

Oromia's *Irreecha* Festival - A Revival of an Ancient African Culture An Attempt to Understand and Explain*

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Irreecha (also spelled *Irreessa*), the Oromo equivalent of Thanksgiving, was traditionally celebrated bi-annually in different parts of the Oromo country. The *Irreecha Birra* festival is celebrated in the month of September and *Irreecha Arfaasaa* in the month of April. Although it was a non-political festival, the *irreecha* was suppressed by Ethiopian regimes. Brought back to life by a struggle for cultural revival which the Oromo have waged during the last fifty, the festival is now playing a significant role in the manifestation and preservation of Oromo national identity. The festival in its traditional form is celebrated in different localities across Oromia. At the national level, it is an event that brings millions of Oromos from all over the Oromo country and non-Oromo visitors from other parts of the world to the shores of Hora (Lake) Arsadi in the city of Bishoftu in central Oromia. As such, it has no parallel in Africa. The festival is celebrated not only in Oromia, but has become an event which is observed transnationally by tens of thousands of Oromos settled in many countries around the world.

This paper aims to shed light on the role of the *irreecha* festival in the expression of Oromo unity and national identity. It is said that a collective identity is constructed not only in and of its present life, but also in reconstructing the collectivity's earlier life. I will describe the role of numerous pan-Oromo socio-cultural and historical symbols and artefacts which the festival has brought to light, in awakening the Oromo sense of belonging to a community. The pan-Oromo democratic tradition is reflected in the artefacts displayed in the *irreecha* parade, in the blessings of elders who officiate it, in the environmental ethics articulated and in the performances of artist who entertain the celebrants.

Elements of a reviving culture packed up in a festival

In the pre-colonial past, the *Irreecha Birra* marked the end of the rainy season and the beginning of harvest season. It is an Oromo custom to gather on the river banks and the shores of lakes and give thanks to *Waaqa* (God) for all his bounty and pray for *Nagaa* (peace) and *Araara* (reconciliation) among humans and with God. Today, the festival has come to mark the end of the rainy season, and more. It marks the end of the cultural trauma which had affected the Oromo for about a century. It heralds and confirms that the time when the Oromo culture was seen as "pagan and primitive" is gone for good. It denotes victory over a history of cultural denigration.

The elders of the nation, their counsel and benediction

Like in the past, the *baayyuu* (elders, wisemen, the learned – both singular and plural) thank God and bless the nation as their ancestors did. They bless the nation; they remind their audience to uphold the Oromo ethics of *safuu* and *nagaa* (respect and peace), reconcile among themselves and pray to God to reconcile with them. Although many of the Oromo concepts, vocabulary and semantics the *baayyuu* use are archaic, the meanings of their blessing and sagacious counsel are comprehensible to their audience. The following is a rough translation of an excerpt from the counsel and blessing of a *baayyuu* who officiated an *irreecha* festival outside the city of Naqamtee in 2013.

Shall evil have no place amongst you?
 Shall hate have no place amongst you?
 Shall truth find you?
 Is this your testimony before God?
 Let peace be among all!
 Let peace be among adults!
 Let peace be among the youth!
 Let peace be with the livestock!

He reminded the participants the connection that the occasion has with the Oromo heritage and counsels and commands them to confirm the authenticity of the occasion. He asked them whether spirit of the celebration is aligned with the spirit of Oromo traditions as reflected in the laws of the five major *Odaas*: *Odaa Nabee* (in central Oromia), *Odaa Bisil* (in western Oromia), *Odaa Bulluq* (in north-western Oromia), *Odaa Roobaa* (in south-eastern Oromia) and *Odaa Bultum* (in eastern Oromia). He asked them whether the traditions of Madda Walaabuu are respected. The five *Odaas* were centers of the ancient *gadaa* republics where the Oromo met and elected their leaders and reviewed their laws and made new ones every eight years according to the constitution of the nation, and Madda Walaabuu was the seat of *Abba Muuda*, the high priest of traditional Oromo religion *Waaqeffannaa*. The response of the celebrants is in the affirmative. This was followed by another moment of blessing which, roughly translated, said the following

You shall not conspire against one another
 You shall not betray one another
 Let God be at peace with you
 Let the Earth be at peace with you

The significance of this ritual is not that the counsel of the *baayyuu* is translated into action, but the historical and cultural knowledge it conveys and the consciousness it raises in the minds of the audience. The past is memorized and communicated not only by the *baayyuu* but is also stored and reflected in the array of artefacts and costumes that decorate the *irreecha* parade. Combined with sagacious words of the *baayyuu*, the rich symbols of the Oromo *gadaa* culture – that attire the multitude who march in total harmony – reveal the dignity and pride with which the Oromo nation is re-asserting its culture and identity.

The poetic interpretations of artists

The collective memories of the nation, preserved in the ritual and symbols, then expressed in the words of the *baayyuu*, are supplemented by young artists who herald the revival of their heritage with songs and dances. Some of songs such as Galaanee Bulbulaa's "*Kottaa ni hirreefannaa, aadaa bade deeffannaa*" which means ("Come let us celebrate Thanksgiving; Let us revive our banned culture", Giftii Dhadhii's *Oromoon seera qabaa* ("The Oromo have laws"), Abdoo Badhaasoo's *Irreecha irreeffanna* ("We will celebrate Thanksgiving"), Gaaddisee Shamsadin's *Beenu Oromia, irreechi irree keenya* ("Go on Oromia, *irreecha* is our power") and Amartii Waarii's *Kottaa ni kabajna kuni aadaa keenyaa* ("Come, let us celebrate our culture"), which were performed at the *irreecha* festivals and elsewhere, connect the Oromo present with the past. They herald the recovery, revival and survival of the Oromo culture from the destruction to which it was doomed by conquest and colonization. In short, they reflect the feelings which underpin the ongoing Oromo recovery from a century of cultural trauma. The "green" leitmotif of luxuriant vegetation and abundant

water against which the artists perform, provides a symbolic connection with God and nature that suggest that the Oromo are and will be at peace, with God, and also with nature. Their lyrics imply that the earth, the forests, rivers, lakes, animals and all the other living things are both natural and divine. Their implicit message is that what hurts the eco-system hurts humans also.

The dynamics that are at work during the *irreecha* festivals and what the participants experience is more than what the eye can see or the ear can hear. It is a joy and sense of belonging and experience of being part of a community that cannot be expressed fully in words. It is more. What the participants experience is a resurrection of a nation and a reconstruction of collective memory through the festival and the array of artefacts it displays. The occasion creates a collective “reality” and history. This collective reality connotes a state of being of the same mind, sharing a collective memory about a shared past and, just as importantly, an aspiration for a common future. This is more than a product of individual perception or understanding. When asked by a journalist from *China Central TV Africa (CCTV)* what he was thinking about the *irreecha* celebration at the 2014 festival in Bishoftu, a young celebrant replied

I don't have a word to express what I see or feel. I believe that that this is my culture and religion at the same time. This is what was forwarded to us by our ancestors; and it is what I will forward to my children.

This individual is not alone in having that “feeling” about the festival. His feeling is shared by other Oromo participants around him and those who watch the process on TV. They may or may not express what they see and feel with words, but most of them, share with him the experience that what they see is their culture symbolized in the festival. When human communities attach symbols to words, concepts and artefacts that signify their collective experience, they share a vision. A society cannot exist without a degree of this sort of vision shared by a majority of its members. The young respondent cited above says that what he sees is his culture and religion which was passed to him by his ancestors and which he will pass over to his children. In other words, what he sees reflects his identity and that of others around him. My point is that the *irreecha* festival is one of the ways in which the Oromo society “recognizes itself”, that is to say imagines, feels, experiences or knows about its own existence. As an occasion and venue for the symbolic expression of Oromo history and culture, the *irreecha* festival connects the Oromo to a common past through the tangible artefacts on display in the massive parades.

It important to note here that the Oromo celebrate the *irreecha* irrespective of their religious backgrounds. Whether they are *Waaqeffataa*, Christians or Muslims they participate in the festival. The moral counsel and ideals officiated by the *baayyuu* do not contradict the essence of any of the three religions. In fact the *baayyuu* who officiate it are from all the three religions on most occasions. The festival unites the Oromo and harmonizes their thoughts and voices. It creates a “mental state” shared by the entire Oromo nation. Whether one interprets the occasion culturally or politically, the significance of the prayer, counsel and blessing of the *baayyuu* and the songs of the artists in raising Oromo consciousness and unifying the nation cannot be overlooked. It is important to stress, however, the fact that the aim of the counsel of the *baayyuu* and the songs of the artists is not to “mobilize” the participants for collective political action on the spot. The occasion is to celebrate a tradition and its revival. The traditional Oromo ethics of *safuu* and *nagaa*, or respect for and peace with God, humans and the natural world pervade the atmosphere in which the festival is conducted. As I will explain in more detail below, the tranquility which the occasion demands is respected.

Tranquility underpinned by tension and ethically controlled anger

It is important to note here that the tranquility that has characterized the Bishoftu *irreecha* parade of millions of men, women and children during the last few years is *not* a sign that the participants are satisfied with their situation or the status quo. The tranquility reflected in the massive annual parades should not give us the impression that Oromia is a peaceful territory and that Ethiopia is a stable polity. In fact, the benedictions of the *baayyuu* who officiate the festival are often underpinned by restrained feelings of dissatisfaction. The songs of the artists who entertain the participants contain anger felt against the prevailing political conditions. During the 2014 *irreecha* festival, for example, the prayers of the elders were marked by a feeling of grief for the Oromo students who had been cruelly killed by the agents of the regime because they were opposing the so-called Addis Ababa Master Plan. The “crime” for which students were killed, as we all know, was participation in a peaceful protest against the eviction of the Oromo people from their land *en masse*. The *baayyuu* were not calling their audience to make war, but praying for the restoration of justice and for Oromo victory over all those who are harming or will harm them. Concern about human rights’ violations committed by the TPLF regime was also reflected through slogans which called for “Respect to Oromo humanity and sovereignty” and “Respect Oromo Rights to their Territory” from the crowd. In short, the bright colors, the melodious songs and entertaining dances we observe in the *irreecha* parades do not signify Oromo satisfaction with their present situation in Ethiopia. We cannot expect a people whose youth are killed cruelly by a dictatorial regime, or, a people who are evicted from their homes and land, or, a people who are rounded up routinely and are thrown into jail *en masse* without the rule of law, to be satisfied. The celebrants of the *irreecha* festival were immensely dissatisfied with the Tigrayan regime. But, as Asmarom Legesse has remarked, “among the Oromo, war is war and peace is immensely tranquil” (see *Gadaa Democracy*, 2000, p. 77). The *irreecha* festival is an occasion that requires such tranquility. To feel anger about the injustice is normal and expected, but to express it would violate the spirit of a sacred occasion that Oromos greatly value. As a journalist from *CCTV Africa* who visited the festival in 2014 described it “the *irreecha* is a sort of family gathering.” Indeed, the festival is a sacred come-together for the different branches of the Oromo nation. It would be considered immoral to disturb it. However, given that the ruling Tigrayan elite are nervous about every Oromo gathering and that they have shown unprecedented impunity against the Oromo people, the possibility of interference by its security forces that can turn the tranquil “family gathering” into a bloody scene cannot be disregarded. During the last ten years the peace was disturbed by measures taken against participants of the festival: visitors were beaten, and many were imprisoned. Some of them were wounded by bullets fired by the police. During the 2010 festival 120 young participants were imprisoned accused of being “terrorists”; the *gadaa* cultural costume they wore was interpreted as a symbol of the Oromo Liberation Front (personal communication). Yet the Oromo have continued to come to Lake Arsadi in an ever increasing numbers to continue with the revival of their ancient culture.

Artefacts that symbolize the “staying power of Oromo institutions”

After decades of suppression, the spontaneity with which *irreecha*, and other Oromo traditions, have come back to life during the last two decades has proved the resilience of Oromo culture. This shows that the majority of the Oromo people have successfully maintained a collective identity different from an identity which the Ethiopian ruling elites have been trying to impose on them in an effort to create a people with “one culture (Abyssinian), one religion (Orthodox Christianity), one language (Amharic) and one nation (Ethiopia)” out of a colonial empire.

The symbols that the *irreecha* festival has brought together are ancient and pan-Oromo reflecting what Asmarom Legesse has famously referred to as the “staying power” of the *gadaa* cultural heritage (ibid. p. 103). They symbolize justice, peace, and sovereignty which the Oromo of the *gadaa* republics enjoyed in the past. In fact, the *bokkum* which are carried by men and *siqqee* carried

by women, as well as a range of other pre-colonial pan-Oromo *gadaa* symbols which are lined-up prominently by participants in the *irreecha* parade, reinforce the memories and values shared by the multitude gathered at the festival sites as well as those who are following the event in the media from afar, whether in Oromia or in the diaspora. The *bokkum* and *siqqee* are the symbols of the democratic ethos of the *gadaa* system. The *bokkum*, a scepter which is carried by elderly men, is the symbol of the *gadaa* system, signifying both power and justice. As a symbol of *gadaa* democracy the *siqqee* stood for the inalienable rights of Oromo women and the inviolability of their human dignity. It is a symbol for an institution within the *gadaa* system. A woman is “accepted” into such an institution on her marriage day and thenceforth she is protected by it against any violation of her rights or human dignity, be it by her husband or other men. The *siqqee* entitles Oromo women to participate in many instances of decision making, in conflict resolution and other important matters that concern their society. The authenticity of the *irreecha* festival is reflected not only in the artefacts displayed in the parade or the blessings conducted by the *hayyuu* and songs sung by the artists, but also in the amazing harmony which pervades the gathering of millions of people: the festival is serene; it proceeds peacefully and ends without incidents.

To go back to symbols, nations need symbols to frame their self-identification: that is symbols which help them to recognize themselves as collectivities, or that they exist as a “We”. Those who claim belongingness to such a collectivity share a culture, the elements of which are given significance in ritual practice. Thus, the array of symbols, such as the ones displayed in the *irreecha* parades, constructs a narrative which holds together the imagination of a people and provides bases of harmonious thought and collective action. Nations around the world organize parades for different reasons. Some organize them to commemorate historical events such as their victories in battles or day of national independence. Others use parades to exhibit their cultural achievements or display technological progress. The *irreecha* festival, in the form it takes in Bishoftu today is, by and large, a national parade organized to celebrate the revival of Oromo culture. It heralds Oromo victory over ethnocide, or the attempted destruction of their culture by Ethiopian regimes. The costumes which the majority in the parade wear and the artefacts they carry reflect the culture and history which the different branches of the Oromo nation had shared and preserved. It is a history and culture which they rejoice with pride and will revive and defend. For the Oromo people, the consequences of the Abyssinian conquest was prolonged cultural trauma. The *irreecha* festival heralds that the Oromo are now leaving behind that trauma.

The *irreecha* is taking the place of the ancient *muudaa* pilgrimage

What is very significant about the festival is that the multitude of men and women who converge on Bishoftu city from all over the Oromo country celebrate a culture that was denigrated, despised and suppressed for about a century. Such a massive gathering is reminiscent of another aspect of Oromo culture. The spontaneous pan-Oromo participation in the festival suggests the manner in which the ancient pilgrimage to *Abbaa Muuda* was undertaken by thousands of *jila* (pilgrims) from the different *gadaa* federations. The pilgrimage to the holy *muuda* shrines attracted every eighth year tens of thousands of men who represented every Oromo clan from every corner of the Oromo country. Today, the *irreecha* festival celebrated on the shores of Lake Arsadi is playing a similar role.

The *jila* pilgrimage was both a religious and a political undertaking. Those who traveled on foot for months every eighth year to the *muuda* shrines from regions which are far apart, were drawn together by a myth of origin from one ancestor, Orma. This was reinforced by a common language, a common religion through a strong attachment to their spiritual leader *Abba Muuda*, a common system of law, a shared attitude toward the natural world as well as their democratic

character – all gave the Oromo who lived in different *gadaa* republics a sense of a single nation. The *muuda* institution maintained the moral unity of the Oromo nation until it was banned in 1900 by Emperor Menelik. The ban exacerbated the traumatic disruption of Oromo culture which I have mentioned above. The revival of the *irreecha* festival is a major step in dispelling the distortion of Oromo self-perception as a nation that was created by the disruption of conquest and colonization.

It is important to recollect here that it was the Macca Tuulama Association (MTA) that paved the way to take the Oromo nation into the present phase of their history. It is a well known fact that the activities of the MTA launched the recovery of the Oromo nation from the cultural and political traumas of conquest and colonization. It became the first forum to gather members of the Oromo branches from different parts of their country for a common purpose decades after the *jila* pilgrimages were banned by the imperial Ethiopian government. The MTA itself was banned by a successor of Menelik in 1968; but its work was resumed by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) beginning in the mid-1970s. It was also by the initiative of the MTA members that the Lake Arsadi *irreecha* festival was revived in the mid-1990s overcoming the restrictive surveillance of the present Ethiopian regime. The MTA was banned and its leaders were imprisoned for the second time in 2004, but the irreversible work of Oromo cultural revival that had started fifty years ago has continued on a large scale as reflected in the *Irreecha* festival.

Although the aim of the journey taken by Oromo masses to Lake Arsadi today is not exactly the same as those which stimulated the pilgrimage to the *muuda* shrines in the past, the effects are similar. It brings people from every corner of the Oromo country to one place. The *irreecha* festivals have re-established the sense of belonging to a single nation by the different branches of the Oromo nation in the way that the *jila* pilgrimage did in the past. The national consciousness created by the *irreecha* festival may be even deeper than the awareness that was created by the *muuda* pilgrimages and kept the Oromo nation intact in the past. Covered by mass media which takes the festival home to millions of Oromos at home and transnationally, the annual *event* makes Oromo imagination of their national community more vivid, immediate and real than it had ever been in the past.

For the Oromo their land is holy to all religions

As a cultural and religious site Lake Arsadi is located in a district which, de facto, was a holy land for the Oromo. Odaa Nabee, one of the oldest and most historic and ritually significant sites of the *gadaa* assemblies, is located about 15 km north of the lake. *Tulluu* (Mount) Cuqqaalaa (Ziquala in Amharic), *Tulluu* Erer, *Tulluu* Bosati, *Tulluu* Furi, *Tulluu* Eegduu, *Tulluu* Foyataa, *Tullu* Galaan and *Tullu* Waatoo Daalachaa which were called *Saddetan Tulluu Waaqayoo* (the eight mountains of God) in Oromo tradition are also located in the district within less than 30 km distance from the lake. Scholars of Oromo studies have argued that mountains were seen as ceremonial grounds in the past and that the tops of the mountains mentioned here were used for that purpose. In fact, the shores of a crater lake on Mt. Cuqqaalaa was a site for the *irreecha* festival for centuries. In short, the proliferation of ritual sites indicates the importance which the region has in the religious and political lives of the Oromo.

It is well known that Abyssinian kings and Orthodox clergy built churches in the lands they conquered to serve their soldiers and settlers, and in some cases also to Christianize the conquered peoples. It seems that the Oromo region of Ada'a in which Bishoftu city is located was given more attention in this respect than normal. The conquerors did not stop with building churches and converting the indigenous population; the intention seems to have been Christianizing the land and changing its Oromo identity as well. They gave biblical names such as Debre Zeit to

Bishfotu and Nazret (Nazareth) to Adama. Farther south, two islands in Lake Zway were also called Galila *Daseet* (Galilee Island) and Debre Sina. The change of these place names in a region which is seen as sacred by the Oromo to Semitic Biblical names is perhaps to “Semiticize and Abyssinize” the region, deny its indigenous Oromo identity and claim it as a “holy” land proclaiming that it belonged to their Christian empire since ancient times. However, the policy did not succeed; the place names were reversed back to Oromo names in the 1970s, and now the *irreecha* festival is reviving the cultural identity of the district. *Waaqeffannaa*, the traditional Oromo religion, with which the *irreecha* is culturally aligned, is also reviving. This does not mean there is no opposition to the re-institution of the Oromo heritage. According to interviews given by Abba Abdiisaa Dhaabaa, Hunddataa Waaqwayyaa and Kaasaa Balchaa to a journalist from the *Oromia Media Network* recently (*OMN TV*, September 13, 2015), the opposition of the Orthodox clergy against the Bishoftu *irreecha* festival is still persistent. The denigration of the Oromo religious festival has not stopped.

The opposition of the Orthodox clergy seems to be even more marked against the celebration of the Spring *irreecha* on the shores of the crater lake on Mount Cuqqaalaa. As mentioned above, the shores of that crater lake is an ancient site where the Oromo festival was celebrated for centuries. A monastery run by Orthodox Christians had also existed since the twelfth century on the same mountain. Its clergy had co-existed with the Oromo who follow their own religious tradition and celebrated *irreecha* festival on the shores of the crater lake. On the part of the Oromo, who do not see the co-existence of the different religions as a problem, this is not surprising. What is remarkable is the decision of the Orthodox clergy to share the shores of a small lake for ritual purposes with a people their church considers as heathen. According to oral tradition the remarkable co-existence was a result of an agreement made with the Oromo by a bishop who founded the monastery. The condition which forced the bishop to accept the coexistence of the two religions is not clear. Ironically, the tolerance which the Orthodox clergy have shown over the centuries has changed into irrational opposition in recent years and the co-existence between the two religious communities is disturbed. According to my informant, the Oromo have been forbidden to celebrate the *irreecha* festival on Mount Cuqqaalaa since 2010. It is reported that a stela called *sida Nabee* (Nabee’s statue) which stood for centuries and was associated with Oromo traditions was also destroyed recently. According to the same source, the resistance of the clergy is against the revival of the Oromo religious culture. However, given the number of Oromo “pilgrims” who visit the *irreecha* celebrations, it is plausible to suggest that the revival of Oromo religious and cultural traditions is unstoppable. Above all, based on the religious backgrounds of the millions of people who participate in the *irreecha* festival and the *haayyuu* who officiate it, one can say that today Bishoftu is a sacred place not only for *Waaqeffataa* (followers of the traditional Oromo religion), but also for Christians and Muslims. That shows that in Oromia people from all religious backgrounds are welcome. But, religious fanaticism is not. It is detested.

Refutation of Oromo misrepresentations and misconceptions

The festival refutes many of the misconceptions which are created by Ethiopianist narratives. As I have pointed out in my recent book *The Contours of the Ancient and Emergent Oromo Nation* (see Bulcha, 2011, Chapter 8), there are Ethiopianist writers who posit that the Oromo “have never had a sense of collective identity based on popular memory,” that the Oromo have no common historical symbols that are emotionally appealing to them or which could serve as primary symbols of their national identity and that they do not have a collective consciousness “rooted in myths and symbols.” The range of pan-Oromo symbols and artefacts, which are mentioned above, refute these propositions. They contradict the argument, which says the Oromo “do not possess a sense of belonging to a single societal community who shared important past experience and a common historic destiny.” The enthusiasm with which the Oromo are reviving

the *irreecha* shows not only the resilience of this element of their traditional culture but also the revival of *Oromummaa* (being Oromo) in contradiction to the imposed culture of *Ethiopiyanet* (Ethiopian-ness) with unexpected speed and vibrancy. Contradicting the picture of a “chaotic” people depicted in the Ethiopianist discourse, the festival also proves that the Oromo are a people who have a culture capable of bringing together millions of men, women and children from different religious backgrounds in one place to celebrate their ancient traditions with utmost harmony and peace. The revival of the *irreecha* festival in such a manner and on such a scale confirms, among others, that time when the Oromo were made to feel shame about their history, culture and identity; and the time when they strived to behave like or speak the language of their conquerors in order to be taken as Ethiopians is gone.

It is also interesting to note here the profound refutation the festival offers to the *Ethiopianist* misconception of Oromo history, culture and identity. It refutes the misconception that the Oromo are a mixed bag of different tribes who do not share a common past or have a collective identity. As I have discussed at length elsewhere (see Bulcha 2011, above), literature on Ethiopia – still in use – asserts the ‘fragility’ of Oromo socio-cultural features in contrast to the ‘tenacity’ of Abyssinian traditions. It has been argued by Ethiopianist historians that the Oromo lack a sense of community and solidarity and possess no collective memory or corporate history. For those who will understand Oromo culture and history it suffices to watch the *irreecha* festival. It narrates a cultural history shared by an entire nation. It does not narrate stories about kings and emperors who conquered and subjugated other people; it mirrors a heritage that is different from the Abyssinian heritage which the Ethiopianist historiographers have in mind when they talk about peoples “who lack history”.

Conclusion

Given what is said about the *irreecha* in this article, the following can be concluded. From the historical point of view, a recent and clear manifestation of the resilience of Oromo cultural heritage is that the Oromo have, in the face of a vicious colonial repression, preserved the *irreecha*. This achievement shall be added to the preservation of important aspects of the Oromo *gadaa* system and the traditional Oromo religion, *Waaqeffannaa*. Indeed, this confirms that time when the Oromo were made to feel shame about their culture is gone for good, and the time has arrived when the Oromo culture assumes the place it deserves as a noteworthy cultural heritage of Africa and a significant contribution to global culture.

Taking into account the colorful costumes of its celebrants, it is clear that the festival has brought out expressions, colors, and art forms that are uniquely Oromo but which were hidden from public sight in the past. It is incumbent on Oromo artists, designers, scholars and organizers of festivals and Oromo events to polish and create quality out of the treasure of Oromo arts, artefacts and narratives that have been preserved by their people and are now manifested in abundance in Oromo oral literature and cultural traditions, including in the *irreecha* festival. In short, the festival is an occasion that can be used by the Oromo to introduce themselves and their unique African culture to the world community.

As a parting word, I would like to point out that as an event which attracts millions of participants from near and far, the Bishoftu *irreecha* festival is becoming a major income generating event. Unfortunately, most of the beneficiaries are not Oromo. Frantz Fanon has reminded us that the poverty of a colonized people, national oppression and the inhibition of their culture are one and the same thing (see his *Wretched of the Earth*). This has been the fate of the Oromo. Because of the policy of the previous Ethiopian regimes, the majority of property owners in and around the city of Bishoftu are no longer Oromo. The present regime’s land policy

which is encroaching on the district and displacing the Oromo from the area and is worsening their predicament. The income generated by the lease or sale of their land to local and international contractors along with the value generated by their cultural significance is not benefiting the Oromo. For the *irreecha* festival to benefit them, the displacement of the Oromo should cease, and the so-called Addis Ababa Master Plan (AAMP), which is encroaching on the district from the north, should be stopped. If the Plan continues, the *irreecha* festival will soon end up celebrated in a territory bereft of its Oromo inhabitants and culture.

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