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Pan-Oromo Confederations in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

Tsega Etefa

Before the Oromo began to move in large numbers into the central and northwestern highlands dur ing the first half of the sixteenth century, they had lived in the plains and southeastern highlands of today's Ethiopia region for centuries. In these regions, a single institution of government known as the *gadaa* regulated all aspects of Oromo life from its seat in the area now widely believed to be the cradleland of the Oromo.[1] The *gadaa* system was a politico-military and ritual system based on an egalitarian ethos and well-organized institutions. Within this system, the Oromo were ruled by a generational class that assumed office at the age of forty with the honorific title of *luba*. Each class ruled for a period of eight years after which the next group of the same age assumed the mantle of corporate leadership.[2]

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During the early years of Oromo expansion into various areas of East Africa inhabited by Christian, Muslim and the other groups, these *lubas* led and directed the movements of the people. The population movement was initiated, among other factors, by demographic and ecological factors. According to traditions collected by Yelma Deressa, the Oromo cradleland in southern Ethiopia prior to the mid sixteenth century was endowed with salubrious pastureland and fertile soil. The situation was favorable for a rapid increase of the human and livestock population.[3] The resultant increase in population led to the emergence of different groups, including the two major Oromo moieties known as the Boorana and the Barentuu/Bartumma. Over time, these groups multiplied in number and began looking for living space that was more commodious for the ever-increasing human and animal population.

At the initial stage, the Oromo expansion of the sixteenth century does not seem to have involved all the various groups moving *en masse*. Recent research has shown that only the pastoralist Oromo who were looking for pastureland moved while the settled agriculturalist stayed in the general area of their cradeland, the territories then ruled by the Muslim sultanates of Dawaro, Ifat, Waj, and Bale, and within the land of the Christian kingdom in today's Shawa region of Ethiopia.[4] Such patterns of movement helped the emigrant population to form a long chain of settlements along their major routes of expansion. The Bartumma branch moved in eastern and northern directions eventually settling in today's Arsii, Baale, Harar, Gojjam and Wallo regions in Ethiopia. The Boorana, on the other hand, trekked to the northwest, west, and southwest regions along meandering routes to what are today Shawa, Wallaga, Illuabbabor and Gojjam. Other Boorana groups also moved into Kenya as far south as the Tana River.[5] At present, the Oromo have become one of the largest and most widely spread ethnic groups in Africa.[6]

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In spite of the emergence of several groups during and after the population movement, the Oromo kept their unity and identity. Addressing the enduring unity of the Oromo, Mekuria Bulcha has suggested that, "After separation, the different branches of the Oromo nation lived in federations and confederations in several autonomous but contiguous territories. Segmentation into different branches did not diminish the shared belief of common descent from one founding father."[7] This paper explores Bulcha's observation further and provides an explanation as to why and how the Oromo kept their unity and identity long after they began to live in places far-flung from their cradleland where they lived under a single institution of governance.

Formation of Oromo Confederations

The various Oromo groups began to form autonomous *gadaa* governments in the territories they had come to occupy. In some cases, these autonomous local governments were answerable to the overall *gadaa* of the main branches such as Tuulama. Though Odaa Nabee, the seat of the *caffee* or the governance council of the Macca and Tuulama located somewhere between today's Dukam and Bishoftu, served as a unifying regional center, Tuulama power gradually decentralized into local republics as was the case with other Oromo groups. Each of the major Tuulama groups formed its own *gadaa* government and elected officials. "For instance, the Bacho had chafe [*caffee*] Ballo while the Soddo had Birbirsa Tiya, Jiddaa had Foqa Awas, and the Galaan had their chafe [*caffee*] Galaan just south of Addis Ababa."[8] The *gadaa* system allowed a decentralized self-administration since the Oromo abhorred concentration of power in the hands of a single individual or a few persons. The *caffee* among the Tuulama branch thus functioned at both local and higher levels. For instance, the Foqa Awash took responsibility for maintaining order and peace, and rendering justice locally among the Jiddaa group of the

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Tuulama. At a higher level, the regional or the inter-group *caffee* of the whole Tuulama was constituted from the representatives of the local *caffees* of the various clans. In theory, the whole Tuulama assembly at Odaa Nabee had supreme powers and could reverse the decisions passed at the local level, but in practice, the local *caffee* seem to be virtually independent.[9]

The decline of *gadaa* government as an institution for the whole of the Oromo might have eventually contributed to the formation of independent Oromo states. The *gadaa* leaders found it difficult to exercise their power over each Oromo group and the war leaders gradually established themselves over their own territories. The establishment of local governments did not create a groundswell of Oromos identifying with their clan government rather than the larger Oromo identity. Despite the transformation of the way they were governed, Oromos continued to emphasize group rather than individual interests and uphold pan-Oromo unity rather than specific clan affiliation. The various branches of the people, though moved into different territories, kept their common identity and shared beliefs. This might have facilitated the formation of confederations particularly in defense of their respective autonomous territories.

From the accounts transmitted by Bahrey, it seems that various Oromo groups formed confederations to defend their respective territories. The earliest of these confederations were the *Afre* and the *Sadacha*. During the days of the Robale *luba* (1570-78), two Macca Oromo groups, the Calliya and Hooko, forged an alliance with the Liiban and Guduru and assumed the collective name of *Afre*, literally the confederacy of four. The *Sadacha* confederation was formed by three (hence *Sadacha*) groups consisting of Warra Karrayyu, Warra Ilu and Warra Noolee of the Barentuu branch[10] in the Wallo region. There was also a *Sadacha* confederation formed between 1578-1586 by the Boorana groups of Hakaakoo, Abbo and Suuba. It seems that these confederations were formed to help each other in

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defense of their territories. Emperor Sarsa-Dengel of Abyssinia (1563-97) led a series of expeditions against the Macca, Tuulama, Jawwi and other Oromo groups. The *Sadacha* (Boorana) moved further to the southwest and joined the earlier confederation of the *Afre* in Damot. This alliance of the confederation of the *Afre* and the *Sadacha* was able to defend Oromo territories in the west and southwest as well as consolidate their respective *gadaa* government in all the lands between Abbay and Gojeb Rivers. These include Wallagga, Jimma, Illuabbabor and surrounding areas. The formation of these confederations produced significant results by keeping Emperor Sarsa-Dengel's army at bay. On one occasion, exhausted by his prolonged struggle with the Oromo, the emperor is said to have blurted in despair: "It is better ... to fight those who shed the blood of Christ [Falasha] than the pagan [Oromo]."[11]

The successes of the *Afre* and *Sadacha* (Boorana) confederations in defending their territories in places as far west as Wallaga and Illuabbabor made difficult constant communication with the common government of the Macca and Tuulama at Odaa Nabee. Owing to the long distance and increased problems of security, travel to Odaa Nabee for the regular *gadaa* ceremonies became difficult. The Macca, therefore, decided to set up their own *caffee* at Odaa Bisil, located between Geedoo and Ijaajjii towns.[12] Even though the Macca founded a new *gadaa* government center, they maintained good relations with the Tuulama who kept their center at Odaa Nabee. The Macca-Tuulama together with Barentuu groups formed a pan-Oromo confederation and conducted simultaneous expansions north of the Abbay River. In 1585, for instance, the Boorana crossed the Abbay into Gojjam while groups of the Bartumma conducted expansions into the Abyssinian province of Bagemeder.[13]

Oromo pressures from two directions forced Sarsa-Dengel to devise several new policy measures to defend his imperial domain. Unable to keep control of Damot to the south of the

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Abbay, he decided to keep the Oromo out of Gojjam because losing it would have dealt a serious blow to his power. Gojjam was his principal province for its riches in gold and horses. An Italian traveler, S. G. Baratti, described the gold riches of Gojjam as follows: "The other kingdoms are less remarkable, only that of Damut and Goiame are full of Mines of Gold. The Emperor keeps them with above 6000 men in Arms continually."[14] In fact, the forces that were stationed in Gojjam were not only numerically significant, but also comprised one of the emperor's famous regiments. The emperor exempted the people of Gojjam from tribute obligations of supplying him horses as a way of encouraging them to block Oromo expansions into Gojjam.[15] When these measures proved ineffective, Sarsa-Dengel devised a policy of striking an alliance with friendly Oromo groups and settling them in Gojjam and Dambya so that they could stiffen the line of defense against other Oromo groups. He allotted the uncultivated and fallow lands of Gojjam and Dambya to the Oromo and began mingling them with the Abyssinian society.[16] Nevertheless, these measures could not keep the two provinces from the Oromo expansion, which was actually further intensified.

In 1586, Oromo forces attacked the royal camp at Mangesto in eastern Gojjam and dispersed the royal family. During the operation, the Oromo mobilized their forces simultaneously and attacked from three directions. The Macca moved against the royal camp from the direction of Gindebarat, the Tuulama from the direction of Amonat and Walaqa, and the Marawwa and Wallo, of the Barentuu branch, from the direction of Bashilo and Mille Rivers.[17] This was a coordinated assault by a pan-Oromo confederation of both the Boorana and Barentuu moieties under the leadership of *gadaa* officials of the Mulata *luba*.

By 1586, the Macca had already formed their own *gadaa* assembly at Odaa Bisil but they continued to work with the Tuulama and Barentuu groups. The same year, the Oromo also

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held governance council (*caffee*) in Gojjam and issued decrees for furthers actions and matters of common interest. Despite the creation of various *caffee* by the subsequent groups, the *gadaa* council of all Oromo was at work during this period. In the early seventeenth century, however, the overall leadership of the *lubas* had diminished, and the Oromo had resorted to forming alliances under new respective confederation leaders. In the process of the expansion of the Oromo in the seventeenth century, the leaders of the *Afre, Sadacha* (of both Barentuu and Boorana branches) and other confederations seem to have eclipsed the role of the *lubas* of the pan-Oromo *gadaa* government.

Pan-Oromo Confederations in the Seventeenth Century

Following the death of Emperor Sarsa Dengel in 1597, a power struggle in the Abyssinian imperial court ensued. The political infighting facilitated the process of Oromo settlement north of the Abbay in a rather complicated manner. The empress Maryam Sena, Kefle Wahed, the governor of Tigray, and *Ras* Atnatewos, the governor of Amhara, became the three most powerful personalities in the empire. The two governors, both sons-in-law of the emperor, formed a powerful ruling triumvirate together with the empress. Later on, however, the empress added to her party, *Ras* Za-Sellase, whom James Bruce identifies as a Gurage renowned for his bravery in the army.[18] Just before his death, Sarsa-Dengel had nominated his cousin, Za-Dengel as his successor. The party of the empress, however, enthroned the minor Yaqob, an illegitimate but natural son of Sarsa-Dengel. They deported Za-Dengel to Deq Island in Lake Tana from which he later escaped to live in a remote mountain hideout in Gojjam. *Abetohun* Susenyos, who had the right to claim the throne as a great grandson of Lebne-Dengel (1508-40), escaped to his Oromo allies in western Shawa to avoid imprisonment. From there, he started to raid and plun-

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der the territories south and east of the Abbay. Thousands of the Oromo followed him (note that he had been captured by the Oromo and lived with them for a while until he was rescued and returned back to Gojjam); and Oromo attacks on Amhara, Bagemeder, Enarya, Gojjam and Walaqa between 1597 to 1607 were essentially associated with Susenyos. Together with his Oromo and some Berababo Gafat followers, Susenyos attacked eastern Gojjam in 1597. Then he campaigned in the region of Waj in the south and sought to force the former subjects of the kingdom there to pay him tributes. He is even said to have become a member of the Oromo *luba* class and led the Oromo in campaigns against the Kingdom of Enarya south of the Abbay. With the *Sadacha*, Susenyos penetrated Enarya's defenses and killed its governor Gumcho. The people of Enarya, however, reorganized themselves and defeated Susenyos.

Concerned by Susenyos's rebellion against them, the empress and her allies at the royal court deposed Yaqob and brought Za-Dengel back to power. The main reason for this was apparently that Yaqob reached the age of fourteen and wished to exercise full authority, while the triumvirate wanted to keep power in their own hands. When Za-Dengel assumed power, many of the dignitaries of Yaqob, who was exiled in Enarya, escaped from the court and joined Susenyos in Walaqa. His army augmented in number and momentum on his side, Susenyos's stepped up his revolt. He crossed to Gojjam and laid it waste from 1603-1604. Oromo pressure on Gojjam also increased. Susenyos then returned and camped in Darra east of the Abbay. Za-Dengel was forced to lead an expedition to Darra against Susenyos and his Oromo allies. For this purpose, he decreed a general mobilization except for the disabled. The emperor moved against Darra and confronted Susenyos and his numerous Oromo, mainly Warantisha, one of the historical Bartumma branch of the Oromo, followers. Susenyos's army laid ambush and killed many soldiers of the

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emperor. In a heavy rainfall and hail, the emperor's troops were unable to track down the rebel prince. The only thing Za-Dengel could do was to plunder Oromo cattle and return to Gojjam.

Because of the increasing *Afre* pressure on Gojjam, Za-Dengel ordered *Ras* Atnatewos of Gojjam not to combat the Oromo until he had arrived; but Atnatewos could neither postpone nor avoid confrontation. In the decisive battle that followed, Atnatewos's forces were routed. It seems that these strong Oromo pressures on his empire eventually led Za-Dengel to seek European military assistance. In 1604, he wrote a letter to the Pope disclosing his desperate struggle with the Oromo as follows: "... we have in our country certain heathen enemies [the Oromo]. If we march against these we cannot find them, for they fly, and when we return, they come in where we are not like robbers; and therefore to destroy them we desire him to send us forces and all sorts of officers to direct the assault on the enemy's mountain strongholds."[19]

In the meantime, Za-Dengel grew increasingly unpopular among his own people, according to some, because of the depredations of the general mobilizations he had decreed and, more serious still, due to his reported conversion to Catholicism. In 1604, his people rebelled against him and he was killed at the Battle of Barcha in Dambya. Important personalities of the court led by *Ras* Za-Sellase of Dambya subsequently decided to recall Yaqob from Enarya and raise him to the throne again. Za-Sellase and *Ras* Atnatewos, for their respective reasons, agreed on this arrangement. Enraged by their action, Susenyos traveled to Amhara from where he sent letters to *Ras* Atnatewos of Gojjam asking him to recognize him as the lawful successor of Za-Dengel. Without waiting for the response of the *Ras*, Susenyos crossed to Gojjam with a large Oromo following. Atnatewos turned around and recognized him, while Za-Sellase hesitated. Ignoring this, Susenyos crowned himself and declared the *fait accompli*.

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When Za-Sellase still refused to accept his ascension, Susenyos ordered his Oromo troops to attack Bagemeder. The conflict continued with Yaqob being crowned again by Za-Sellase and his allies who went on hunting for Susenyos. Finally, the forces of Yaqob and Susenyos met at Gol, near Yabart in eastern Gojjam, where Yaqob lost his life and Susenyos finally assumed full powers.

It should be noted that Susenyos owed his success greatly to his alliance with Oromo groups. In gratitude for this, he allotted them tracts of land in Gojjam, Dambya and Agawmeder. The most important Oromo groups who followed him were the Macca, the Baso, the Warantisha, the Jawwi and many others. Thus, both the Boorana and Barentuu groups were represented and they were all settled in Gojjam and Bagemeder. They were so numerous that Susenyos had to confiscate church land to satisfy his Oromo allies, which highly angered the clergy. Pieces of land belonging to churches at Makana Semayat, built by emperor Galawdewos (1540-1559) in Bagemeder and Mayfade Maryam built by *Itege* Silus Hayla between the Chemuga and Shigez Rivers in Gojjam, were partly confiscated and redistributed to the Oromo.[20]

Once on the throne, Emperor Susenyos (1607-32) turned against the Oromo. The Oromo realized that Susenyos had betrayed them and they decided to dethrone him. As I have argued elsewhere, "Those of the Oromo who favored Susenyos remained with him but the rest decided to oppose him. All the Oromo decided to overthrow him once and for all."[21] Oromo expansions into Gojjam and Bagemeder became increasingly organized and Susenyos had to march against them to protect the throne in various fronts. In 1610, a pan-Oromo confederation was formed when a mainly Arsii group of the Barentuu/Bartumma branch decided to engage Susenyos' army in Gojjam. At the same time, the Liiban group of the Boorana moved in from a different direction. While the emperor was busy fighting the Barentuu/Bartumma groups, the Liiban marched on

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western Gojjam as far as Agawmeder.[22] The emperor's chronicle makes it clear that the Oromo conducted joint operations to overthrow the emperor and to control the fertile lands of Gojjam and Dambya. The emperor's forces defeated the Barentuu/Bartumma groups and wanted to pursue them beyond the Abbay but he could not follow through with his plans because of the reluctance of his troops.[23]

When the fog of battle cleared up, it became apparent that only one regiment of the Oromo was defeated in southern Gojjam. Other Oromo groups continued to move and settle in the Bir River Valley where Susenyos marched against them. This region would actually continue to be a constant scene of contention between the Oromo and the emperor for a long period. Emperor Susenyos achieved a temporary victory against the Oromo who simply re-crossed the Abbay southwards, only to come back with reinforced forces to launch a counterattack at a more propitious time. This strategy eventually helped them to settle in areas north of the Abbay. As the emperor was occupied elsewhere, the Oromo were able to defeat regiments of the army and settle in the region, which further enriched the Oromo groups north of the Abbay.

It is apparent that, just like Emperor Za-Dengel (1603-04) before him, these Oromo pressures weighed heavily on Susenyos while he started requesting Europe for military assistance. In 1610, he wrote to the Pope and the King of Portugal, complaining, like Za-Dengel before him, about the disorderly state of his empire and requesting Portuguese to provide troop assistance once again to save the country from the Muslims as they had done during Ahmad Grañ's invasion. The Pope replied promising him some military aid.[24] However, Portuguese troops did not arrive to assist militarily, although Jesuits like Pero Paez sometimes accompanied the emperor during his campaigns helping with theological discussions. Regardless, Susenyos continued to have a strong attachment to and admiration for the Jesuits in his empire.

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Unchecked, the Oromo continued to pressure the emperor's domain in various directions. A rebellion broke out in Tigray, for instance, against *Ras* Se'ela-Krestos, Susenyos's brother and governor of that province, at the beginning of his reign. While Susenyos was marching to Tigray to crush the rebellion, the Marawwa Oromo confronted him in Bagemeder. The emperor was defeated and most of his officers perished in the conflict. Unable to proceed to Tigray, he returned to Qoga, his capital. Following their victory, the Marawwa and other Oromo groups formed a confederation to undertake expansions into all the lands between the Takaze River and Lake Tana. They pursued Susenyos as he retreated, obliterated Enfraz, and burnt down the royal settlement at Qoga.[25]

The second decade of the seventeenth century witnessed repeated Oromo expansions to areas north of the Abbay as far as Tigray. In 1617 groups of both the Boorana and Barentuu/Bartumma Oromo, such as the Ittu had formed a pan-Oromo confederation known as the Boorana League[26] to move northwards in a coordinated manner. Accordingly, some Boorana groups and the Ittu lined up against Gojjam, the Marawwa against Bagemeder, and the Karrayyuu against Tigray. Although there were earlier Oromo settlements in all these regions, they had not yet consolidated their positions because of repeated attacks by the emperor's forces.

Caught off guard by the simultaneous threat from three directions, Susenyos and his officers temporized for a while before deciding to march against the Karrayyuu in Tigray. When he reached Bagemeder, his officers told him the hopelessness of the case as follows:

> We cannot save Tigray. If we go down by Wag Meder and Abargalle we shall not find enough water and grass for our camp. It will not even suffice for the merchants, let alone for us. If we descend via Lemalmo it will be too far, and the [Oromo] will have returned, having done

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> what they set out to do. Let us save Gojjam which is nearer to us, lest both countries be lost.[27]

Susenyos and his officers returned to save Gojjam which gave the Karrayyuu a free hand in Tigray. When Susenyos reached Gojjam, he found that *Ras* Se'ela-Krestos had already defeated one flank of the confederation's fighters. The rest of the Oromo continued to reinforce the Oromo who had settled in various parts of the province.

By forging a well-organized confederation and launching coordinated attacks in different places, the Oromo were intent on dividing and attacking emperor Susenyos' army. They put all their resources together and decided to dethrone the emperor as well as settle in the fertile parts north of the Abbay. So far, the Boorana League seems to be a major pan-Oromo confederation known by that name at the time. Here the name *Boorana* does not seem to refer to one branch of the Oromo. It was applied probably because of the *Angafa* (elder) status of the Boorana branch. Although Beckingham and Huntingford[28] state that the league collapsed in the same year, that there were more continuing operations indicate that it might have lingered on for some more years.

In 1620, three years after the Boorana league's maneuvers, there was another pan-Oromo operation. As the Macca and Tuulama continued to settle in Gojjam and Dambya, the Bartumma groups continued their expansion into Bagemeder. When some members of the *Afre* crossed the Guman River in southern Gojjam and settled in areas extending all the way to Metekkel, other members of the confederation moved into eastern Gojjam. Disturbed by all this, Se'ele- Krestos, the governor of the province (transferred to Gojjam from Tigray in 1612), appealed to Emperor Susenyos for help. A fierce fighting between the Oromo and the combined forces of Susenyos and Se'ela Krestos followed in the Bir Valley with the Oromo retreating south across the Abbay after the battle. At about

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the same time, the Tuulama crossed to Gojjam via Baranta in eastern Gojjam. The inhabitants of the region failed to inform Susenyos about the Tuulama advance because they feared further plunder by the emperor's army. It is also possible that the local population in eastern Gojjam, which included the Oromo, were in support of their incoming kin group. Therefore, the Tuulama seem to have settled in those parts while the emperor's forces were still in Gojjam, although some of them crossed back to the east of the Abbay.[29]

One of the fallouts of the Macca-Tuulama campaigns against Gojjam in 1620 was the weakening of the alliance between Enarya and the emperor against the Boorana. In the same year, King Benaro of Enarya sent his son Yemane-Krestos to *Ras* Se'ela-Krestos to forge a stronger alliance. In any event, nothing effective could have come out of it because Gojjam itself was seriously weakened by repeated Oromo onslaughts.[30] Therefore, Benaro's efforts to take a concerted action against the Boorana failed to materialize.

When the emperor set out for Gojjam to fight off the Boorana groups, he left *Dajjach* Walda-Hawariat, his son-in-law, at Danqaz, the temporary capital, to guard his throne. It was during this time that the Barentuu/Bartumma groups of the Wallo, Jiillee and Karrayyuu descended upon parts of Bagemeder. While the emperor and his other officers were busy fighting the Macca-Tuulama in Gojjam, *Dajjach* Walda-Hawariat was forced to march against the Barentuu/Bartumma who defeated his troops and killed him and other officers.[31]

Successes of the Confederations

Between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the Oromo managed to expand and settle in various parts of Gojjam and Dambya, despite the Abyssinian rulers' best efforts to put up an effective resistance. As indicated earlier, Emperor Sarsa Dengel exempted the people of Gojjam from tributes to encourage resistance against Oromo settlement,

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allowed friendly Oromo groups to settle in Gojjam and Dambya and stationed strong regiments and governors in Gojjam. It is possible that Susenyos transferred his energetic brother *Ras* Se'ela-Krestos from Tigray in 1612 to deal with the growing Oromo power in the province. The Oromo nevertheless became an influential force in Abyssinian politics.

The Oromo rose to such prominence in Abyssinian affairs because of the swiftness with which they overpowered their enemies in military confrontations. They used their famed intelligence gathering strategy in the frontier districts, launched surprise attacks when possible, and effected organized retreat ahead of stronger enemy formations. Their overall strategy was to avoid conventional wars as much as possible. In Gojjam and Dambya, they were able to defend their positions against the enemy's strong resistance and the difficult terrain of the Abbay Valley. They mastered the challenge of geography through courage and endurance. Contemporary accounts report that the Oromo, "cross it [the Abbay] at all times without difficulties by swimming or on rafts or inflated skins or by clinging to their horses' tails."[32] According to a seventeenth century Yemeni Ambassador to Gondar "they [the Oromo] are of strong physique of endurance in long journeys and in bearing hardships."[33]

In fact, the explanation lies with the way the Oromo mobilized their society and military campaigns than the robust physical condition. Women participated in the campaigns by digging trenches, raising ramparts, fortifying camps, and providing supplies to soldiers using pack animals.[34] The unity, coordination, military strategy and discipline of the Oromo sustained their fighters and the populations through difficult confrontations and physical challenges. They had an effective intelligence network that fed commanders not only with information relevant to military operations but also concerning locations of fertile lands for occupation and settlement. In 1627, for example, when a serious Oromo expansion was suspected,

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the emperor Susenyos appointed *Dajjazmach* Buko, apparently an Oromo, as governor of the province of New Damot (north of Abbay River) replacing Se'ela-Krestos who was nevertheless ordered to assist Buko whenever called upon. The emperor himself was ready with another regiment of the army to combat the advancing Macca from south of the Abbay by stationing his troops at various locations in the Bir Valley. When the Oromo observed that Gojjam was thus fortified, they retreated after a few skirmishes, leaving disinformation that they had diverted their attention to Enarya. Buko and Susenyos demobilized their forces in great relief. When their spies reported this, the Oromo swiftly moved into the defenseless province and boosted Oromo settlements in that province. Susenyos returned to Gojjam only to be defeated handily. He was later able to reverse the situation. However, Buko was killed in action further west where Se'ela-Krestos was again sent to stem the Oromo advance. The Oromo re-crossed to the south of the Abbay and avoided confrontation with the *Ras*. In 1629, the Oromo recrossed the Abbay to Gojjam when their spies reported that the area was not defended. Its governor had left for Lasta to crush another (probably religious) rebellion. Fequre-Egzi, a general left behind by *Ras* Se'ela-Krestos, tried to resist but he too was killed in action.[35] Oromo expansions into Enarya, Bagemeder and other provinces thus continued unabated.

Upon assuming power, Emperor Fasiladas (1632-67) inherited the protracted struggle of resisting the Oromo expansion. When the Yemeni ambassador visited Gondar in 1648, he was greatly impressed by the Oromo as a powerful people. He reported to his king in Yemen that they were "exerting pressure on the Christians of al-Habasha from all sides and borders of their territory, none of these regions being devoid of them."[36] His report is an indication that, by the second half of the seventeenth century, the Oromo have consolidated themselves and there were little pan-Oromo operations against

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emperor Fasiladas. Around 1662 the Boorana attacked Gojjam while the Barentuu/Bartumma descended upon Bagemeder. While the emperor was fighting the Boorana in Gojjam, the Wallo groups moved into Bagemeder where they met a major resistance.

The Abyssinian emperors were involved in power struggles and civil wars during the Zamana Mesafent (1769-1855) which greatly reduced expeditions against the Oromo. Until the rise and consolidation of Shawa, there was little military threat against the Oromo from north of the Abbay. This might have reduced the need for pan-Oromo confederations. This lack of pan-Oromo operations against attacks led to internecine fighting among the various Oromo groups. The Shawan rulers took advantage of the fighting and disunity within the Oromo. Firearms imported by Shawan kings also worked against the Oromo. Thus, gradually some Oromo groups, particularly the Tuulama, lost their independence and were unable to forge a concerted action against the Shawan expeditions to annex the rest of the Oromoland.[37]

Legacies of the pan-Oromo Confederations

The Oromo confederations and alliances, in addition to helping the Oromo defend themselves and consolidate their positions, allowed them to develop a unique military organization and techniques, particularly in cavalry that inspired fear in their enemies. In the first half of the seventeenth century, Manoel de Almeida noted, "What makes the [Oromo] much feared is that they go to war and into battle determined and firmly resolved to conquer or die. The Emperor Seltan Cegued [Susenyos] recognized this quality in them and in most of the Abyssinians the exact opposite."[38] This reputation was widespread even as late as the nineteenth century. Even outside forces considered the Oromo quite formidable and feared an unfortunate encounter with them. When the British led a punitive expedition against Emperor Tewodros in 1867-68, the

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force they were concerned about most was not the army of the emperor nor any other force but the Oromo. Referring to the Oromo, the British noted in their military communications:

> As some of these pay tribute to Turkey, and others are bitter enemies of King Theodore, there does not appear much reason for anticipating that our troops will meet with any serious obstacles except such as arise from the climate and the nature of the country to be traversed, unless the [Oromos] should decide on fighting in defence of the king.[39]

Aware of the skill and the bravery of Oromo as an effective fighting force, particularly the cavalry, the British decided to approach them diplomatically during their expedition.

> The number of the warriors of the people just mentioned [Oromo] is estimated at twenty-thousand; most of them gallant horsemen, well-skilled in the use of their weapons, fighting on the system of the Parthians, that is to say, fighting when they choose, flying when they please, and availing themselves of every opportunity of harrassing their antagonists. Fortunately, these men are like Dugald Dalgetty of old, and are generally willing to sell their services to the highest bidder; we may therefore hope that our Government will be able to buy them, otherwise the danger to which the expedition will be exposed from their attacks during its passage through their territories are too evident to need specifying; especially as they actually delight in war, and are constantly engaged in it.[40]

What contemporary observers were unable to notice was the cooperation and alliances Oromos were quick to forge in face of formidable enemies. As the pan-Oromo confederations demonstrate, it was a standardized practice for the Oromo to come together and help one another in times of external attacks. During the reign of Iyyasu I (1682-1704), the Oromo

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of Guduru repulsed his planned expedition to the Gibe region. The Guduru inflicted a major victory over his army and he was forced to turn around, though he was able to reach the Gibe region during his second expedition in 1704. In addition, during the reign of Emperor Tekle Giyorgis I (ruled intermittently, 1779-1800), the Oromo of Wallo and other groups of the Barentuu branch blocked his planned expedition against Shawa.[41] The emperor seems to have prepared to attack the Oromo of Shawa as the age-old expeditions against the Oromo continued.[42]

Even though the pan-Oromo confederations were unmistakable examples of Oromo cooperation, it should be noted that there were Oromo deserters who fought on the side of the Abyssinian army. Some of these deserters guided the emperors against their fellow Oromos. For instance, during Emperor Iyyasu II's expedition to Guduru in c.1700, some Oromo groups provided guidance to his army but the Guduru eliminated them in the process. This was indeed a major defeat for Iyyasu's army, and when a famine broke out in Gojjam a year later, it was named 'Guduru' as a painful remainder of their shameful defeat in Guduru.[43]

Today the idea of cooperation and alliances pioneered by the early pan-Oromo confederations symbolizes the enduring unity of the Oromo despite their dispersion over a wide area and contacts with other cultures. Even today, Oromos refer to Oromos a *Ijoollee biyya abbaakoo* (children of my fatherland). During the time of the confederations, the epithet referred to the whole of Oromoland (Oromia) rather than territories under the respective federations such as *Afre* and *Sadacha*. The fact that Oromos use the description *Oromo keenya* (we the Oromo) rather than *Arsii keenya* (we the Arsi) or *Tuulama keenya* (we the Tuulama), when referring to themselves shows that clan or regional affiliation was never used as an identity marker before Oromoland was annexed by Menelik II (r. 1889-1913). In spite of external influences and internal segmenta-

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tion, the Oromo kept their ancient traditions, values, and history and continued to claim descent from a common ancestral father and consider the various Oromo groups as brethren. When the Macca-Tuulama Association was founded in 1963, the name that the founders chose for the organization was not a new coinage, but a conscious effort to revive the spirit of cooperation and alliance that characterized the earlier confederation of the two branches. We have seen above that these branches of the Oromo had been in a confederation, though they had separate *gadaa* governments. In many ways, the Macca-Tuulama association is an important legacy of the pre-colonial pan-Oromo confederations.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Oromo had a strong commitment to the pan-Oromo cause, the ability to mobilize human and material resources for that cause, and execute a well-planned strategy to advance their collective purpose. We have seen above that they were able to mobilize the Oromo from Wallaga to Wallo and from Hararge to Gojjam for the same cause. These accomplishments are unique achievements rooted in Oromo nation.

Notes

1. H.S. Lewis, "Origin of the Galla and the Somali," *Journal of African History,* 6:1(1966): 39; J. D. Clark, *The Prehistoric Cultures of the Horn of Africa* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), 12.
2. C. F. Beckingham & G.W.B. Huntingford, *Some Records of Ethiopia 1593-1646* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1954), 115.
3. Yelma Dheressa, *Ye Ityopiya Tarik basrasedesteñaw kefle Zemen* (Addis Ababa: Berhanen Selam Printing Press, 1959 E.C.), 216; Tesema Ta'a, "The Oromo of Wollega: A Historical Survey to 1910" (M.A. Thesis, Department of History, Addis Ababa University, 1980), 9-10.
4. Mohammed Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia: A History 1570-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), xii-xiii.
5. Tesema, "Oromo of Wollega," 10.
6. Kumsa Asfaw, "Ethiopia, Revolution and the National Question: The case of the Oromos," *Journal of African Studies,* 15: 1&2 (1988): 16; Jan Hultin, *The Long Journey: Essays on History, Descent and Land among the Macha Oromo* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1987), 14.

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7. Mekuria Bulcha, "The Survival and Reconstruction of Oromo National Identity" in *Being and Becoming Oromo. Historical and Anthropological Enquiries*, eds. P. T. W. Baxter, Jan Hultin, Alessandro Triulzi (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1996), 50.
8. Lemmu Baissa, "The Oromo Gada system of Government," in *State Crisis Globalization and national Movements in North-East Africa*, ed., Asafa Jalata (New York: Routledge, 2004), 110.
9. *Ibid.* 110-111.
10. Beckingham & Huntingford, *Some Records,* 112-114.
11. David Matthew, *Ethiopia: A Study of Polity 1540 - 1935* (London: Eyre & Spottis Woode, 1947), 38.
12. For details see, Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia*, 42.
13. Beckingham & Huntingford, *Some Records*, 120; Rene Basset, "Etudes sur L'Histoire d'Ethiopie," *Journal Asiatique* ser. 7: 17 (Paris, 1882):118.
14. S.G. Baratti, *The Late Travels of S. Giacomo Baratti*: *An Italian Gentleman Into the remote Countries of the Abyssins or of Ethiopia Interior* (London, 1670), 120.
15. Balthazar Tellez, *Travels of the Portuguese in Ethiopia* (London: J. Knopton, 1710), 62.
16. Bairu Tafla (ed.), *Asma Giyorgis and His Work: History of the Gâllâ and the Kingdom of Sawâ* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden Gmbh, 1987), 163.
17. Tafla, *Asma Giyorgis and His Work*, 185; Beckingham & Huntingford, *Some Records*, 122-123. Amonat is a river located in northeastern Shawa and southeastern Wallo; while Walaqa was one of the administrative districts within the Christian Empire before the 17th century. It was located north of upper Shawa as far as Gishen River, and perhaps included Goha Tsiyon, Darra and Boorana in Wallo. Today Walaqa is only survived as a name of a river in Boorana in Wallo. See Bairu Tafla, pp. 880 & 982.
18. James Bruce, *Travel to Discover the Source of the* Nile vol. 2. (London G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1790), 238-39; Wallis Budge, *A History of Ethiopia, Nubia and Abyssinia* (London: Methuen & Co, 1928), 374.
19. Philip Caraman, *The Lost Empire: The Story of the Jesuits in Ethiopia 1555-1634* (London: Sdgwick & Jackson, 1985), 53.
20. For details see, Tsega Endalew, "The Oromo of Wanbara: A Historical Survey" (MA thesis, Addis Ababa University, 1997), chapter I.
21. Tafla, *Asma Giyorgis and His Work,* 311.
22. *Idid.*, 307.
23. Esteves Pereira (ed.), *Chronica de Susenyos roi d'Ethiopia* (Lisboa: Impresa Nacional, 1892 – 1900), 104– 105. There were several Oromo soldiers

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who remained with the Emperor and perhaps they were in favor of their kin.

24. Bruce, *Travels*, 268. For the details see Caraman, *The Lost Empire,* 80–81.
25. Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos,* 116-119, 120; Bruce, *Travels,* 277–78. Note that Emperor Minas (1559-63) had transferred his power base to this region in 1559 for security reasons. Now, it was no longer secure and even the Royal Court could not protect itself.
26. Beckingham and Huntingford, *Some Records,* xc.
27. Tafla, *Asma Giyorgis and His Work*, 333-335; cf. Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos,* 156-157.
28. Beckingham and Huntingford, *Some Records,* xc.
29. Tafla, *Asma Giyorgis and His Work*, 361 – 363; Pereira *Chronica de Susenyos*, 222 – 224.
30. For details, see Hassen, *Oromo of Ethiopia*, 74.
31. Tafla 375.
32. Bruce, *Travel,* vol. 3, 646 -647; See also Budge, *A History of Ethiopia,* 614.
33. Johannes Van Donzel, *A Yemenite Embassy to Ethiopia 1647 – 1649* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1986), 113.
34. Caraman, *The Lost Empire*, 76; Budge, *A History of Ethiopia,* 614.
35. Bruce, *Travels*, vol. 2, 374 – 377 & 383.
36. J. Van Donzel, *A Yemenite Embassy*, 113.
37. Beckingham and Huntingford, *Some Records*, xcii.
38. *Ibid*, 137.
39. Colburn's United Service Magazine, *Naval and Military Journal*, Part III (London: Hurst and Blackett, Publishers, 1867), 245.
40. Colburn's United Service Magazine, *Naval and Military*, 245. Here the Oromo were compared to the ancient Parthians who invented heavy cavalry. They were the archenemy of the Roman Empire in the east; and they limited Rome's expansion beyond eastern Anatolia. Their power was based on a combination of the guerilla warfare, with organisational skills sufficient to build and administer a vast empire (247BC-224AD). For details, see http://ebooks.abc-clio.com/?1-57607-994-5, 17-18.
41. Tafla, *Asma Giyorgis and His Work*, 435.
42. Beckingham and Huntingford, *Some Records* xci; see also Tafla (ed.), *Asma Giyorgis and His Work*, 447.
43. Tafla, *Asma Giyorgis and His Work*, 413-415. This expedition is also described in, Basset, "Etudes sur L'Histoire d'Ethiopie," 161-166.

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