

The Oromo as recorded in Ethiopian literature

Ekaterina Gusarova¹

The Oromo, their origin and their expansion against the Christian Ethiopian State in the late 16th and in the first half of the 17th centuries play a particular role in the Ethiopian literature. I would like to discuss here different aspects of the wide literary corpus dedicated to the Oromo and the different points of view exploited in the literary corpus. The literature represents a special interest for the study of ethnography, history, and historical geography of Ethiopia and Ethiopian studies in general.

A general historical presentation: appearance of the Oromo as a historical fact and their location.

The people in question are spread across the vast territories of northeast Africa and apart from Ethiopia also live in the North of Kenya, in Eritrea and Sudan. The question about the place of origin of the Oromo is controversial. It represented a particular interest also in the time when the literary corpus I am writing about was created. The authors of the works dedicated to the question a substantial amount of valuable parchment.

The point of view shown in the frame of the research is that as the existence of the Oromo is a real historical fact the information about them should be found in a historical documentation, reliable written fonts and traditions which deal with facts, not only in mystic local folklore, which is usually full of legends. Anyway, different attitudes in historical research exist. They have been the cause for creation of a number of hypotheses on the still actual question about the history, location, origin of the people and the way they accessed in the body of Ethiopia.

Actually we have several different literary traditions that surely cannot pretend to be a source for a historical research. The common link is that most of them inform about a violent character of the first Galla, or actually one of their groups Borana, about their birth from one mother and an eventual contact of the Galla with the other people, probably the Amhara or generally Christians. Thus, I mean that in absence of other reliable sources, we have to try to use the information obtained from the available texts.

Here I would like to note that various points of view also exist on the question of the origin of the Oromo. Two of them are the following. In the middle of the 20th century the main theory, shared also by Haberland, was that the Oromo originated from the tableland of Bale in the West of Ethiopia. In more recent times this theory was re-elaborated and deepened by Mohammad Hassen, who supposed that the famous expansion of the Oromo was in fact a way back to the territories that had already been occupied by them in the past (Bassi, 1996).

¹ University of Naples "L'Orientale", Piazza S. Domenico Maggiore, 12; Napoli; 80133, Italy,
e-mail: ekater-ina@mail.ru

The historical background and some chronological data.

This literary corpus, that has been a subject of discussions and the research of a number of scholars from Europe and all over the world, was in the major part created between the end of the 16th and the 17th centuries as a consequence of the appearance of the Oromo from the southern borders of Ethiopia and their vast expansion that moved them further in the heart of the state. The main aim of this literature was to explain the victorious and destructive presence of the people in the state. It was a necessary thing in the unstable political situation in the country complicated by preceding 30 years of war with the troops of Ahmad Grañ. These events weakened greatly the Christian State of Ethiopia from all the points of view. The war had a great significance for the Ethiopian State of that period of time. In this way the narration about Ahmad Grañ constitutes parts of some of the texts and is strongly related with the literary corpus in question.

The struggle of the Empire culminated in almost real occupation of the Abyssinian highland territories. After the end of the war, Ethiopia faced a lot of internal problems. To restore the central authority the king had to fight with ethnic groups inside the state, with the separatist tendencies of the nobility and feudal lords. He had to resolve a difficult question of relations with the representatives from Europe, particularly with the Jesuits. Additionally the Oromo tribes' migration still continued, representing a considerable threat for the weakened state.

As many scholars note, unlike the invasion of the troops of Ahmad Grañ, the appearance of the Oromo in Ethiopia had a completely different character. Their vast migration could not be considered as an invasion of the Christian State, but as a "natural disaster", as a sort of "human flood" (Hultin, 1996: 88). These new "disaster" was damaging to both Christians and Muslims in the country and was impossible to control. The ethnic composition of the great territories was changed notably once the strangers arrived and settled everywhere.

The narratives of the literary corpus I deal with do not always represent the history in the sense of temporal sequence of events. So we should be very attentive in our study of them. The difficulty is to distinguish the history from the myth and to manage to pick up snippets of precious information on the ethnography, social life, habits, geography and so on.

Apart from the Ethiopian literature we have the foreigner's works in European languages dedicated to different peoples of Ethiopia. One of them is "Journal de Voyage" of the French savant Antoine d'Abbadie, who spent about twelve years in Ethiopia in the middle of 19-th century. His manuscripts contain useful observations on the customs and traditions of the Oromo, obtained from the local informants. The author used the data contained in the *Journal* in creation of his "Géographie d'Ethiopie".

Talking about the modern attitude to the people in question, we should note, as Prof. Triulzi underlines, some wrong approaches to the problem of the origins of the Oromo. The main problem is that it is usually spoken of "the *Galla* yesterday and the *Oromo* today" and the tendency of considering them as a "monolithic" group (Triulzi, 1994: 593). As far as the literature dedicated to the origins of the people is concerned, it writes about the Oromo groups' common ancestor, but more or less hypothetically. On the other hand it writes about the brothers-ancestors of the different groups of the people in question. These last concepts live in the minds of the Oromo today.

Reconstruction of Oromo national identity.

It is of great importance for us to know more about the process of formation of the people. Nevertheless, researching the history of the Oromo we found a strong antagonistic prejudice towards the people from the part of Amhara-Tigray society, which traditionally represented the main pillar of Ethiopian official ideology. May be this became the reason for inventing of the large amount of fantastic stories, connected to the people. Bairu Tafla also underlined this fact (Bairu Tafla, 1987). One of the works that was written by traditionally trained Asma Giyorgis clearly represents traditional attitude of the Shoa. So we found in the work and, in general, all over the literature concerned the Oromo an absence of historical neutrality. This makes our research, already complicated by the abundance of the myths and legends, much more complex. The authors, as for example the just mentioned Asma Giyorgis, were aware of this. Surely we can't expect any neutrality after the events that accompanied and followed the migration of the Oromo tribes in the years of the reign of Ləbnā Dəngəl (1508-40) and his successors. We can assume that this literature, naturally, has little value as a historical source, but is very useful in the sense that it contains the "social character" of Ethiopians and can help to draw a general mood of Ethiopia in that period of time.

It seems strange, but the events of the period found their reflection in the particularly controversial position of the people in modern Ethiopia and especially during the recent decades. It is aggravated by sometimes very superficial knowledge of Oromo history on all the levels of the country's society. The existing literature plays an essential role in the reconstruction of the Oromo national identity that must not be underestimated. The reconstruction is often based on various traditions invented in the course of historical process. In some cases it leads to a form of nationalism. We have frequently found such examples of an "invented" (Marcus, 1992: 2) or fabricated background of a people in the recorded history all over the world.

As far as we know, no reconstruction of this kind is possible without at least a glance in the past. It obviously would have no sense for a people to start a "struggle for identity" in a "historical vacuum" (Mekuria Bulcha, 1996: 49) and without a presence of another stronger and often hostile population in the vicinity. As for the past of the Oromo, it is represented in different controversial ways in literary works of different authors that illustrate the existing points of view in the Ethiopian society in connection to some events in the past and especially during the reign of Ləbnā Dəngəl. The main two of them we will see in detail below.

In the context we can say that the complex processes of the Oromo common history in a very particular form are described in the literature dedicated to the so-called "history" of the people in question. Such a self-identity also constitutes a part of the fact that different Oromo groups identify themselves as derived from one or several, common for all the Oromo, ancestors. This is clearly justified at least by the existence of common language and customs.

An attempt of historical interpretation: Bahrəy's History of the Gallas.

The work of Bahrəy is the starting point of any research focused upon the literary traditions about the Oromo. Many scholars turn their attention to the precious literary work. In the recent times Prof. Getatchew Haile published a book dedicated to the study of the manuscripts of the work. It contains very interesting observations on the question

of the position of the Oromo in Ethiopia and the text itself, given also in Amharic and English translations (Getatchew, 2002).

At the moment I am preparing a new critical edition of the text based on all the 4 manuscripts of the literary work we know. My interest for the subject traces back to the years when I was a student of S.B. Chernetsov (1943-2005) in the Saint-Petersburg State University, who devoted to Bahrəy an important study (Chernetsov, 1974). In his article the particular character of the *History* in the sense of its subject and form is underlined. J. Tubiana, working on the preparation of the *Journal* of Antonie d'Abbadie for publishing, points out a particular ethnographic approach of the author of the *History*. The work tells about the Oromo tribes and the structure of the tribes' unions, their conquests and their conflicts with the Christian Ethiopia. It contains an explanation of the reasons of the victories of the Oromo and the defeats of the Christians of Ethiopia. The work was probably written under the reign of King Zādəngəl (1603-04) and it clearly illustrates the personality of the author. As an ecclesiastic, Bahrəy applies a "partisan perspective" in his work (Jan Hultin, 1996: 84).

Yet, though he was a monk since his childhood, he had a strong orientation towards the Court. Probably he is the same figure, mentioned in the "Short chronicle" as the confessor of the king. The formation of the personality of the author in the way of his life, that has its reflection on the pages of his work, must be very interesting. His political views are clearly illustrated by the enumeration of the reasons of the victories of the Galla in the 22 chapter of the chronicle. The author divides the people of Ethiopia in ten categories, nine of which didn't participate in the military expeditions. The categories are described in details in the dialog between the king and the learned men of the country. Then it is said that among the Galla everybody fought, "both old and young". We can see the same dialog on the pages of manuscript EMLL 1610, ff. 13v-27v, containing an Amharic "History of Ethiopia" from the origins till the reign of emperor Susnəyos (1607-32).

However, before this enumeration we see a short phrase that writes about some people who thought that the sins of the Ethiopians were the main reason of the defeat. This phrase represents a common attitude of the clergy that is not completely denied by Bahrəy or is at least considered worth to be mentioned in order to show its artificiality. The king had to mobilize some categories of people, with the exception of the monks and the *däbtäras* to obtain the success. The impossibility of calling for war such categories of people as the landlords and the minstrels was also clear for him.

Here it is worth to mention the political situation in the country and the personality of Zādəngəl (1603-04), the only king who tried to institute the main ideas contained in Bahrəy's *History*. The reforms he made show that the work of Bahrəy was familiar to him and that he shared the ideas and the attitude of the author. In fact, he mobilised peasants and guards before going against the Oromo and made the men of arms and farmers pay the war tax. These were two main factors that made the nobility turn against him. In a sense the presence of the Oromo was an advantageous thing for most part for the feudal lords as it weakened the central power of the state.

In addition Zādəngəl was excommunicated from the Church. Consequently, disapproval amongst the Ethiopian nobility of his reforms manifested quickly and led to a tragic end for the king himself. He was killed most cruelly in the battle with the representatives of secular and clerical high circles putting an end to his short reign and his attempt to realise the ideas of Bahrəy's *History*. The murder of the king who had an ecclesiastic education and was never military trained had naturally a big symbolical

sense, as they cut his finger with a diamond ring, blinded his eyes and made horses march on the body of the Christian king. He was left on the battlefield for three days without burial shows a high degree of the hatred against him. As Chernetsov points out, both the monk and the king have in a great degree “outrun their historical time” (Chernetsov, 1974: 808).

Origin and development of the Amharic traditions about the Oromo.

Little is known about the origin and the dating of the local traditions concerning the Oromo. Even if we could affirm that some of them were created in the end of 16th-17th centuries, often they were re-elaborated greatly in the way of time. This is confirmed by variations of information contained in different manuscripts. In this relation we can try to distinguish between earlier and later fabricated variants of the texts. Although, sometimes we can be luckier: if a work is dated, we can accept - always with a relative confidence - the date to be accurate. We can presuppose a period of a compilation according to numerous particularities of a linguistic character, the type of material used for writing and the proper names found in the text, but we cannot be sure that the work was not rewritten with fabricated information at a later time.

Some legends, as described by I. Guidi (Guidi, 1907), were probably orally transmitted and then written down in later times. They are also clearly characterised by the influence of the surrounding Christian Shoan milieu.

The literary works dedicated to the Oromo can be divided in two categories: autonomous works, as that of Bahrəy, and texts, contained within historical collections. As this type of literature is strongly related to the raise of Ahmad Grañ the narrations about him are included in some of these texts. This is the case with the *Book of the history of the Galla and the vision of Ləbnä Dəngəl* and the two texts edited by Guidi: the *Book of Grañ and the Galla* and the *History of the Galla*.

The two last examples once more represent the kind of literature that contains both narrations about apparition of Ahmad Grañ and the Oromo, the two events in the history of Ethiopia strongly connected one with the other in the minds of the Ethiopians of that period of time. In the very beginning of “The history of the Galla” it is said that it was written about the things of Grañ, at the time of the reign of Ləbnä Dəngəl. From the point of view of the author these two events must have been connected among them. This serves as a proof to the affirmation I have just given above. Without having a different source of information to know the minds of the people contemporaries to the events, the literature becomes the only source of precious information.

In order to trace the development of the traditions I would like to put my attention on the work of Bahrəy (the only one in Gə‘əz), already examined before, a section of the manuscript EMMML 1610, “The history of the Galla and the vision of Ləbnä Dəngəl” and the two texts edited by Guidi, mentioned above.

The texts can be divided according to the point of view they represent: the one of the court and the other of the clergy. The former reasoned the defeats lay in the actual situation in the disordered state. The latter explained it as a punishment of a god for the sins of the people and of King Ləbnä Dəngəl, who was too proud and was also accused in the body of the literature in experiencing some habits of pagan or foreign origin. We cannot be sure whether these were real facts or not, but we can be completely sure about the attitudes of some categories of people to the emperor. In this relation Bahrey represents for as a special interest as he shared in some degree both attitudes. Being

both a man of the church and a man of the court he had very progressive and modern points of view that have never had a real possibility to be realised.

The clergy related to Dabra Libanos was mostly opposed or even hostile to the king. The fact is reflected in some traditions, as I will show below.

The two points of view can be also illustrated by the description of the origins of the Oromo in one or another text.

As far as the *Book of the history of the Galla and the vision of Ləbnä Dəngəl* is concerned, it is the most widespread Ethiopian text about the Oromo, in spite of the fact that it is mostly characterised by the lack of order and a lot of contradictions. One variant of the text was published by A. Caquot (Caquot, 1957). At present, we know at least six manuscripts of the work. Caquot had the only incomplete or short version of the work. The narration of the vision of Ləbnä Dəngəl lacks in the published version.

Analysing the text, we can stress the importance of the passage present in the longer versions and lacking in the text published by Caquot, as a *terminus* for the dating of the tradition. I present here the translation of the piece of the text directly in English:

We didn't write this book according to our will, in order to find glory for ourselves, but we wrote it by order of King Zādəngəl, Son of the King of Kings Malak Sagad, the Orthodox and beloved by the Saint Mary, that is to say Sarṣa Dəngəl, and for the sake of our Ethiopian people. (Lusini, 1994: 614)

So relying on this essential for us passage we can conclude that the text was or, better to say, could have been created during the short and tragic reign of Zādəngəl, when Bahrəy himself was writing his *History of the Gallas*.

The work reflects also an important side of the history of that period of time, the disputes inside the Ethiopian church, complicated by the arrival of the Jesuits from Europe. It is worth to mention that the Jesuit missionaries' reports have also a notable value as a source of information on the numerous aspects of life and history of Ethiopia. For example: the Manoel de Almeida's report on the Galla (Beckingham, Huntingford, 1954).

The opposition to the introduction of pagan or Muslim habits in Ethiopia is also shown in the text. Thus, we can almost certainly conclude that it was written by a representative of the monastic circle pivoting around the monastery of Däbrä Libanos.

The literary corpus as a source of information.

The question, if we can consider such cultural forms of manifestation as local tales, songs and traditions as valuable historical sources, is still open. It is worth to remember the attempts of Guidi to distinguish inside the two manuscripts studied by him the true and the invented parts that are very interesting to follow (Guidi, 1907).

The traditions on the origin of the Oromo concern usually the recent past of the people and tell little facts concerning their original homeland that are so crucial for restoring their history. In the body of such kind of literature they tried to identify themselves in the contemporary situation and surrounding rather than to describe a real picture of their past. The picture itself was and is essential now for the self-identification of the people in question. This process of national identification, already noted above, was partially stimulated by the racist politic of the Derg government towards the "national minorities" in the country. As a result it made the question much more painful. The people started to look more frequently in the past trying to found a justification of their position, in spite of the fact that many of them have been "Amharised" or assimilated.

As far as the literary corpus is concerned, the absence of the necessary neutrality of the authors that was discussed above can become very useful for us in the context. Surely, we should consider it not as a source for the Oromo's history, but as a precious and reliable source of information concerning internal church processes and culture of the Christian Ethiopians in the period of time when the texts were elaborated. It also contains numerous elements of ethnography.

The creation of the texts was caused by the personal wishes of the authors or, more commonly, by order of a person for whom they had to be written. And the fact that the texts were usually written by monks who had the famous traditional church education is also of considerable importance. The Muslim or pagan Oromo themselves are opposed to the Christian king and Christian population of the country. The polemics of the texts were compiled exactly in this surrounding.

Jesuits in the literature on the Oromo.

Talking again about the Europeans in the country we can note another role that they played in the literature in question. The polemics about the origins of the Oromo were in a very interesting way connected with the problem of the Jesuits' presence in the country, supported by some Ethiopian kings. Their presence was useful for development of the country as the missionaries educated local population and were also essential for the contacts with Europe. For the Ethiopian clergy, on the other hand, they represented a real threat for their strong position in the state. In fact the clergy actively participated in the struggle for the power and the throne in the country, by which a long period of its history was especially characterised. The presence of the Jesuits and the positive attachment to them of some rulers made the situation very tense and complicated that often provoked an open aggression and shed of blood.

The text of the *Book of the history of Wayzaro Agaya* occupies a special place in the discussion. It contains an interesting part where the Agaya comes to emperor Susnəyos, and quotes him the words from the *Book of the history of the Galla*, that she had taken away from the region of the Lake Zway, where she lived before. In this way she convinced the emperor not to convert to the Roman faith. She must have quoted the passage that describes as Ləbnä Dəngəl authorised the use of tobacco in the country, which was considered as a magical practice of the Oromo or foreign origin. It could be a clear example of harm that relations with Jesuits brought. In fact the period of reign of emperor Susnəyos was characterised by the deepest split in Ethiopian church, aggravated by disputes with Paes. The emperor was put in a difficult situation. The European help still had not arrived and probably depended on the conversion of the emperor in Catholic faith that was promised and never done by Ləbnä Dəngəl. Finally, about 1621-1622 Susnəyos and a group of people who were close to him were secretly converted, that immediately become aware. The consequences of the step caused the emperor to deny his throne in favour of Fasilidäs (1632-67).

So we can conclude that the Oromo and their origins, described in the text were still essential and actual in the later period of time. They were still used to resolve or just explain some Ethiopia's problems of religious character, ingratiated by the foreign influence. It shows that the ecclesiastic circles still suffered the crucial mistakes of Ethiopian sovereigns. And so the theory of the origins of the Oromo that trace the genealogy of the people back to a certain Lalo, a man of azmač Endreyas, must have been created about the time of the reign of King Susnəyos.

As for the texts that tell about the Borana and their genealogy, they represent for us a particular interest. Some of them are kept in the manuscripts of Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei (Rome), Fondo Conti Rossini (=CR), 48 and 81. CR 48 was edited in the recent time (Triulzi, Täsämma Ta'a, 2004: 284-306). The text has a particular story of its way to Italy, which is described in a preserved accompanying letter in Amharic.

The texts contain a long detailed genealogy of the group of the Oromo, adding sometimes short stories from the life of some of the personalities, which might be very interesting to follow. This genealogy is similar to traditional Amharic genealogies. Its creation can be considered as an attempt of so called "Amharisation" of the Oromo with a purpose to legitimise in this way their presence in Ethiopian society on the same or, at least, similar positions with those who had a dominating position in the state. These traditions were created in a considerably later period of time, when their position in the state actually became a problem.

Many of the texts are still unedited.

A large number of the manuscript texts are still unedited. They are preserved in the libraries in different parts of the world and in the numerous monasteries of the far and mysterious Ethiopia. The work with them is still ahead. It is a task of a great importance to manage to read them, to translate, to edit the texts in a correct form as the result of a comparative analysis, to try to understand them in the way to allow the literary works occupy their proper position in the field of Ethiopian studies.

Now my research consists of analysing all four manuscripts of the work of Bahrey "The history of the Galla". I hope to manage to complete it in the light of the new information available to me and I plan to prepare the text for the new edition taking into consideration any new details that emerge. The text is surely of a considerable importance for the Ethiopian studies in which we are enrolled.

References

- Bairu Tafla. 1987. *Asma Giyorgis and His Work. History of the Gällā and the Kingdom of Šāwā*, Stuttgart.
- Bassi M. 1996. *I Borana : una società assembleare dell'Etiopia*. Milano.
- Beckingham C.F, Huntingford G.W.B. 1954. Some records of Ethiopia 1593-1646: Being extracts from the history of High Ethiopia or Abassia by Manoel Almeida together with Bahrey's History of the Galla. – Nendeln.
- Beke, Charls. T. 1848. On the Origin of the Gallas, Report to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, London, pp.1-7.
- Caquot, A. 1957. Histoire Amharique de Grañ et des Gallas, AE, 2, pp.123-143.
- Getatchew Haile. 2002. *Yeabba Bahriy Dirsetoch*. Minnesota.
- Chernetsov, Sevir. 1974. The "History of the Gallas" and death of Za-Dengel, king of Ethiopia (1603-1604). In: *Atti del IV Congresso Internazionale di Studi Etiopici*, Roma, pp. 803-808.
- Guidi, Ignazio. 1907. *Leggende Storiche di Abissinia*, RSO, 1, pp. 5-30.
- Hultin, Jan. 1996. "Perceiving Oromo. 'Galla' in the Great Narrative of Ethiopia". In: *Being and becoming Oromo*, ed. by P.T.V. Baxter, Jan Hultin, Alessandro Triulzi, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala.

- Lusini, Gianfrancesco. 1994. Documents on the History of the Oromo. In: Proceedings of the 11th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, I, Addis Ababa, pp. 641-647.
- Mekuria, Bulcha. 1996. "The survival and reconstruction of Oromo National Identity". In: *Being and becoming Oromo*, ed. by P.T.V. Baxter, Jan Hultin, Alessandro Triulzi, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala.
- Triulzi, Alessandro. 1994. Oromo Traditions of Origin, in *Etudes Ethiopiennes, Actes de la Xe conférence internationale des études éthiopiennes*, I, pp. 593-601.
- Triulzi, Alessandro, Täsämma Ta'a. 2004. Documents for Wallaga History (1880s-1920s E.C.), I, Addis Ababa.

