

# **The Oromo Secessionism in a Broader Context of the Horn of Africa**

050. The Horn of Africa at the brink of the 21st century – coping with fragmentation, isolation and marginalisation in a globalising environment  
ECAS 4, Uppsala

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## **Abstract**

The region of Oromia belongs to the most important as well as the most fragile parts of the contemporary Horn of Africa. Reasons for this statement are of various kind including historical, economic, political or socio-cultural. The Oromo people are the most numerous in the Horn of Africa and the Oromo nationalism is one of the most sensitive issues of contemporary socio-political development in Ethiopia. Recently, several Oromo organizations in the diaspora, mostly via Internet, use the opportunity to call for an independent Oromia while the Ethiopian societies find themselves in a narrowing political space destructively managed by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. Some of the Oromo leaders and intellectuals claim that the independence of Oromia should be a natural option comparable to the independence of Eritrea. This paper will examine the problems and limits of the Oromo nationalism and its contribution to a decreasing political stability in Ethiopia especially in a broader comparative context including Eritrea, and/or Somaliland. As I argue, there exist a huge number of different strategies and opinions on the case of Oromia within the Oromo community in and outside Ethiopia which makes it complicated for international community to appropriately understand worsening socio-political situation in Ethiopia. The question of Oromia is, on the other hand, completely attached to the general debate concerning the so-called federal nature of contemporary Ethiopia. The paper will thus analyze and examine opinions for and against the existence of Oromia in the context of political instability in the Horn of Africa.

**Key words:** Ethiopia, Oromia, nationalism, secessionism, diaspora

## **Introduction**

For many decades, the Horn of Africa has been a synonym for political instability, conflict, oppression, marginalization, and violence. Civil wars in Somalia and the Sudan, Eritrean war for independence, Eritrean-Ethiopian war, these all have contributed to a deteriorating political, and socio-economic situation in the region which, historically, is a bit different from other African regions. First, while in other parts of Africa, a heritage of European colonialism is still evident in political and socio-economic development, the Horn of Africa lacks a concrete European colonial hegemonic power. From the Nile to Mogadisho, various European powers have shaped the existence of what is now Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia. As obvious, an important regional actor, Ethiopia, has never been systematically colonized by a foreign power (except for a short Italian occupation). Ethiopia itself is usually described as a colonizing state which make things worse to fully compare with other regions in Africa, be it West Africa (with the dominant colonialism of France), or East Africa (with the hegemony of Great Britain). Second, the Horn of Africa is a region where we may find some of the most successful secessionist attempts in terms of both international law (official international recognition) and internal political development. Since the 1960s, the region has been affected by three stages of secessionist struggles and separatist movements. The early phase includes Southern Sudan and Ethiopia/Eritrea which have been resolved relatively recently. In the second phase, civil war in Somalia and internationally unrecognized independence of the

Republic of Somaliland took place at the early 1990s (see Bradbury 2008). The third phase, after 1990s, has been formed by liberation organizations (especially in Ethiopia) which are influenced by and using global means of communication including the Internet, the media, etc. Among such movements, one may easily count the Oromo nationalism which is not easy to analyze and it would be misleading to consider it a unified, centrally organized and tightly controlled organization.

In this paper, I will focus on the case of Oromo nationalism in a comparative perspective of all three abovementioned phases of separatist movements in the Horn of Africa. For the analysis, I use mostly available sources both printed and electronic, as well as interviews and observation from Ethiopia. The basic specter of materials is, of course, composed of the works of leading Oromo scholars in diaspora and Ethiopia who represent the core of the Oromo nationalism (see Bulcha 2002). After a brief introduction of the Oromo people and Oromia, I will discuss a position of the Oromo nationalism in a globalizing world when it comes to means of communication and effectiveness of communication towards readers and the Ethiopian government. Then, I am going to analyze the position of the Oromo nationalism, and the call for independent Oromia (as proclaimed by some nationalists), in the context of Eritrea, Somaliland, and Southern Sudan. This has its internal, regional, and international dimensions which will be taken into consideration. One of the major aims of this paper is thus to strictly distinguish between the Oromo identity based on specific culture, history, religion, language, and Oromia as “psychological”/”mythical” rather than really territorial concept.

For anthropologists, territoriality is usually considered a delineation of borders and behavior inside these borders. Political science understands territoriality in a narrower sense of territorially determined political rule. Individuals can be distinguished on the basis of their territorial *attachments* and *detachments*. Diaspora is usually characterized by a strong connection with original homeland, though in this case it is very often an idealized or even mythical relation based on “black and white” reality caused by a long-lasting detachment from the given environment. Within the diaspora, the so-called *long-distance nationalism* is the most obvious phenomenon which has clearly ideological character (Anderson 2006).

Crawford Young (2007: 242) in this context speaks about naturalization of territorial nation as a necessary prerequisite for the construction and maintenance of integrity of African state because within these states dozens of different societies have shared, due to an artificial creation of borders, the same territory but have not shared common national mythology. Only a few African states had shared pre-colonial history and thus a consciousness of national integrity, namely Morocco, Egypt, and Ethiopia. Some other states at least evoke a historical existence going beyond the borders of colonialism (Botswana, Swaziland, Lesotho, Tunisia, Madagascar). It is obvious that contemporary Oromo studies would question Young’s premise of national integrity of Ethiopia as it is regarded as a colonial, Abyssinian domain in which the Oromo (and other people) belonged to those oppressed and thus had no national “feeling”. Young argues that there exist three causes or theories clarifying the maintenance of national integrity despite the existence of artificial borders. These reasons are the following: international refusal of separatist attempts stemming from the Charter of the organization of African Unity and later African Union, absence of alternative mechanisms for defining territoriality (e.g. ethnic principle, which has proved to be rather explosive), and the theory of rational choice in which political elites whose existence is tightly related to the existence of the state would have, in case of potential dismantling of the state, risk too much with rather uncertain result (Young 2007: 245).

## **The Oromo and Oromia**

The Oromo people belong to the largest ethnic groups in Africa, and since the 16<sup>th</sup> century they have formed an inseparable part of the history of what is now Ethiopia. Oromia, as a homeland of all Oromo people, forms a necessary part of the Oromo nationalism since every nation needs to have its original homeland. The country of origin, as proposed by Braukämper, lies between “the Darassa country and the upper Dawa in the West and the Ganale valley in the east” (Braukämper 1980: 35). The search for an Oromo homeland and theories of origin have differed through time, at least since Enrico Cerulli, but recently, let us say, in last three decades, debates over Oromia as a natural homeland of all people have entered scholarly meetings, publications, and vocabulary.

Since the 1960s, the Oromo national consciousness began to emerge and new perspectives on so far undisputed Ethiopian history had been presented. Words like “Abyssinian colonialism”, “ethnocide”, “conquest”, “tyranny”, “terrorist regime” and others have entered vocabularies of social scientists and political activists. Authors with more complex and structured opinions have been usually blamed of demonizing the Oromo nationalists and vilifying the Oromo national liberation (Kumsa 2009: 204). An idea of the Ethiopian colonialism has become broadly accepted fact and the so called Ethiopian Empire has been put into the same category as great European colonial powers (see e.g Gadaa Melbaa 1988, Hameso and Hassen 2006, Gebissa 2009, and many others). It has been argued that the Oromo were colonized during last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and various sources have brought various and much different information on reduction of Oromo (and other non-Semitic) population due to the Abyssinian conquest. Although it is obvious that the expansion of the Ethiopian state was accompanied by conflicts, wars and battles against “the Others”, it is evident that impossibility to present clear and indubitable data creates space for exaggeration and simplification. Moreover, conflicting perspectives and the process of creation of “otherness” are now necessary part of the whole debate over nationalism in Ethiopia (Gudina 2006).

Under the Imperial rule until 1974, the Oromo people could not publicly express their identity, especially when it comes to the language used in public spaces and institutions, the Amharic language was the only accepted while the use of afaan Oromo in schools was strictly prohibited (Bulcha 1997; Hassen 1996). After the fall of Haile Selassie regime, a short period of enthusiasm stemming from a seemingly equal ethno-linguistic emancipation policy manifested by alphabetization campaign and the use of several languages in the media, a political “hangover” came as a result of the Derg’s inability to meet the needs and demands of people in Ethiopia, regardless their origin. Nevertheless, the 1970s and 1980s were the period of enormous growth of the Oromo studies so that many authors began to use the rhetoric of “invented” Oromo history and identity. Mekuria Bulcha states that this rhetoric “is closely connected with the erroneous belief that Ethiopia is an ancient and immutably natural identity” (Bulcha 1996: 49).

In 1991, a coalition of forces defeated Mengistu and a new wave of enthusiasm filled the air in Ethiopia. However, shortly after the transitional period was launched, disagreements between the major parties (Tigray People’s Liberation Front and Oromo Liberation Front) took place and resulted in isolation of OLF. Since the beginning of the 1990s, OLF as a dominant representative of the Oromo nationalism has been accused of being a terrorist organization and still, the Oromo “phobia” forms a part of the government’s struggle against political enemies. It is thus logical, that under such circumstances, the whole issue of Oromo nationalism has reached another level in which it may use the modern means of

communication and extend the knowledge and information about the development in Ethiopia in an easier way than a couple of decades ago.

### **Oromo nationalism in a globalizing world**

One of the basic questions of contemporary Oromo nationalism is whether to use “secessionism” or “self-determination” or “national liberation”. Secessionism means a policy of those people or groups who maintain the right for secession from one state in order to form their own, new, state. In postcolonial Africa, secessionist movements have been surprisingly unsuccessful. This has been caused by the fact that new, postcolonial states, desperately needed to prove their viability, with the guidance of the Organization of African Unity and help

Despite being a part of secessionist movements, as discussed in scholarly literature, some authors tend to avoid this term and substitute it by “people’s movement”, “national struggle”, “anti-colonial struggle” (see e.g Jalata 2007). Single words have their own particular meaning and the use of the abovementioned terminology gives legitimacy to the whole nationalist movement and makes it understandable in the eyes of readers, supporters, followers.

What is generally false and misinterpreted is a certain positivist approach that (not only) the Oromo nationalism uses in order to describe and analyze the historical development of Ethiopia. In an absolute majority of such texts, we may read stories on how the Oromo, Sidama, or Wolayta people were oppressed and marginalized by the Amharas and Tigrayans. Little or nothing is usually said about the situation of rural Amharas and Tigrayans who lived in the same conditions as their non-Semitic fellows. Unfortunately, ethnic categories (Oromo, Amhara, etc.) are taken as uniform, homogeneous entities where any kind of cooperation is strongly criticized as is the case of those of Oromos who served under Menelik at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These are labeled as “collaborators” and are used as an example of how the consecutive Abyssinian regimes acted evilly.

In the era of globalization, it has been the Internet which has served as the most effective means of communication. Revolutionary advances in communications have with no doubt changed and affected the development of ethnic nationalist challenges towards the state (Romano 2002: 128). David Romano analyzed the impact of modern communications on the case of the Kurds. He states that the communications revolution “provides many new opportunities for the formation and preservation of identities independent of territoriality, allowing dispossessed and stateless groups to redefine themselves and challenge dominant states” (Romano 2002: 128). On the other hand, if the Internet and other modern means of communication allow the nationalist movements to change their strategies toward the governments, then the governments, of course, use their own strategies in order to eliminate or at least lessen the access to these technologies. In many non-democratic countries including Turkmenistan, North Korea, the access to the Internet is a matter of only a tiny minority or rulers while the rest of the country stays untouched by it. In African state like Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea or Ethiopia, access to the Internet or even mobile phones is still limited mainly due to political reasons because availability of these sources means access to information of any kind, including those anti-governmental.

The Oromo nationalism, like the Kurdish nationalism, have benefitted from the Internet due to several factors. Both the Kurds and the Oromo are known for its diaspora living in the West and thus having easy access to the Internet and the media. The Internet allows two important things used for nationalist movements – anonymity, and simplifications because simple

phrases can attract more readers rather than complicated analytical works. On the other hand, the situation in Ethiopia is much different because, as in other non-democratic regimes, the government keeps control over the Internet and the media as well as mobile phones. This makes it difficult for people in Ethiopia to communicate with the diaspora and vice versa. Moreover, this can be seen as one of the factors which contribute to the difference between diaspora long-distance nationalism and (in my opinion) various forms of the Oromo nationalisms in Ethiopia.

One of the main voices of the Oromo nationalism, the Oromo Liberation Front, does not clearly define its goals as leading to independence of Oromia though several statements may indicate this: “The aim of the Oromo struggle led by the OLF is only to gain back our country that was taken away from us by force. It is not, in any way, against the rights of any other people. The OLF believes that the Oromo people win the right to self-determination and open up a venue for other peoples to achieve the same rights. After winning the right to self-determination, the Oromo people will live side by side with its neighbours in peace, equality and respect.”<sup>1</sup> Some other sources, however, clearly declare the right of the Oromo people to proclaim independence of Oromia and call for the dismantling of Ethiopia. Inspiration is taken from the fall of USSR, Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia<sup>2</sup> though a simple comparison between these entities and Ethiopia is impossible. Such a comparison was relevant in the case of the independence of Eritrea in 1993 but lacks the same legitimacy and consequences in the case of Oromia or other internal units of Ethiopia as these do not have historically given, internationally recognized borders, which would be accepted by an international community (see below). Nevertheless, latest development seem to bring new strategies for struggling parties as the Brigadier General Kamal Galchu, Chairman of OLF, declared that “OLF firmly announces a non-violent removal of the dictatorial regime of Ethiopia led by Meles Zenawi. We urge all interested parties to stand together for a unified action to end Meles Zenawi's régime.”<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, some other and relatively minor Oromo organizations like The Islamic Front for Independence of Oromia, or The Front for Independence of Oromia have not given up armed struggle against the Meles Zenawi regime in order to establish a free state of Oromia.<sup>4</sup>

In last two decades, sensitive debates and heated discussions have entered scholarly works and international conferences. Especially the Oromo community in the United States began to work on the development of Oromo consciousness in the diaspora. The used rhetoric has been based on “racial”, as if historically approved, differences between the Oromo and Amhara people. At least some part of Oromo studies has gained strongly political impetus. As John Sorenson puts it

“The process of learning to be Oromo is not only a cultural project but a political one. The (re)discovery of Oromo identity is consistently linked with acceptance of the programme of Oromo nationalism. Speakers continuously emphasise the importance of Oromo identity which is linked to the necessity to support the OLF rather than other organisations which claim to represent the Oromo people. No allowance is made for those who value a sense of Oromo ethnicity but do not support the OLF's nationalist programme. For example, Tilahun Gamta, speaking at the 1992 conference stated, An Oromo can change his religion but not his Oromo-ness. Those who do not support Oromo nationalism are traitors” (Sorenson 1996: 454).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.omoliberationfront.org/Publications/OSvol10Art101.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.omomia.org/tkbo/tkbo-globilization.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://gadaa.com/oduu/9485/2011/05/20/oromiaethiopia-olf-declares-nonviolent-struggle-against-zenawi-his-tyrannical-regime/>

<sup>4</sup> There are many web pages in regard to these organizations and issues, easily accessible through Google.

Obviously, Sorenson's work served as an unacceptable demagoguery for many Oromo nationalists and it is in this context not surprising that his work became a target of heated debates. Martha Kuwee Kumsa, for instance, blames him of having anti-Oromo approach favoring Eritrean independence while refusing an idea of Oromo self-determination (Kumsa 2009: 209-213). On the other hand, nationalism in the diaspora is not crossing only ethnic issues but is related to religion as well since the Oromo community is divided into at least three parts, Christians (Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox), Muslims, and followers of traditional Waaqefanna. This means that even the nationalist diaspora voice does not speak a single language (see e.g. Hoehne et al. 2010). The same can be said about the Oromo communities in Ethiopia itself because to think about a unified wave of Oromo nationalism would be a complete misunderstanding of Ethiopia's historical and regional differences and different links and connections which, for instance associate at least a part of Muslim Oromo community in the East to other Islamic societies in the Middle East while the Oromo Christians in the West do not show any significant comprehension to the Islamic revitalization (including the Oromo Muslims) in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa in general. Basically, all abovementioned arguments point at a sharp difference between diaspora long-distance nationalism and various local forms of nationalism in Ethiopia which do not even share the same goals (in the case of this study the independence of Oromia).

### **Oromia in the context of Eritrea, Somaliland, and Southern Sudan**

As I have already mentioned in the introduction, the Horn of Africa belongs to the regions characterized by a high number of more or less successful separatist movements. Actually, Eritrea is still the only successful secessionist attempt in the modern and recent history of Africa. Southern Sudan will most probably become the second one, although a comparison of both cases is at least risky. Despite being one of the most stable elements in the Horn of Africa, the Republic of Somaliland is not internationally recognized state, but still, it can serve as a good example of separatist movements in the region.

When we talk about Oromia as one of potentially secessionist regions, we should put it into a broader comparative perspective. In 1992, Amitai Etzioni, in reaction to the fall of Soviet Empire and creation of new states in Eastern Europe, analyzed the relation between self-determination, nationalism, and colonialism. The article is called *The Evils of self-Determination*, and one of the main arguments presented in there is that it is "impossible to sustain the notion that every group can find its expression in a full-blown nation-state, fly its flag at the United Nations, and have its ambassadors accredited by other nation-states; the process of ethnic separation and the breakdown of existing states will then never be exhausted" (Etzioni 1992: 27). One crucial aspect arise from Etzioni's article and that is a misleading vision of many separatist movements that to have their own flag and the head of state will definitely solve all existing problems. If a state declares independence, it does not mean that it is going to exist in a different regional or international climate than it would without full independence. The fresh case of Kosovo might be more than illustrative. When it comes to regional affairs, Eritrean independence was largely welcome by social scientists and international public but soon after, the country itself had to deal with new and old realities including tense relations with the Sudan, war with Ethiopia, international isolation, Somalia's civil war and the Ethiopian invasion, disputes with Djibouti, etc. (for more on Eritrea, see e.g. Pateman 1998; Kibreab 2009; Kidane and Oghzabi 2005, and many others).

Seeing the problem of Oromia regionally, one may come to a conclusion that there is not enough space for so many states in the broader Horn, including the newly born Southern Sudan, internationally unrecognized Republic of Somaliland, and potentially the State of

Oromia. Moreover, there are some international obstacles which any new separatist attempt has to face, be it a certain reluctance of international organizations to support such movements with not enough legitimacy, international charters and law making harder for these movements to become successful, etc. For instance, Article 23 of the African Union Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (2007: 9-10) says State Parties agree that the use of, *inter alia*, the following illegal means of accessing or maintaining power constitute an unconstitutional change of government and shall draw appropriate sanctions by the Union:

1. Any putsch or coup d'Etat against a democratically elected government.
2. Any intervention by mercenaries to replace a democratically elected government.
3. Any replacement of a democratically elected government by armed dissidents or rebels.
4. Any refusal by an incumbent government to relinquish power to the winning party or candidate after free, fair and regular elections; or
5. Any amendment or revision of the constitution or legal instruments, which is an infringement on the principles of democratic change of government.

Having this said, in order to create a new state, one should count with a full agreement of all interested parties as was the case of the Sudan when the Southern Sudanese referendum came to existence as a result of Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. Such an idea is almost impossible in Ethiopia despite theoretical opportunity for any federal state to proclaim independence as written in the Federal Constitution of 1995 (The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia). A crucial problem for Oromia when compared to other regions in the Horn of Africa is a lack of historical legitimacy in terms of historical borders, “pre-colonial” entity, etc. In this sense, both the Republic of Somaliland and Eritrea have an “advantage” because these were established by the British and Italians as control areas for further expansion (Italy) or for strategic reasons (Great Britain) during the Scramble for Africa (Záhořík 2009: 255). Southern Sudan, seemingly blurred territory inside what is now the Islamic Republic of Sudan made during the times of civil war historical claims similar to those of Senegal’s Casamance stating that the three southern provinces were administered separately by the British rulers and Southern Sudan was even supposed to become a part of British East Africa (Englebert 2007: 63). Oromia lacks this kind of historical heritage as the territory which is now known as Oromia federal state has been created by the Federal Constitution. A legitimate question thus arises: Which borders should a state of Oromia have in case it gains independence one day?

As compared to other regions on the Horn of Africa, Oromia resembles more the Southern Sudan rather than Eritrea as it has no clearly defined, historically given borders, which is, by the way, one of the reasons why there are so many low-level conflicts in the border areas between North and South. In the history of Ethiopia, there existed several Oromo states including Jimma Abba Jifar, Limmu Enarea, and some others but there had never been any entity called Oromia with clearly defined, internationally recognized, undisputable borders. In case a new state called Oromia would be established in future, which borders will be taken as official, current federal scheme or would there be any redefinition of historical regional borders inside Ethiopia? Would Addis Ababa (Finfinne) become a part of Ethiopia or Oromia or would have any special status, something comparable to Brussels in Belgium? Getahun Benti, for instance, argues, that the Amhara conquest of what is now Addis Ababa was intended to de-urbanize the Oromo population and that “the Amhara created a socio-cultural frontier between themselves and the Oromo” (Benti 2009: 151). Nowadays, Addis Ababa is a melting pot where, of course, Amharic language is dominant but people from various corners of Ethiopia come there in order to find better livelihood and jobs. Any transition of status of Addis Ababa would be, at minimum, complicated if not impossible as it stands as the only

true metropolis of Ethiopia. These are, on one hand, simple questions which do not seem to be important to answer these days, but in a long run and in case some regime change in Ethiopia will take place, their meaning might increase.

International support to an independent Oromia is thus minimal, even if we admit that historical claims made by Southern Sudanese might not be sufficient, they have a legitimate moral value as the situation of Southern Sudan is much different because its referendum for independence was a result of a long-lasting war and decades of absolute marginalization. Even though the region of Oromia, economically very rich and politically marginalized can make serious claims for independence, as compared to Eritrea or Southern Sudan it is not enough. There we may get back to Etzioni's article the Evils of Self-Determination, because the situation of Oromia, despite all negative developments, is not much different from dozens of regions or territories throughout the world, from Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak), China (Uyghuristan) through Turkey (Kurdistan) to Mexico (Chiapas) where all groups which claim to be indigenous there struggle for self-determination, political and economic emancipation, but rarely for independence.

### **Conclusion**

This article was not supposed to become an anti-thesis to the Oromo nationalism but rather to serve as a part of discussion on weaknesses of the movement in a broader context of the Horn of Africa. As we have seen, Oromia is not the only region which could potentially seek for independence within the Horn of Africa. Despite all claims made by representatives of the Oromo nationalism in regard to the independence of Oromia, there are many weaknesses which disadvantage these claims in a comparative perspective.

These are (1) lack of coherence of the Oromo nationalists as there exist too many discrepancies and differences between the diaspora-driven discourse on nationalism and self-determination, and various forms of local nationalisms manifested by different means including religion or ethnicity and which are not so influenced by the detached nationalism of the Oromo diaspora. The following (2) weakness of the Oromo nationalism in this regard is the lack of international support for any separatist movement because Ethiopia is traditionally regarded as a stable country with relatively minimal tensions and internal conflicts and any high-level conflict led by a desire to proclaim an independent territory within contemporary Ethiopia's borders would be hardly welcome by international community. Last but not least, (3) as we have seen, Oromo secessionism suffers a lack of historical legitimacy as compared to neighboring regions/countries. When compared to Western Sahara, Republic of Somaliland, not mentioning Eritrea, it resembles cases like Casamance in Senegal or Tuareg's Azawad in West Africa as it may, if successfully managed, only deteriorate political stability in the given region. In another words, if Oromia would separate from Ethiopia, then it might inspire other regions to do the same including conflict-stricken Darfur, politically sensitive region of Ogaden, or some other.

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