, were perceived by Ethiopian and Somali rulers as 'an enormous population of Adams and Eves, from whom the apple of ethnicity had as yet been withheld',[34] and who would just learn the 'national' language of their conquerors, become de-Oromized and turn

29. Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, pp. 377.
30. Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, pp. 379–80.
31. Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, pp. 379.
32. Christopher Clapham, 'Centralization and Local Response in Ethiopia', *African Affairs*, 74, 294 (1975), p. 80. Both Margery Perham and Christopher Clapham do not deny the oppression of the Oromo and other nationalities under Ethiopian regimes, yet they seem to abhor the view that the Oromo might establish their own state. To be fair, Perham's attitude to the Ethiopian state seems to be quite ambivalent. While she advocated the assimilation of the Oromo into the Amhara state, she also commented: 'The provisions in the United Nations Charter for the direction of international interest upon the conditions of the backward people who have been annexed to the empires of foreign rulers, which have been willingly accepted by Great Britain, would seem to apply with complete propriety to the regions and people conquered by Menelik'. Perham, *The Government of Ethiopia*, p. 366.
33. Czeslaw Jesman, *The Ethiopian Paradox*, (Oxford University Press, London, 1963), pp. 57–58.
34. Ernest Gellner, in his *Nations and Nationalism* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1983), noted: 'At the time of the temporarily successful Somali advance against the Ethiopians in the 1970s, it was plausible, and from the Somali point of view attractive, to present the Oromo as a kind of a human population without a set form, a pre-ethnic raw material, waiting to be turned either into Amharas or into Somalis by the turn of political fortune and religious conversion'. See pp. 84–85.

into Amharic-speaking Orthodox Christians or Somali-speaking Muslims. In the conventional academic discourse of many 'Ethiopianists', the Oromo were not regarded as cultural subjects with their own language and history but as mere recipients of other people's culture. The assumption was, and still is, that modernization and development would relegate any ethnic sentiment that the Oromo might entertain to a folkloristic trivia over which an Ethiopian identity would prevail. Contrary to the assumptions held by the rulers of Imperial Ethiopia and expatriate scholars, ethnic consciousness among the Oromo had been provoked, among other things, by the methods used to implement the policy of Amharization.

Haile Selassie's 'nation-building' project implemented

As already indicated, the administrative apparatus and the school system became the primary means in the implementation of the imperial regime's programme of building an Ethiopian nation. To that end Amharic was declared the official national language of Ethiopia and the medium of instruction in all elementary schools throughout the empire in 1943; all other indigenous languages were proscribed and the use of Oromo literature for educational or religious purposes was banned.[35] Christian missionary activities became the subject of an imperial decree which prohibited the use of the Oromo language for teaching and preaching. The possession of Oromo literature including the Bible became illegal.[36] Haile Selassie's post-war language policy not only banned Oromo literacy and any sort of literature in all non-Amhara ethnic languages of the empire, but also restricted their use even for verbal communications in public and state institutions; the schools, churches, law courts, and public offices. The implementation of the linguistic farce was described vividly by Paul Baxter who writes,

> Oromo was denied any official status and it was not permissible to publish, preach, teach or broadcast in any Oromo dialect. In court or before an official an Oromo had to speak Amharinya or use an interpreter. Even a case between two Oromo before an Oromo speaking magistrate had to be heard in Amharinya. I sat through a mission service at which the preacher and all the congregation were Oromo but at which the sermon, as well as the service, was given first in Amharinya, which few of the congregation understood at all, and then translated into Oromo. The farce had to be played out in case a Judas informed and the district officer fined or imprisoned the preacher.[37]

Thus, the Oromo were told, and some of them were even made to believe, that their language did not belong to the public sphere. A study

35. *Imperial Decree*, No. 3, of 1994.
36. *Imperial Decree*, No. 3, of 1994.
37. Paul T. W. Baxter, 'Ethiopia's Unacknowledged Problem: The Oromo', *African Affairs* 77, 308 (1978), p. 288.

conducted by the Law Faculty of the Haile Selassie I University in 1969 confirmed this and indicated that in nearly all of the courts located in the south, the judges used only Amharic although in most of these courts one or several of the judges spoke the indigenous language.[38] Parties to law suits spoke often only indigenous languages and much time and money was spent on interpretation. The litigants paid for the interpretation which often no one in the court-room cared to follow.

Politicians, development planners and social scientists often see linguistic homogenization as a necessary step to social and economic development. In Ethiopia, however, the policy of 'one language one nation' when implemented became rather an obstacle to socio-economic development. Insistence on the use of a single language prevented vital information from reaching the majority of the population. For example, the state-owned Radio Ethiopia (the only one in the country) broadcast programmes on such themes as health, education, and agriculture only in Amharic. One such programme dealt with improved methods of coffee cultivation, but nearly all coffee cultivators were non-Amhara peasants who spoke no Amharic; consequently the programme benefited very few coffee farmers. The 'Amharic only' policy of the Ethiopian regimes also greatly hampered Oromo education for many decades. In the 1960s, it was reported that 83 per cent of the children who started school dropped out before they reached sixth grade.[39] As Randi Balsvik wrote:

> The fact that all instruction in the primary schools was in Amharic . . . severely hampered the learning capacity of all those children whose first language was not Amharic. The appalling number of primary school drop-outs, especially between the first and second grade, must to some extent be related to problems of communication.[40]

The attrition rate remained very high for decades. Statistical estimates from the Ministry of Education for the 1980s indicate that 80 per cent of those children who started primary education dropped-out before they reached the sixth grade. About 40 per cent of the drop-outs occurred from the first grade.[41] The imposition of Amharic as the only medium of instruction resulted not only in high rates of school drop-outs but also made it difficult for the non-Amhara subjects to acquire basic literacy.

38. Copper, R. and Fasil Nahum, 'Language in Court' in M. Bender, R. Cooper & C. Ferguson (eds), *Language in Ethiopia* (Oxford University Press, London, 1976), pp. 256–263.
39. R. Balsvik, *Haile Sellassie's Students: The intellectual and social background of revolution, 1952–1977* (East Lansing, Michigan State University, 1985), p. 7.
40. Balsvik, *Haile Sellassie's Students*, p. 10.
41. Computed from C. McNab, *Language Policy and Language Practice*, PhD thesis, Institute of International Education, University of Stockholm 1989, Table 6.7, p. 75.

Socio-psychological and integrational consequences

Oromo children reacted to this degrading experience in different ways. Many felt rejected and unwelcome in the educational institutions and simply dropped-out of school, contributing to the startling rates mentioned above. The method used to teach Amharic to non-Amhara children, the attitudes of most of the Amharic teachers, and the social environment of the schools were neither conductive to learning Amharic nor persuasive in developing a sense of identity with Ethiopia. The schools failed to bridge the gulf between the dominant *naftanya* settlers, and hence the Ethiopian state which they represented and the Oromo or other conquered peoples in the south for a variety of reasons. The Ethiopian school classroom in the south, particularly during the pre-revolution period was more or less a replica of the wider colonial society in which it was located. The behaviour of the Amhara teachers towards children from indigenous families was little different from the attitudes of Amhara administrators, judges and policemen towards the conquered populations. As was the case in the wider society, ethnic identity and language were also related to social prestige, status and power in the school environment. The powerlessness and indignity adult Oromos experienced in their contacts with Abyssinian officials and landlords was felt even more by Oromo children at school, before their Amharic teachers and among Amharic-speaking classmates who were in the majority even in the Oromo region. Before the 1970s most of the teachers and nearly all of the Amharic teachers were Amhara. The problem was not that the teachers spoke Amharic, but the fact that children who did not speak Amharic were expected to communicate in it from the very first day of school. Hence, when an Oromo child started school he/she was often placed in a state of uncertainty and insecurity because even in 'a predominantly Oromo-speaking area, linguistic communication between pupils and teachers was impossible at the early stages of primary education'.[42] Non-Amhara children were often prevented from using their own language in the classroom, and were constantly reminded that their mother tongue was too 'uncultivated' to be used in a 'civilized' environment such as the school compound.

The alienation and frustration of the Oromo and other non-Amhara school children were deepened by the methods and attitude of their teachers. The most difficult period occurred as a child started to use the few Amharic words he/she had learnt for communication with the teacher. Ethnic prejudice rather than pedagogic guidance was often reflected in the teacher–pupil relation since, instead of pointing out the correct language, many Amharic teachers chose to ridicule children

42. Nagassa Ejeta, cited in McNab, *Language Policy and Language Practice*, p. 135.

whenever they made grammatical errors or mispronounced Amharic words. Sometimes classmates joined the teacher in laughing at the 'erring' child.[43] It was in these circumstances that such perjorative concepts as *tabtaabaa Galla* ('the stammering/inarticulate Galla') and *gamad aaf Galla* ('mute Galla') were coined by the Amhara to apply to those who spoke incorrect Amharic. Lack of knowledge of the Amharic language was equated more or less with 'barbarism' while the ability to speak it correctly was seen as a sign of being 'civilized' and having superior status. Knowledge of the Oromo language was seen as a mark of illiteracy and backwardness as the school pressed Oromo children to learn Amharic and conform to Amhara culture. The education given in the schools and the attitude of the school authorities even exaggerated cultural and status differences, promoted an ideology of ethnic hierarchy and hindered the cultivation of a sense of belonging. The message was clear: the non-Amhara children needed to learn Amharic to be 'civilized' and 'Ethiopianized' not only in order to gain respect and recognition as citizens but also to be considered candidates for employment in the administrative, educational, judicial and military institutions. Before 1991, it was impossible to get a job even as a cleaner, gardener or guard in public institutions, or even with private firms without a knowledge of Amharic.

By excluding the cultures and histories of the non-Abyssinian peoples from its curriculum, the school system was working against the very purposes it was meant to accomplish—social integration and assimilation. It invoked differences without any regard to the consequences. In its narratives of Oromo conquest by the Abyssinians, Ethiopian historiography exaggerated the superiority of the conquerors and inferiority of the conquered.[44] Since it depicted them as a people that had nothing to contribute to Ethiopian civilization, the message that the history classes imparted was that the Oromo had no common heritage with their

43. It was this, rather than the incapacity or unwillingness to learn the Amharic language, which often led to the very high rates of school drop-out mentioned by several writers. It is interesting to note that not only the less-educated teachers but also graduates from teacher training colleges were responsible for this sort of psychologically and socially damaging behaviour. When I was in school, we had in grade six, an Amhara (from a *naftanya* background) who taught us science. He used to 'supplement' every roll call by making derogatory remarks about our Oromo names and culture. Partly because of him many of the older pupils stopped coming to school.

44. Supporting this view, Edward Ullendorff, in *The Ethiopians*, first published in 1960, argued that the monophysite Christian Abyssinians (Amhara-Tigre) alone embody and represent Ethiopia, internally as well as in the eyes of the outside world. In a 20 page long chapter devoted to language, Ullendorff makes mention of *afaan Oromoo* in three lines. All in all the non-Semitic languages, spoken by about 75 per cent of the Ethiopian population were mentioned in only nine lines. Ullendorff argued, 'We shall mainly confine ourselves . . . to Semitic languages of Ethiopia, since they express the "real" Abyssinia as we know it and are the virtually exclusive carriers of Ethiopian civilization, literature, and intellectual prestige'. (1973 ed., pp. 111–12). Ullendorff's book was used as a text book at the University in Addis Ababa, and won him the Haile Selassie I Prize in 1972.

conquerors, and that a common future can be aspired to only if the Oromo were Amharized. The exclusive ideology inherent in Amharization made Oromo and Ethiopian identities incompatible. Thus, as Edmond Keller has rightly pointed out, 'rather than education serving as an agent of national integration, it contributed to the alienation of ethnic minorities from the Ethiopian state'.[45]

There were mixed reactions to the Ethiopian language policy as implemented by the school: outright rejection, resentment, and an attempt to 'cease to be Oromo' in order to be accepted and escape being the undesirable 'outsider'. Those who dropped or tried to drop their ethnic identity, 'were not only ashamed to speak their language in public', but became also contemptuous of their heritage. In a desperate move to hide their identity, and often with the persuasion and coercion of their Amharic teachers and school administrators, they changed their given Oromo names into Christian/Amhara names.[46] The result of such attempts were not always the desired new and higher social status, but an identity crisis. Assimilated Oromos were constantly reminded of their background, either by unassimilated relatives or by the Amharas themselves. In other words, assimilation did not gain educated Oromos automatic acceptance by the Amhara. If not socially, psychologically many of the Amharized Oromos remained marginalized individuals in the sense that they were poised on the edge of two distinct societies without being fully part of either. Karl Eric Knutsson comments about these individuals in ethnic borderlands as follows:

> Amharization does not mean, however, that there is a complete change of a person's ethnic status. There is definitely a loss in his original ethnic identity. it will be said about him that he is not 'Galla [Oromo] any longer', he likes to be 'like Amhara'. But he will nevertheless not be accepted as Amhara either by his original group or by the Amhara. He has lost part of this ethnic identity without gaining a new one.[47]

In Amharic, an assimilated Oromo was referred to as *ye-selettene Galla* (the 'civilized Galla'), and hence a separate category between *ye-meeda* ('wild') *Galla*, (the non-Amharized majority who were considered to be beyond the pale of civilization), and the 'true' Ethiopian—the Amhara. In the ethnic hierarchy of Ethiopian society, assimilated Oromo were positioned lower than the Amhara but higher than the unassimilated Oromo. Thus, they were halfway between two worlds, and often felt that they did not belong to

45. Edmond Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia. From Empire to People's Republic.* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1988), p. 140.
46. Lemma Arity, cited in McNab, *Language Policy and Language Practice*, p. 59.
47. K. E. Knutsson, 'Dichotomization and Integration: Aspects of inter-ethnic relations in Southern Ethiopia' in F. Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1969), p. 98.

either of them.[48] As an intermediate category, the Amharized Oromo polarized and widened the distance between the 'authentic' Amhara and the Oromo. As Karl Eric Knutsson has stated, 'the ... policy to ethiopianize, which was tantamount to amharize, the subject groups in order to facilitate integration often had the opposite effect: ethnic identities became emphasized and polarization on ethnic grounds was increased.'[49] The educational system which produced this sort of estrangement naturally sowed some seeds of awareness among Oromo students. The language policy of the Ethiopian regimes was resented by the Oromo and the other non-Amhara ethnic groups, not only because it disadvantaged them in the acquisition of modern education, information and employment, 'but also because of the implication it had for the destruction of their own languages and cultures'.[50] As the small and slowly increasing class of educated Oromos came of age in the 1960s, pan-Oromo consciousness started to manifest itself, and for the first time, the issue of language became an important ingredient in the conflict between the Oromo and their Amhara rulers, the hegemonic 'custodians' of the Ethiopian state.

Early manifestations of resistance

The Oromo continued to resist the exploitation of their economic resources as well as the suppression of their cultural and linguistic heritage. While there were several local armed uprisings against the oppression of the imperial government in the Oromo country in the 1940s and 1950s, individual efforts were also made to preserve Oromo culture and language. Among such initiatives taken by individuals, that of Sheik Abubaker Usman Oda from the eastern regions of Hararghe, was outstanding. Abubaker, who is popularly known as.Bakri, was an Islamic scholar and teacher; he has written several works both in the Oromo and Arabic languages which deal with secular as well as religious subjects. These works contain a wealth of information which shows Bakri's views about the oppression to which the Oromo were subjected under Ethiopian colonial administration.[51] In addition to his writings, Bakri made a remarkable contribution by creating an Oromo alphabet. Having realized that both the Arabic and Ge'ez (Ethiopic) orthographies were unsuitable to

48. cf., Alfred Schutz, 'The Stranger: An essay in social psychology' in *Collected papers II*, Brodersen (ed.), (Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1976). Schutz describes the situation of a stranger, an immigrant, who seeks to 'cease to be' and 'gear into' hiding himself in order to escape being the undesirable 'other'. Therefore, he chooses assimilation to adapt to his situation. He becomes, however, dissatisfied with the result and remains a stranger because there is an insurmountable cultural and psychological barrier between him and the group he meets.

49. Knutsson, 'Dichotomization and Integration', p. 98.

50. Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia*, p. 140.).

51. Mohammed Hassen, 'The Growth of Written Oromo Literature', in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Resource Mobilization for the Liberation of Oromia*. (University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 31 July–1 August, 1993), p. 79.

transcribe Oromo phonology, he developed a script which gained popularity in the eastern Oromo regions in the 1950s and 1960s, before the Ethiopian authorities discovered and suppressed it, and then imprisoned him.[52] Bakri survived the Haile Selassie regime, but was forced to flee the 'Red Terror' of the Mengistu regime in 1978: he died in 1980 in a refugee camp in Somalia at the age 85. The impact his work had on a younger generation of Oromo nationalists is reflected in the following lines from an obituary dedicated to him by one of his students.

> Bakri is the very life of our countrymen,
> consider his work and learn!
> Let his spiritual greatness be in your heart,
> to be with you for ever!
> He died for the faith you embrace;
> he died for the country you love.
> One who dies for his country does not die;
> he is never lost from the heart of his people.[53]

The late 1960s saw some changes in the language policy of the empire, and four ethnic vernaculars, Tigrinya, Tigre, Somali and Afar, were used by the government-owned radio stations. However, use of the Oromo language remained proscribed.[54] The exclusion of the Oromo language from the mass-media, while use of the vernaculars of the smaller nationalities was permitted, can be explained only by the comparative linguistic, cultural and political weight it carried. If competition were allowed, it is only the Oromo language which had the potential to compete with Amharic. As mentioned above, the Oromo language is not only spoken by the largest ethnic group 40–50 per cent of the total population in Ethiopia, but it is also used as a *lingua franca* among several smaller ethnic groups in the south and southwest.[55] Since the other ethnic groups, separately or in combination, lack the demographic weight of the Oromo they pose no threat to official Ethiopian nationalism even if allowed linguistic freedom.

The overall effect of the Amharization policy was not very significant. It did not result in a massive expansion of Amharic among the conquered peoples. A survey of language use in Ethiopian markets conducted in the early 1970s showed that Amharic was not used as a *lingua franca*, but rather

52. Hassen, 'The Growth of Written Oromo Literature', p. 81.
53. Shayk M. Rashad, cited in Hassen, 'The Growth of Written Oromo Literature', p. 81.
54. McNab, *Language Policy and Language Practice*, p. 81. She writes 'Languages of major ethnic groups were not even permitted to be used if that group was not seen as potentially a danger to the central government. Therefore Oromigna, . . . was not used for broadcasting.' She is completely wrong. Ethiopian regimes saw the Oromo as a source of danger to their rule and repressed their language and identify more than any other ethnic group in the empire.
55. The use of the Oromo language is widely spread among ethnic groups such s the Burji, Gurage, Kaficho, etc. In 1982, the present author while conducting research among Berta refugees in the Sudan found that more than 90 per cent of them spoke Oromo. The Berta who inhabited a sub-province in western Ethiopia since the 1880s, constitute since 1992 one of the autonomous ethnic regions created by the present regime.

that transactions relied upon the multi-lingualism of the traders.[56] There are several reasons for the failure of Amharic in becoming a language of wider communication. First, in a pre-industrial and multinational empire like Ethiopia, imposition of the culture and language of a minority on every individual and every ethnic group was an unachievable goal. Such a project requires enormous resources to implement and is beyond the capacity of an agrarian and technologically backward state. Even where and when resources are available, and the empire builders who attempt to implement such a policy posses modern technology, subjective factors could often hinder the success of such projects. The failure of the 130 year long French experiment of linguistic assimilation in the Maghreb illustrates the futility of such efforts.[57] Up to the 1980s, the rate of literacy in Ethiopia remained at less than 10 per cent in general and at less than 5 per cent in the conquered territories of the south. The main channel for spreading Amharic literacy was in the schools, but only a minority of children went to school and were thus exposed to Amharic in a classroom situation. The few available schools could enrol only about 10 per cent of the children of school-going age.[58] Only a tiny fraction of those who attended school were Oromos. Cooper notes that 'the ancient association of Amharic with Coptic Christianity may have retarded the spread of amharic among Ethiopian Muslims'.[59] The majority of the Oromos are Muslims.

Language as a factor in pan-Oromo movement

In Ethiopia the 1960s was a decade that saw many events with far reaching implications. Among these developments was an upsurge of ethnic and neighbourhood voluntary organizations that aimed at collective self-help. The genesis of a modern pan-Oromo political movement began with one such self-help organization known as the Macha Tulama. Started in the early 1960s by the few Oromo intellectuals, the organization aimed first to develop education, health, communication and social welfare facilities in the Oromo areas. Thus its purpose was to promote socio-economic development and not to promote the politics of ethnic identity.

56. R. L. Cooper and S. Carpenter, 'Language in the Market', in *Language in Ethiopia*, pp. 244–255.
57. Between 1830 and 1962, the French administration attempted to bring about linguistic homogeneity of its Berber and Arab subjects in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. Compared to imperial Ethiopia, France had several means at her disposal to carry out the task. The French had communication facilities which were far superior to that which the Abyssinians possessed. According to Charles F. Gallagher, 'North African Problems and Prospects: Language and identity in Fishman, Ferguson, and Das Gupta (eds) *Language Problems of Developing Nations*, pp. 129–149, by 1962, as many as 12 million (41·4 per cent of the total population) North Africans were speaking French; 2·5 million (8·6 per cent) could read and write in it. But learning French did not make Algerians Tunisians and Moroccans into Frenchmen. French rule and culture was resisted and North Africans chose to remain Arabs and Berbers or Tunisians, Algerians and Moroccans.
58. McNab, *Language Policy and Language Practice*, p. 64.
59. R. L. Cooper, 'The Spread of Amharic', in *Language in Ethiopia*, pp. 289–304.

Several factors interacted to turn it into a political movement. Among the important issues that the organization took up was the status of the Oromo language. The cementing bond of the regionally divided, religiously diversified and socially stratified members of the Macha Tulama was their language. It is no wonder, therefore, that revival and preservation of the Oromo language and culture became also a preoccupation of the organization, although this was not mentioned explicitly as its *raison d'etre*. A nationwide mobilization based on a common language, common experience under imperialism, and belief in descent from a common ancestor was set in motion and started to stir Oromo cultural nationalism. A sense of pride in themselves, their language and culture that was seriously eroded by their socialization in the Ethiopian schools was restored among many educated Oromos.

In the many meetings conducted by the Macha Tulama, Tadesse Birru, the leading figure of the organization, 'linked his appeal to the dignity of Oromo culture, a culture that he emphasized was being destroyed at the hands of the Amhara', and 'sensitized the Oromo to the importance of their culture and language and to the contradictions inherent in the emerging politico-economic system'.[60] The organization gave support to cultural troupes organized by Oromo youth. To promote literacy, it donated significant amounts of money and land towards the construction of schools in several districts.[61] The demands of the Macha Tulama were moderate and limited to educational opportunities, cultural and linguistic rights within the framework of a multi-ethnic Ethiopia. However, the Amhara rulers, who themselves have not known similar subjugation, were insensitive to the feelings and aspirations of the Oromo. Although the national question was becoming more and more complicated in the 1960s as the Oromo took up arms in Bale, and other nationalities, particularly in Eritrea and the Ogaden, were doing the same to demand their rights, Haile Selassie was not ready to make any concessions. He adhered to his plans of 'nation-building' through forced assimilation of his non-Amhara subjects. The Macha Tulama was banned in 1966, and most of its prominent members and leaders were arrested and jailed. Two of the leaders were condemned to death for what the regime called 'subversive activities against the state, and for disseminating false propaganda in an effort to divide the Ethiopian people'.[62] It should be noted that since the aim of the Macha Tulama was not Oromo secession from Ethiopia, what the imperial courts labelled 'effort to divide the Ethiopian people' can be understood as the association's demand for cultural rights and recognition

60. Keller, *Revolutionary Ethiopia*, p. 162.
61. Several members of the association made very generous material contributions towards the construction of schools.
62. Reported in *The Ethiopian Herald*, 3 August 1968.

of Oromo identity which included the use of the Oromo language. Notwithstanding its short life, the Macha Tulama movement became a milestone in the history of the on-going cultural and political awakening among the Oromo.[63] It also dispelled the wrong belief about the 'readiness' of the Oromo to assimilate and Amharize. The frailty of the assimilationist assumption was made even clearer by actions of members of the organization, who previously were, or seemed to be, totally Amharized or assimilated, but now who publicly resumed their Oromo identity and began to speak for the Oromo cause.

Although the rising Oromo demand for the recognition of their identity and equality of citizenship was seriously affected by the fate of the Macha Tulama, it was not totally stopped. Armed resistance continued to expand in the provinces of Bale and Sidamo up to 1970, and Oromo students at the Haile Selassie University made significant attempts to continue with the work started by the organization, particularly in the areas of culture and language. Beginning in the mid 1960s, university students began to be active in Ethiopian politics and to oppose the *ancien regime* of Haile Selassie. However, as Balsvik has correctly observed, the students, and Amhara students in particular, supported the government policy of linguistic and cultural assimilation. Student publications from the mid 1960s, resented the use on the campus of what they called 'tribal' language and regarded it as a manifestation of tribalism and opposition to Ethiopian unity.[64] That the use of these languages was, to their speakers, not only a natural thing to do but also an expression of their culture and identity rather than dissidence of any kind was totally discounted in such discourse. At least in the beginning, the use of non-official languages such as Oromo and Tigrinya on the university campuses was an expression of identity. It was only continued suppression that gradually turned these languages into instruments of resistance and revolt.

Some of the students thought that the only way of working against linguistic and cultural humiliation was elevating the Oromo language from the inferior status to which it had been relegated by the imperial order. In the past, educated Oromos usually took pride in their mastery of Amharic and tried to speak it as native speakers. The beginning of the 1970s saw

63. Regarding the role of the Macha Tulama Association in the awakening of Oromo national consciousness see Mekuria Bulcha, 'The Survival and Reconstruction of Oromo National Identity', in P. T. W. Baxter, Jan Hultin and Alessandro Triulzi (eds), *Being and Becoming Oromo* (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, 1996), pp. 48–66. In the same volume, see also Mohammed Hassen, 'The Development of Oromo Nationalism', pp. 67–80.

64. Balsvik, *Haile Sellassie's Students*, pp. 280–281, wrote that, 'A letter to *News and Views* [a student paper] in 1964 resentfully noted . . . the development of provincial languages and customs and that "tribal languages" such as Tigrinya, Orominya, and Guraginya were increasing spoken on the campus. The lack of objection to Amharization revealed in this comment was probably quite common, especially among Amhara students, before the level of consciousness about the ethnic issue prevented such comments from appearing in student papers.'

a radical change in their attitude towards the national language. In order to register their protest against the language policy of the state and show also pride in their own mother tongue, university students, particularly in public, began to speak deliberately broken Amharic with an Oromo accent. At the same time, they also began to use their language on university campuses and school compounds. Writing in the Oromo language, however, proved to be more difficult than speaking it in public. Publishing materials in it needed skill and resources. Distributing them in an environment swarming with security agents and informers was also risky. Nevertheless, clandestine publications in Oromo started to appear on and off the university campus in the capital. While some of the authors who contributed articles to these publications criticized the imperial system that denigrated their culture, language and identity, there were also those who stressed the need to stick to their roots and reminded and persuaded the Oromo to give due importance to their language and history.[65] Even if the volume was limited, the contents of these publications indicated a growing national consciousness among the incipient Oromo intelligentsia, and their determination to defend and restore an identity that the imperial educational programme was meant to suppress and replace by an Ethiopian identity.[66]

Thus, in spite of Haile Selassie's policy of linguistic and cultural assimilation, and perhaps even as a reaction to it, ethnic consciousness continued to gain ground among the Oromo and the other subjugated peoples of the empire. When in 1974, Haile Selassie's long career as Emperor and 'nation-builder' came to an end through a popular revolt against his regime, Amharic was far from being the language of the majority in Ethiopia. The different ethnic groups were far from being integrated and united into a nation. This was even the case at the level of the educated elites who, in the beginning of the 1970s were already being fragmented along ethnic lines. Hence, in spite of his efforts, what Haile Selassie left behind was an Ethiopian empire and not an Ethiopian nation.

The Ethiopian revolution: unfulfilled promises

One of the main issues that the military regime or *Dergue* (in Amharic) which ousted Haile Selassie promised to tackle was the grievance of the various nationalities with regard to the suppression of their cultures and languages. It declared, therefore that 'each nationality will have regional

65. One of these publications, *Kana Bektaa?* ('Do You Know?') was from 1969–71 and took up cultural, linguistic and historical themes in order to make its readers aware. Another document, *The Oromos: Voice against tyranny*, (1971), described the oppression that the Oromo suffered under Amhara colonial rule and called upon its readers to rise up and fight for freedom.

66. For a detailed description of the role of modern education and the intelligentsia in the development of Oromo nationalism, see Mekuria Bulcha, 'Modern Education and Social Movements in the Development of Political Consciousness: The Case of the Oromo', *African Sociological Review* 1 (1997), pp. 30–65.

autonomy to decide on matters concerning its internal affairs. Within its environs, it has the right to determine the contents of its political, economic and social life, use its own language and elect its own leaders.'[67] The declared intentions of the *Dergue* were widely and loudly expressed through the state controlled mass-media. Eagerly seizing the opportunity the declaration purported to offer them, the Oromo quickly organized cultural activities and worked out a literacy programme. Some started to translate books from other languages into the Oromo language. An Oromo weekly, *Bariisaa*, (Dawn) was also launched. The story of *Bariisaa*, is interesting because it casts light on the interconnections between ethnicity and language in Ethiopian politics.[68] Above all it established the unifying role that the Oromo language has among its speakers. Although *Bariisaa* was launched by a few individuals, it was able to engage many Oromos in the capital city and the provinces and inspire a movement of sorts. Because they considered the paper their own, people from all walks of life contributed money towards its production and participated in its distribution. It brought together many Oromos from different regions. In 1977, a cultural show involving troupes from most of the Oromo regions was staged to raise funds for the production and distribution of the paper. The show was a great success in many respects. For those who were responsible for its organization, the cultural show was an assertion of a national identity. And it was also understood as such by its audience and the military regime, which made an unsuccessful attempt to stop it at the last minute.

The linguistic and cultural freedom promised by the *Dergue* did not last very long. The regime went back on its word and started to repress the use of the Oromo and other indigenous languages. Instead of encouraging voluntary integration of the different ethnic groups in Ethiopia's socio-political structure, unity was demanded by force. The *Dergue* labelled any manifestations of ethnic identity as 'narrow-nationalism' and counter-revolutionary, dealing very severely with those involved. Thus despite the rhetoric of revolution the Ethiopian state was not ready to re-define itself, change its Amhara identity for a multi-cultural and multi-national one. Mengistu's socialist ideology converged with the imperialist ideology of his predecessors, and he continued with their politics of centralization and homogenization of the multi-national and multi-cultural empire. Amharic, as the language of government and administration remained as it had been during the Haile Selassie period, becoming even more established at all levels of government and administration. Moreover, the regime allocated considerable resources for the development and promotion of Amharic as a national language in the schools and for the mass-media in general.

67. See the 'Programme of the National Democratic Revolution', *Basic Documents of the Ethiopian Government*, (1977).
68. See Mekuria Bulcha, 'The Language Policies of Ethiopian Regimes', pp. 108–109.

The language policy of the *Dergue* was, in effect, a continuation of the imperial policy of Amharization. The regime was even more successful in the implementation of that policy than its predecessors. Through its educational and literacy programmes, and the programme of 'demographic colonization' which was conducted through forced settlement of hundreds of thousands of Amharas and Tigreans in Oromia and other regions in the south and southwest, through the state owned mass-media, and the peasant associations and other forms of mass-organizations that it had initiated and implemented, the *Dergue* was able to spread Amharic throughout the non-Amhara regions of the empire. However, even if the *Dergue*'s language policy was relatively more successful than its predecessors, its rule also became a turning point for the decades-long process of gradual linguistic and cultural homogenization of Ethiopia. Although the numbers of Oromos who learnt Amharic increased at a greater speed after the revolution, the Amharization programme was paralleled by a linguistic and cultural revival campaign conducted by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The Oromo national awakening process which began in the 1960s, and was encouraged by the initial promise of the revolution with regard to nationality rights, could not be deterred by the *Dergue*'s change of policy from what was promised. The revolution brought out thousands of assimilated Oromo who were hiding behind Amharic names and who were speaking the Amharic language before the revolution. They declared not only that they were Oromos, but many also dropped their Amharic names and took Oromo ones. Very few, if any, Oromo children born after 1974 were given Amharic names by their parents. In spite of the efforts of the Dergue, Amharization was losing ground on some of the fronts where it used to make critical encroachments on Oromo ethnic identity.

The revival of the Oromo language

It is common knowledge that the *Dergue* was challenged by various national liberation fronts during the entire period of its rule. As most of these fronts were led by educated elites, the opposition faced by the military rulers was also qualitatively and quantitatively much different from, and larger than, that which faced the pre-revolution regime. Both the gun and the pen were used in the struggle against the *Dergue*. The OLF, for example, developed cultural and linguistic programmes in its areas of operation. In its political programme issued in October 1974, the Front stated one of its objectives to be: 'To develop the Oromo language and bring it out of the neglect that colonialism has imposed upon it'.[69] The

69. *The Political Programme of the Oromo Liberation Front*, Finfinnee, 1976. An OLF occasional publication states: 'All the legal methods used to revive and popularize Oromo national culture and language have always been met with violent repression by the Ethiopian

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effort to develop Oromo culture and language was considered as a major aspect of the struggle for national revival, and a literacy programme was implemented alongside armed struggle from the very beginning. Literacy in the Oromo language was made a requirement to become a fighter or member in the Front in order to emphasize the importance given to linguistic revival. The Front adopted the Latin script, developed an appropriate alphabet and began to print various educational and political literature. By 1982, a range of primary school textbooks and readers along with a teachers' handbook and literacy material for adults were published. Mohammed Hassen has commented on this development:

> When I visited the liberated areas of western Wallaga, I witnessed for the first time in my life, Oromo men and women, young and old learning in their language. I was truly impressed by the amount of literary material which I saw ion the areas controlled by the OLF. Before my visit to the liberated areas of Wallaga, I never imagined that every subject from science to political economy, from philosophy to poetry, was written in and taught by Afaan Oromo.[70]

The OLF literacy programme was also adopted by Oromos in the diaspora. In the 1970s and 1980s, the policies of the military regime generated the largest group of refugees in Africa. A large proportion of these refugees were Oromos. It was Oromo refugees in the Sudan, Djibouti and Somalia who became the first to adopt the OLF programme and who started literacy classes in their own language.[71] Their example was followed by Oromo organizations in Europe, the Middle East and gradually by those in North America. Elementary education for refugee children in Sudan and a radio programme broadcast over *Sagalee Adda Bilisummaa Oromoo* were implemented during the second half of the 1980s. The 1980s saw also a rapid rise of interest among Oromo scholars in history, culture and language. Significant contributions were made to Oromo historical research with a focus on the old Oromo socio-cultural and political system. By the mid 1980s, the Oromo had made appreciable advances in the development of the Oromo language.

The *Dergue* with its entire military force became bogged-down in the quagmire of armed conflict that it had waged against various ethnic fronts. The fall of the military regime brought a sudden halt to the Amharization process. Up to June 1991, the Ethiopian state was dominated by the Amhara. With the fall of the *Dergue*, a multi-ethnic transitional government was formed. The OLF which was one of the forces

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authorities. Our people had no choice but to resort to violent resistance to maintain their national identity and restore dignity and honour to their culture and language.' See *Oromia Speaks*, 3 (1981), p. 4.

70. Mohammed Hassen, 'The Growth of Written Oromo Literature', p. 85.

71. See for example, Ulrich Braukämper, 'Ethnic Identity and Social Change Among Oromo Refugees in the Horn of Africa', *Northeast African Studies*, 4, 3 (1983), pp. 1–15.

that brought down the military regime, was among the fronts and organizations that formed a transitional government and began operating throughout Oromo territory. Immediately after joining the transitional government in July of 1991, the OLF began a literacy programme throughout Oromia using the Latin script. The programme was enthusiastically accepted, and literacy was conducted extensively for the first time in the Oromo language. After a disruption of more than 50 years caused by the policy of Amharization, the Oromo language once again became a medium of instruction for primary education and administration in Oromia.

'Who hates his own?'

It is commonly argued that ethnic elites will often attempt to use language to mobilize the masses for their own selfish ends. Such an argument implies that 'the masses' are indifferent in regard to what languages are spoken by the rulers or used by the state institutions they live in. This is, however, not true in all cases or always. The quotation at the start of this section, a rhetorical answer given by an Oromo peasant to an American journalist who asked him if he was happy to send his child to an Oromo school, indicates that the issue of language is also the concern of ordinary men and women. As was suggested by Joseph Tubiana, when a state prohibits the use of a language in education and religious worship, and for newspapers, 'it is attacking the very culture of the community that uses it'.[72] The consequence of such an attack on a people's culture and language is felt not only by its elites but often also by members of the other sections of the society including peasants and workers. As pointed out earlier, the linguistic farce played out in Ethiopian courts and the prohibition to pray in their own language affected ordinary Oromos more than their elites who also spoke Amharic. Consequently in 1991, it was not only the educated class but the entire Oromo nation which became overwhelmed by an exhilarating sense of restored dignity and self-confidence as a plethora of cultural and linguistic activities began to appear and as promises of political self-determination were made. Oromo poetry in both its traditional and modern forms found its way into books and magazines (and even the electronic media) and became accessible to the majority of the Oromo. The themes and contents of these works are mainly social and political; they articulate the rage felt against the political, economic and cultural oppression that the Oromo had suffered under consecutive Ethiopia regimes.[73] But some of the poems and songs are

72. J. Tobiana, 'The Linguistic Approach to Self-Determination', in I. M. Lewis (ed.), *Nationalism and Self-Determination in the Horn of Africa*, (Ithaca Press, London, 1983), pp. 23–30.

73. See for example, Abdullahi A. Shongolo, 'The Poetics of Nationalism: A poem by Jaarso Waaqo Qoot'o', in *Being and Becoming Oromo*, pp. 265–290.

truly cultural and artistic; they express several aspects of Oromo culture, and stress the beauty of *afaan Oromoo* and its vast oral literature.

Before 1991, much of the available literature in the Oromo language was produced outside of Ethiopia and was initiated mostly by Oromos in the diaspora. Since 1991, many books have been published, plays have been written and staged, and millions of text-books have been printed and distributed in the Oromo language inside the country. Music bands have proliferated and the production of modern songs and music in the Oromo language is increasing at a surprising rate. Writing about the development of nationalism in Europe, Benedict Anderson has noted that 'everywhere . . . as literacy increased, it became easier to arouse popular support, with the masses discovering a new glory in the print elevation of languages they had humbly spoken all along'.[74] Similar sentiments are clearly observed among the Oromo since 1991. An American journalist who visited Ethiopia in 1994 noted that,

> Ordinary Oromo are savouring the return of cultural freedom. Now parents once more given their children Oromo names. 'Who hates his own?' said one farmer with a smile creasing his worn face. He was still unwilling to give his name after decades of repression. He paused from flailing and winnowing his grain and described the end of Amharic domination: 'We love it. We have began to practise our culture: what we forgot and what was repressed. I am pleased that Oromo has become an official language [in Oromia]. Now three of my children are in school and learn in Oromo. We have always spoken it at home.[75]

The implementation of literacy programmes in the Oromo language has enabled thousands to read and write in their mother tongue. Oromo literature is fast growing not only as a medium of communication but also as a means to establish firmly Oromo identity. This does not mean that the struggle over the status of the Oromo language is finished. Although Ethiopian state policy of linguistic homogenization and forced assimilation has suffered a tremendous set-back with the fall of the military regime, there is still strong opposition against the use of the Oromo language as a medium of instruction and administration.[76] The use of the Latin alphabet in Oromo writing has become a cause for a vehement campaign particularly from the clergy of the Orthodox Church and the Amhara elites. Their fear seems to be that by adopting the Latin alphabet, the Oromo are not only assuming a separate cultural identity from the other

74. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism,* (Verso, London, 1983), p. 77.
75. Ben Barber, 'Coming to Life: Will the Oromos' Cultural Revival Split Ethiopia?', *Culture—Crossroads,* 1994.
76. See Mekuria Bulcha, 'Priests, Religion and Language in Ethiopia', *The Oromo Commentary,* **IV**, 1 (1994), pp. 8–12; and Thomas Zitelmann, 'The Return of the Devil's Tongue: Polemics about the choice of the Roman alphabet for the Oromo language', *The Oromo Commentary,* **IV**, 2 91994), pp. 24–28.

peoples in the area, but that a separate alphabet would also lead to a separate Oromo nation. The American journalist cited above has observed,

> The Amharic elite believed that *fidel*, Amharic's unique alphabet, could be used to write Oromo words and hoped it became a national alphabet. *Fidel* graced official signs around the country. However, the Oromo rejected *fidel* and prefer to express their language in Latin characters, arguing that the Amharic alphabet does not allow them to express all their sounds correctly without ambiguity. To the Amhara, the rejection of the Amharic culture by the Oromos, the disappearance of thousands of Amharic signs from Oromo lands, and their replacement with Oromo language signs written in Latin script have been deep and shocking blows.[77]

There are both practical and ideological motives behind the adaptation of the Latin alphabet by the Oromo. Several scholars have, during the last one hundred and fifty years, argued that, for linguistic, pedagogical and practical reasons, *fidel* is not suitable for transcribing Oromo sounds and that the Latin script was an inevitable choice.[78] But there are also those who have suggested that the choice of the Latin script has not only facilitated the teaching–learning process but also greatly enhanced the psychological liberation of the Oromo people.[79]

Irrespective of the open opposition from both the Amhara elite and covert suppression by the Tigrean elite who rule Ethiopia today, the trend in the development of the Oromo language, which is now underway, is not easy to reverse. A continued development of *afaan Oromoo* during and beyond the 1990s would undoubtedly mark the end (or depending on how one sees it, the beginning) of language shift in Oromia. Amharic is a minority language of limited literary, scientific and economic value even at the regional level. Already the number of Oromos learning Amharic is decreasing. As a language of education, law, mass media and administration the Oromo language is today rapidly replacing the Amharic language in Oromia. To use Tom Nairn's words, 'the intelligentsia of nationalism have invited the masses into history; and the invitation-card is written in a language they understand'.[80] In the case of the Oromo the invitation is also enthusiastically accepted by the masses. Using the

77. Barber, 'Coming to Life'.
78. The first to point out that the Ethiopic script was unfit to write Oromo sounds was the German missionary, J. L. Krapf in 1843. See J. Krapf and C. W. Isenberg, *Journals of the Rev. Messrs. Isenberg and Krapf, Missionaries of the Church Missionary Society, Detailing Their Proceedings in the Kingdom of Shoa, and Journeys in Other Parts of Abyssinia, in the Years 1839, 1840, 1841, and 19842* (London 1843; Frank Cass & Co. reprint 1968), p. 175. Enrico Cerulli in his *The Folk-Literature of the Galla of Southern Abyssinia* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1921), p. 15, also pointed out that reading Oromo in the Ethiopic characters is 'like deciphering a secret writing'.
79. Kifle Djote, 'A Glance at Oromo Arts and Literature', *The Oromo Commentary*, **III**, 2 (1993), pp. 20–24.
80. Nairn, Tom. *The Break-up of Britain*, (New Left Books, London, 1977), p. 340, cited in Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 77.

Oromo language is not simply a question of identity any more. More and more Oromos see the revival and development of the Oromo language for modern use as a means to get access to education, knowledge, information and employment. The revival of *afaan Oromoo* has opened new job opportunities for many Oromos in cultural areas as writers, journalists, artists, publishers, and in other fields that were closed to them. This will, no doubt, enhance the development of the Oromo language.