

Book review

The Oromo movement and imperial politics: *Culture and ideology in Oromia and Ethiopia*. By Asafa Jalata. New York: Lexington Books, 2020. XII +197. ISBN 978-1-7936-0337-1

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The primary aim of this book is to interpret Oromo history through a colonial perspective, asserting that the Abyssinian (Amhara-dominated) elite have colonized Oromia since the 19th century. It seeks to highlight the systemic oppression of Oromo culture, language, religion (*waaqeffannaa*), and institutions (*gadaa/siqqee*) under Ethiopian rule. Additionally, the book advocates for Oromummaa (Oromo nationalism) as a liberation ideology to promote self-determination and dismantle Ethiopia's "colonial state".

The book glorifies *Oromummaa*¹, and the Oromo movement's contribution to struggling "Ethiopian colonialism and global imperialism" (p. 1). The book is the colonial narrative's extension vis-à-vis the formation of the modern Ethiopian state. Despite the Oromia Nation being the largest ethnic group, Jalata laments that Ethiopia has colonized Oromia. The author contends that during the 19th century, Emperor Menelik's march to the south was to search for a colony. Jalata argues that Emperor Menelik established a political system to exploit, oppress, and discriminate against the southern nationalities' social and cultural assets. Jalata thinks that Abyssinians have colonized the southern parts of Ethiopia and the Oromia nation since Europeans' scramble for Africa. The Oromos were treated as second-class citizens. Consequently, the *Oromummaa* and Oromo movements started to reverse colonial Abyssinia's policies, practices, status quo, and global imperialism in the 1960s. Since the Oromo movement inculcated the colonial thesis in the Oromo mind, the Oromos accepted it. The author insists colonial Abyssinians treated the Oromos as slaves, practically and theoretically. As a result, a

¹ Oromo's nationalism, in *Affaan Oromo* (Oromo's native language).

few Oromo elites strive to develop collective Oromo consciousness to deconstruct Ethiopia's colonial status quo.

Jalata contends that the Ethiopian colonial state, global imperialism, and global capitalism destroy Oromo's epistemology, *waaqeffannaa* – Oromo's indigenous religion, military organizations, and agricultural practices (farming and cattle herding). The Oromo's traditional institutions and practices were suppressed. The Abyssinians deny the Oromos both indigenous and modern education and systematically hinder self-expression to keep the Oromos in the *darkness of ignorance*. The author ventures to call this practice "epistemicide" (p. 14). This, in turn, deters the Oromos from establishing their own independent institutions and leadership. Fortunately, the Oromo movement and nationalism began to mobilize the wider Oromo people both inside and outside Ethiopia, with special youths (*Qeerroo*- male and *Qaree*-female) to resist colonial Ethiopian state practices, particularly the Addis Ababa Master Plan. Despite modern education making conceivable the revolution of technological spinoffs, it maintains the supremacy and domination of the West over others and opposes plurality of knowledge. So, Jalata argues, except for a few instances, modern education could not solve indigenous nations' problems. Thus, modern education is a tool for domination, exploitation, and colonization. Hierarchies, in terms of class, gender, and race are constructed by the elite through institutions that have been eradicated. Social, political, cultural, and economic concepts and theories constructed through mainstream theories and ideologies must be demystified. Therefore, Jalata aspires to a scientific method to demystify the pitfalls of traditional mainstream scientific methods. Like technology and epistemology, religion contributes to the domination of Abyssinians over the Oromo people.

From the 16th to the mid-nineteenth centuries, the Oromos made their home in *Biyyaa Oromoo*, now Oromia. Before Abyssinia started and established linkage with Portugal using Christianity, the Oromo and Abyssinians were equal in the balance of power. Since the *gadaa* system was powerful in its military structure, the Abyssinians were defensive until the 19th century. In the last decades of the 19th century, however, the balance of power between Abyssinians and Oromos changed when Ethiopia cooperated with England, France, Italy, and Portugal. Ethiopia gained firearms, military training and skills, and diplomatic leverage from its European counterparts. Although there were Oromo elites, notably Gobana Dache, who cooperated with

Emperor Menelik II, determined Oromo elites established the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in the 1970s to liberate Oromos from Abyssinian colonialism and achieve self-determination. The author makes the bold statement that Oromia was an autonomous state in the past. He pointed out that Oromo's epistemology framed Oromo's culture, politics, religion, and institutions. Regarding this, the *gadaa* or *siqqee* system within which social, economic, and political issues are ruled, is worth mentioning.

The author argues the Oromos are not emancipated from colonial aftereffects. The current regime, even after the Prosperity Party (PP) handover of power from the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), is an extension of Ethiopia's colonial state. The "Nafxanyas," an Amharic word used by Oromo speakers to refer to Amharas, the second largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, means the musketeers; and ethno-nationalist Oromos use the word to imply that Amharas invaded and occupied Oromia. Thus, neither *Oromummaa* nor the Oromo movement is able to defeat its "internal and external enemies" and establish an independent Oromo nation or state (p. 132). Jalata insists that *Nafxanyas* systematically massacred the Oromos, committed terrorism and genocide, and disconnected the Oromos from one another. *Nafxanyas* endure their colonialism through slavery, landholding, the gabbar system, Oromo collaborators or opportunists, and garrison cities and towns established in Oromia. Jalata also accuses capitalist countries, including the USA, China, India, and Arab countries, of siding with the Ethiopian colonial state and worsening social injustice, unfairness, and the democratization process. Beyond physical colonialism, the Abyssinians controlled the spirit and psychology of the Oromo and created prejudice and negative stereotypes toward the Oromo people.

Since World War II, capitalist countries have helped Neocolonial Ethiopia and its colonial legacy to continue into the 21st century. To develop the Oromo's political consciousness and prevail in liberty, the Oromo nationalists and political leaders had to engage in critical self-evaluation and deconstruction of the colonial legacy. Since education is the best tool to control and manipulate, Jalata urges Oromos "must be educated and acquire liberation knowledge," which explains the condition the Oromos have been in since the 19th century (p. 47). Though *Oromummaa* was successful in achieving some causes of the Oromo national struggle, it failed to reestablish an independent democratic republic of Oromia where "human freedom and social justice, equality

and equity, national self-determination, and egalitarian multinational democracy" prevailed (p. 76).

Oromummaa is the Oromo people's national ideology; an elastic ideology that extends to political, philosophical (*safuu*-moral or ethical order), social, economic, and cultural arenas. It has to be used to mobilize the entire Oromo and re-initiate the Oromo's consciousness about their history, culture, language, values, systems, freedom, and sovereignty, from which the Oromos were alienated for centuries by the Abyssinians. *Oromummaa* is to be anchored in *Gadaa* or *Siqqee* ideals and principles. The *Gadaa* requires the Oromos to practice their language, culture, norms, etc. to manifest Oromoness. These manifestations of Oromoness are the national marks and emblems of the Oromo people. Thus, *Oromummaa* endorses Oromo's indigenous knowledge, culture, and political-social systems, for instance, *Gadaa/Siqqee*, and philosophy.

To summarize the main points of the book, using the colonial narrative framework, the author firmly believes that the Abyssinians, mainly Amharas, have colonized Oromia, dominating in culture, language, politics, and threatening Oromo's traditional epistemology and institutions. The author exhorts *Oromummaa* and the Oromo movement to realize Oromo emancipation, autonomous statehood, and democracy as their interwoven triad of main goals. The colonial political narrative plunges Ethiopia into political chaos and confusion. Its proponents, ultranationalists, suppose that Oromia was an independent state before Emperor Menelik subjugated it in the 19th century. This presumption is not only false, but it is malicious for co-existence and nation-building projects. A close investigation of Ethiopia's history demonstrates that the Oromos entered Ethiopia in the 16th century, after Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi's, also known as Ahmad Gragn's, destructive war (Habtamu, 2020). Ullendorff (1960) debunks the myth that there was a territory called Oromia before the 16th century. He succinctly puts it: "The Gallas [Oromos] had been pushed towards the center of the country [Ethiopia] by persistently exerted pressure from Somalis and, to a lesser extent, Danakil" (1960: 75). Amda Seyon, Ethiopia's King, vowed to reverse the Oromo invasion. He made a promise saying, "If I return without destroying Adal's land, let me be like my mother who gave birth to me; do not call me a man, call a woman" (Habtamu, 2020). Clapham (1917) proves that Oromos came into northern Ethiopia from Borana, the southern tip of Ethiopia. These pieces of evidence prove that the

provinces where Oromos currently reside were not *Biyyaa Oromoo* (Oromos' homeland). Thus, there was no Oromo State before the 19th century, which is a claim beyond a reasonable doubt. Further, most societies, each with their distinctive language and norms, were not ambitious enough to establish a strong state beyond their local area. They were surviving groups (Levine, 1974).

The proponents of Ethiopian colonialism over Oromia blame the Amharas (Abyssinians) for dominating their language and culture and threatening the Oromo's traditional epistemology and institutions. Though Affaan Oromo is still in use, it is not as dominant as Amharic. It should be noted that Amharic is a widely spoken Semitic language. It is spoken by around 80% of Ethiopians, either as a first or second language (Kozicki, 2018). Since Amharic is a language with its own alphabet, it was a state language. Besides, many religious groups use Amharic for their services. These contribute a lot to its advancement. The domination of Amharic is not at the expense of Affaan Oromo.

The author becomes more superficial while he deals with the Abyssinians' political domination. Most political elites were Oromos, even in the Imperial regime. Haile Selassie I was not an Amhara by blood (Clapham, 2017). Haile Mariam was half Oromo and half Amhara. There were many other Oromo political elites at the time of the Derg (Fikre Selassie, 2013). Their political participation was evident even in Emperor Menelik's rule.

The author also ventures to blame the Amharas as slave traders. If one needs to write about slavery, he/she should understand how a slave is acquired. For instance, in the Kefa and Berta tribes, slavery was a form of punishment for wrongdoing, at least in the norms of the tribes (Levine, 1974). Other slaves were acquired either through conquering war or slave-raiding expeditions (Ibid, 1974). Overall, some Ethiopians had distinguished slave status. Slavery was a widespread problem in Ethiopia for decades. However, the author laments that the Amharas (Abyssinians) slaved Oromos. On the contrary, the Oromos savaged many ethnic groups and called them *gabare*². In connection, Mohamed (1983), an Oromo scholar, witnesses "resisting men were killed, and the rest were made *gabare*" (1983: 163). Besides, Emperor Menelik II

² *Gabare*, in *Affan Oromo*, means slave.

urged Aba Jiffar of Oromo to spare those who come from Janjero. The Emperor said the following in Amharic:

ከጃንጀሮ ወደ አነተ አገር የመጣውን ጋላ እንግዲህ ከጀ ከገባልኝ ብለህ ጭቡ አድርገህ ባሪያ
ነህና አንተንም ልበድልህ፣ ልጅህንም አምጣና እንደከብት ልሸጠው፣ ልለጢጠው አትበል። ይህንን
ያህል ዘመን አባቶቻቸው ከአባቶችህ፣ ልጆቻቸው ከንተጋረ አብረው ኑረው ባሪያ ሊባሉ
አይገባም።

Do not say, I will offend those Gallas who came from Janjero, and bring your children, and I will sell them as cattle. For a long time, their fathers had lived with your father, and their children have lived with you, they would not be called slaves. Overall, an individual of any ethnic group was liable to be slaved by any individual who is a member of the powerful.

The book appears to have been written for the author's political concerns and resentment of the Abyssinians rather than being thoroughly researched and supported by empirical and theoretical sources. He disputes some established facts, such as the claim that the Oromo were the first people to settle southern Ethiopia and that they were overrun by Abyssinians.