

## Oromo

The Oromo people group also goes by the names Oromoo or Oromoota (plural) and Galla, although among the locals, "Galla" is a derogatory term. They are an ancient, traditionally pastoral people who live in western and southern Ethiopia and part of Kenya and Somalia. Originally from northern Somalia, they later migrated to the region of Lake Turkana (Lake Rudolf). In the mid-16th century, they began to move into the Ethiopian highlands. The land of the Oromo is called *Biyya-Oromo* (Oromo country) or *Oromia (Oromiya)*.



### Location

The Oromo number about 25 million and are primarily pastoral. They live largely in western and southern Ethiopia and parts of Kenya and Somalia. Ethiopia is a landlocked country close to the Red Sea. It is bordered by Sudan on the west, Eritrea on the northeast, Somalia on the East, and Kenya to the south.

### Culture

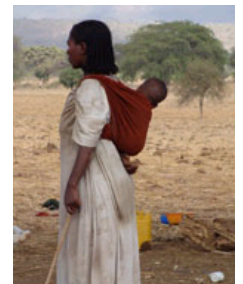
Before colonization, the Oromo people had their own social, political, and legal system. Trade and various kinds of skills such as wood and metal works, weaving, pottery and tannery flourished. Pastoralism and agriculture were well developed.

*Population:* The Oromo make up about 25 million of the present 55 million people of Ethiopia. They live in all the regions of Ethiopia except for Gondar. They are also in neighboring countries such as Kenya and Somalia. Out of the 50 nations of Africa only four have a larger population than Oromia.

Several groups of people in East Africa are very closely related to the Oromo. For instance, the Somalis are similar in appearance, language, and culture. Other Cushitic-speaking groups living in the same areas who are closely related to the Oromo are Konso, Afar, Sidama, Kambata, Darassa, Agaw, Saho, and Baja.

*Infrastructure:* Ethiopia, with a land area of over one million square kilometers and where 90% of the country's transport is by road, has a paved road network of about 4,100 km. and 9,200 km gravel roads. One railway line runs between Addis Ababa and Djibouti.

*Language:* Besides their own language, Oromo, many also speak the national language of Ethiopia, Amharic, and some speak English. The Oromo nation has a single common mother tongue and basic common culture. The Oromo language, *afaan Oromoo* or *Oromiffa*, belongs to the eastern Kushitic group of languages and is the most extensive of the forty or so Kushitic languages. The Oromo language is closely related to Konso (with more than fifty percent of the words in common), closely related to Somali, and distantly related to Afar and Saho.



Oromiffa is the mother tongue of about 25 million Oromo people living in Ethiopia and neighboring countries. In fact, Oromiffa is a *lingua franca* in the whole of Ethiopia except for the northern part. It is a language spoken in common by several members of many nationalities like Harari, Anuak, Barta, Sidama, and Gurage, who are neighbors to Oromo.

*Livelihood:* Potentially, Oromia is one of the richest areas in Africa. Agriculture is the backbone of its economy. Still employing ancient methods, subsistence agriculture is the means of livelihood for more than 90 percent of the population.

The Oromo people farm a variety of crops with farm animals, including cattle, sheep, goats, donkeys, mules, horses, camels, and chickens. The Oromo are expert in animal husbandry through their long tradition as herdsmen. For some, cattle-rearing (pastoralism) is still the main occupation.

*Arts:* The Oromo people also are rich in oral folklore, tradition, music and art. Decorations of stone bowls from Zimbabwe include pictures of cattle with long "lyre-shaped" horns such as raised by Oromo. Although much of Oromo culture and traditions have survived harsh suppression, much has also been forgotten and lost, artifacts have been destroyed. The Oromo are discouraged from developing their culture and art.

*Literacy:* Printed material in Oromiffa include the Bible, religious and non-religious songs, dictionaries, short stories, proverbs, poems, school books, grammar, etc. The Bible itself was translated into Oromiffa in Sabeen script about a century ago by a freed Oromo slave called Onesimos Nasib, alias Hiikaa, (Gustave, 1978).

The Oromo have an extraordinarily rich heritage of proverbs, stories, songs, and riddles. They have very comprehensive plant and animal names. The various customs pertaining to marriage, paternity, and dress have elaborate descriptions.

*Health:* The health statistics in Ethiopia are staggering. Overall life expectancy is 48 years. One hundred eighty-five out of 1000 children die under the age of 5. The health care needs among the Oromo are tremendous.

*Marriage:* Marriage among the Oromo occurs only between different clans. Clans are determined by seven levels of common ancestors. For this reason an Oromo typically can trace at least seven of her/his forefathers. Some can trace more than seventeen.

*Religion:* The Oromo religion is predominately Islam, but this belief system is often mixed with folk or animistic beliefs. A few Christians exist in Awanno.

Before the introduction of Christianity and Islam, the Oromo people practiced their own religion. They believed in one *Waaqayyoo* (*Waaqa* for short) which approximates the English word *God*. They never worshipped false gods or carved statues as substitutes (M. de Aimeida (1628-46)). The Oromo *Waaqa* is one and the same for all. He is the creator of everything, source of all life, omnipresent, infinite, incomprehensible; he can do and undo anything, he is pure, intolerant of injustice, crime, sin, and all falsehood.

There are many saint-like divinities called *ayyaana*, each seen as a manifestation of the one *Waaqa* or of the same divine reality. An effective relationship is often maintained between *ayyaana* and Oromo by *Qaafu* (male) and/or *Qaafitti* (female). A *Qaafu* is like a Bishop in the Christian world and an *Imam* in the Muslim world. He is a religious and ritual expert who has a special relationship with one of the *ayyaana*, which possesses him at regular intervals.

Although the office of *Qaafu* is hereditary, in principle it is open to anyone who can provide sufficient proof of the special direct personal contact with an *ayyaaria*. In the Oromo society a *Qaafu* is regarded as the most senior person in his clan and the most respected in the society. He is considered pure and clean. He must respect traditional taboos (*safuu*) and ritual observances in all situations and in all his dealings and must follow the truth and avoid sin.

The Oromo *Qaafu* must not be confused with the *Amhara Qaailicha*, who has a much lower social status. He is a vagabond who resorts to conjuring and black magic for his own benefit (Knutsson, 1967). He is notorious for extracting remuneration by threats or other means. On the other hand, it is beneath the dignity of an Oromo *Qaafu* to ask his ritual clients for gifts or payment.

The place of worship of *Qaafu* is a ritual house called the *Galma*. Each *ayyaana* has its own *Galma* and its own special ceremonies. The *Galma* is usually located on a hilltop, hillside, or in a grove of large trees. Many of these sites have been taken up by the Orthodox church buildings or mosques. Places of worship also include under trees, beside large bodies of water, and next to large mountains, hills, or stones. This has been misrepresented by outsiders claiming that the Oromo worship trees, rivers, etc.

The believers visit the *Galma* for worship once or twice a week, usually on Thursday and Saturday nights. At this time the followers dance, sing and beat drums to perform a ritual called *dalaga* in order to achieve a state of ecstasy, which often culminates in possession. It is at the height of this that the possessing *ayyaana* speaks through the *Qaallu's* mouth and can answer prayers and predict the future.

Religious Oromo often make *Muuda* pilgrimages to some of the great *Qaafus* and religious centres such as Arsi's *Abbaa Muuda* (father of anointment). Among the Borana Oromo, *Muuda* pilgrimages are still common. *Muuda* pilgrimage is very holy, and the pilgrims walk to the place of *Abbaa Muuda* carrying myrrh and with a stick in one hand. All Oromo through whose village the pilgrims pass are obliged to give them hospitality. As the Mecca pilgrims are called *Haj* among Muslims, these *Muuda* pilgrims are called *Jija*.

Just before the beginning of the harvest season every year, the Oromo have a prayer ceremony (thanksgiving festival) called *Irreessa*. It once took place in river meadows where now the Orthodox church takes its holy *Tabot* (tablets) for special yearly festivals, the *timqat*. The *Irreessa* has become illegal and anybody who attempts to practice it is now likely to be imprisoned.

The Oromo believe that after death individuals exist in the form of a spirit called the *ekeraa*. They do not believe in suffering after death; if someone commits sin he/she is punished while still alive. The *ekeraa* is believed to stay near the place where the person once lived. Offspring are obliged to pray to and to give offering by slaughtering an animal every so often to their parents' *ekeraa*. The offerings take place near the clan cemetery, which is usually in a village.

Oromo people have been in contact with other religions like Islam and Christianity for almost the last 1000 years. For instance, the Islamic religion was reported to have been in eastern Shawa about 900 A.D. and Christianity even before that. Today the majority of the Oromo people are followers of Islam and Christianity, while the remaining few are still followers of the original Oromo religion.

*Calendar*: The lives of individuals, rituals, ceremonies, political, and economic activities are scheduled rather precisely. For this purpose, the Oromo have a calendar. It is also used for weather forecasting and divination purposes.

The Oromo calendar is based on astronomical observations of the moon in conjunction with seven or eight particular stars or star groups (Legesse, 1973 and Bassi, 1988) called *Urji Dhaha* (guiding stars). According to this calendar system, approximately 30 days are in a month and 12 months in a year. The first day of a month is the day the new moon appears. A day (24 hours) starts and ends at sunrise.

In the Oromo calendar, each day of the month and each month of the year has a name. Instead of the expected 29 or 30 names for days of a month, there are only 27 names. These 27 days of the month are permuted through the twelve months in such a way that the beginning of each month moves forward by 2 or 3 days. The loss per month is then the difference between the 27-day month and the 30-day month (Legesse, 1973).

Since each day of a month has a name, the Oromo traditionally had no use for names of the days of a week. Perhaps it is because of this that today, in different parts of Oromia, different names are in use for the days of a week.

Pillars found a few years ago in northwestern Kenya by Lynch and Robbins (1978) have been suggested to represent a site used to develop the Oromo calendar system. According to these researchers, it is the first archaeo-astronomical evidence in sub-Saharan Africa. Doyle (1986) has suggested 300 B.C. as the approximate date of its invention.

According to Asmarom Legesse (1973), "The Oromo calendar is a great and unique invention and has been recorded only in a very few cultures in history of mankind." The only other known cultures with this type of time-keeping are the Chinese, Mayans, and Hindus. Legesse states that the Oromo are unusual in that they seem to be the only people with a reasonably accurate calendar which ignores the sun.

*Economy*: The forests contain a variety of excellent and valuable timbers. Oromia is known for its unique native vegetation and the diversity of its species. For instance, crops like coffee, *anchote* (root crop), and okra are indigenous to this area.

Because of Oromia's favorable climate and rich soil, Oromia can supply most of agricultural products needed for the urban population. Many types of crops are cultivated with little need for irrigation. Normally one and sometimes two crops can be harvested annually from the same field. Among the major food crops are cereals (wheat, barley, tef, sorghum, corn, and millet), fibre crops (cotton), root crops (potato, sweet potato, yam, inset, and anchote) pulses (peas, beans, chick-peas, and lentils), oil crops (nugi and flax), fruit trees (orange, mango, avocado, banana, lemon, pineapple, and peach), spices (onion, garlic, coriander and ginger--coriander and ginger also grow wild) and a variety of vegetables, like okra, that are indigenous to Oromia.

The main cash crops are coffee and *chat* (a stimulant shrub). Coffee, a major cash earner for many countries, has its origin in the forests of Oromia and neighboring areas. Coffee has remained the chief export item.

The forests of Oromia are a source of excellent timber. Although the major portion of the forests has been destroyed, some forests remain in the south and west. Medicinal plants and trees producing different kinds of gums grow in abundance. Myrrh, frankincense and gum Arabic are gathered from the wild trees. Besides being a source of timber, medicine, and gum, forests are useful in the conservation of water and soil and as shelter for wildlife.

Gold and other important minerals can be found in Oromia, including platinum, sulphur, iron ore, silver, and salt. Large deposits of natural gas and oil exist in some regions.

The hundreds of hot springs scattered over Oromia also carry economic importance. Thousands of people, including foreigners, visit these springs for their medicinal and recreational value. They are a great potential source of thermal energy.

The many rivers in the area provide a great potential for irrigation and for the production of electric power. In some places, dams are already producing hydroelectric power.

*Wildlife:* Oromia is also rich in wild animals. Many different species are found in the water and forests of Oromia: different kinds of fish, hippopotami, and crocodiles. Land animals include lion, leopard, rhinoceros, buffalo, giraffe, wild donkey, zebra, columbus monkey, and elephant. There are a number of wild animals that are found solely in Oromia, such as nyaaya, bush-buck (special type), and fox (from Baale). Various types of birds, many of them unique, nest around lakes.

*Oromo Self Government:* The Oromo constitute the largest Cushitic group in all of Africa. The Oromo have several clans (*gosa, qomoo*). They are said to be of two major groups descended from the two "houses" (wives) of the person Oromo represented.

The Oromo people have a distinct culture and language of their own. However, extensive overlap exists in the areas they occupy and in their community groups.

They are a deeply egalitarian people that have lived under a unique and complex indigenous democratic system known as *Gada*, in which political, military, and other leaders, including legal experts, are elected for non-renewable eight-year terms from among males who excel during five eight-year-long grades of continuous training. The religious, social, political, and economic life of the Oromo as well as their philosophy, art, history and method of time-keeping, have been based on this system for many years.

*Gadaa* is the law of the society, a system by which Oromo administer, defend their territory and rights, maintain and guard their economy, and through which all their hopes are fulfilled. Under it, the power to administer the affairs of the nation and the power to make laws belong to the people. Every male member of the society who is of age and of *Gadaa* grade has full rights to elect and to be elected. All the people have the right to air their views in any public gathering without fear.

The Oromo man passes through eleven stages of training during his lifetime. As he passes from one stage to the next, his duties and way of life in society change. For instance, during the grades of *Qondaala*, *Kuusa*, and *Raaba Doorii*, they learn war tactics, Oromo history, politics, ritual, law and administration over a period of 24 years. When they enter the *Gadaa* class or *Luba* at the age of about 40, they have already acquired all the necessary knowledge to handle the responsibility of administering the country and the celebration of rituals. It nears the end with partial retirement of the whole group of elders to an advisory and judiciary capacity. When they enter the final grade, they retire completely.

Although it is not known with any degree of certainty where and when the *Gadaa* system started, it is known and documented that the Oromo have been practicing it for well over 500 years. However, according to oral Oromo historians, the *Gadaa* system has been in practice for several centuries (Prouty et al, 1981).

That the Oromo culture and the symbols of egalitarian *Gada* democratic government have endured the last 105 years of continuous, open, and clandestine war by foreign forces is a remarkable testimony to the endurance of the Oromo cultural identity and democratic heritage. However, today in most Oromo communities, the usefulness of the *Gadaa* system has declined.

## History

During colonial times, under Menelik's rule as emperor of Ethiopia (1889-1909), millions of Oromos were exterminated by war. Millions more were sold into slavery, and hundreds of thousands died by famine. By the end of it all, half of the Oromo population--estimated at about 10 million during the late 19th century--was exterminated.

The Oromo and other people of the south who survived the genocide were subjected by Menelik to servanthood. They had absolutely no legal protection.

Under Emperor Haile-Selassie's policy of repressive centralism, the Oromo were more brutalized, but his attempt to perpetuate Amhara domination failed. Not one decade has passed since then without uprisings against their oppressors.

The OLF was established in 1974 by Oromo nationalists to lead the struggle of the Oromo people for self-determination, to terminate a century of oppression, and to be recognized politically on an equal basis of respect. Finally, in July 1991, a charter was signed between the Ethiopian government and legitimate representatives of the Oromo people. The charter, as stated in its preamble, heralded an "end of an era of subjugation and oppression" and the beginning of "a new chapter in Ethiopian history in which freedom, equal rights and self-determination of all peoples shall be the governing principles of political, economic and social life . . ." However, they have continually met with resistance.

## Current SIM Ministry

SIM operates a health clinic with a team of about eight members (no doctor) in a small farming village about a seven-hour drive from the capital, Addis Ababa. Ethiopians and missionaries work together in the clinic diagnosing and treating diseases. They also travel into communities for preventative care, providing health education and immunizations.

The SIM health station also involves water work such as capping of springs for pure drinking water—the Awanno Water Project—and a veterinary clinic for cattle, all important components of development. While endeavoring to promote long term change among the Oromo, SIM's desire is to establish an on-going Christian witness.

## Scripture Availability

German missionary Johannes Krapf worked throughout East Africa to reach the Oromo people with the gospel. He began translation work in several of the Oromo dialects. The New Testament and some of the Old Testament in Central Oromo were published by the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) in 1876.

During the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in the late 19th century, it was almost impossible for foreign missionaries to make contact with the Oromo people. In 1850, the Swedish Evangelical Mission began work on the coast of Eritrea. The missionaries hoped to reach into the Oromo-speaking areas from there.

Eventually, they started schools and were entrusted with some freed Oromo slaves. These young people were then trained in the mission school.

Two of their pupils were Onesimus Nesib and Aster Ganno, and the mission helped them to train as Bible translators.

The language they spoke was Northern Oromo; but the advantage was that this was used as a *lingua franca* throughout the Oromo-speaking people in Ethiopia, extending as far as Sudan in the west and northern Kenya in the south.

The Oromo Bible was finally published in 1899 by the BFBS. This Bible has served the Oromo church for about 100 years.

## Urgent Prayer Need

Bingham Academy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, urgently needs a [French teacher](#) to join their staff team in August. Pray that God will provide the right person to meet this need.