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THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE ETHIOPIAN STATE AND THE OROMO PEOPLE

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Abstract

Colonialism is a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another. The etymology of the term from Latin word colonus, meaning farmer. This root reminds us that the practice of colonialism usually involves the transfer of population to new territory, where the arrivals lived as permanent settlers while maintaining political allegiance to the country of origin. Colonialism is a characteristic of all known civilizations. Books on African history teaches us that Ethiopia and Liberia are the only countries, which were not colonized by West European states, but the paper argues that Ethiopia was created by Abyssinian state colonizing its neighbouring nations during the scramble for Africa. Using comparative colonial history of Africa, the paper tries to show that Abyssinian colonialism is the worst of conquest and colonial rule of all territories in Africa, according to the number of people killed during the conquest war, brutal colonial rule, political oppression, poverty, lack of education, diseases, and contemporary land grabbing only in the colonial territories. In its arguments, the paper discusses why the Oromo were defeated at the end of 19th century whereas we do have full historical documents starting from 13th century in which the Oromo defended their own territory against Abyssinian expansion. Finally the paper will elucidate the development of Oromo national struggle for regaining their lost independence.

Key words: Colonialism, Abyssinia, Oromo, Ethiopia, Liberation Movement

Theoretical background of colonialism

Before we delve into our main discussion, first of all, it is now the right place to define what colonialism is. The concept of colonialism is a contested term, because its meaning is different for colonised people and colonizing power. For the colonising power, it is a “civilizing mission”. They argue that “the civilizing mission is a temporary period of political dependence [in which] tutelage was necessary in order for ‘uncivilized societies’ to advance to the point where they were capable of sustaining liberal institutions and self-government” (Kohn, 2012)¹, whereas for the colonized people, it is a symbol genocide, humiliation, loss of freedom, economic exploitation, political oppression, and degradation of their culture by alien rule. The academic definition of colonialism must have cross-cultural applicability to be used in the modern world as well as in history.

The American scholar on colonialism, Ronald J. Horvath, who taught at the then Haile Sellasie I University in Finfinnee (Addis Ababa) (1963-65) and had done field research in the Empire adds theoretical basis for the argument of the existence of colonialism in all civilizations. He criticizes scholars of humanity studies, because of the lack of general definition of colonialism in the cross-cultural perspective and gives his own definition based on historical facts from different parts of the world. Horvath correctly argues that colonialism is not only characteristics of a particular civilization (Western Civilization); to consider it as peculiar features of a particular civilization is “simply to ignore the full range of reality ... every major and minor civilization has sought to extend its borders and its influence, and Colonialism is not to be equated by only with the civilized (cultures having cities and literate population); pre-civilized people too, have colonized” (p.46)². Colonialism is a form of domination – control by individuals or groups over territory and/or behaviour of other individuals or groups. Horvath defines colonialism as “a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another” (ibid). Another historian, Philip Curtin (1974) also defines

colonialism as “domination of people of another culture” (p.23)³. A German historian of colonialism, Osterhammel (2005), who wrote a book on theoretical overview of colonialism, accepts that the formulation contains two decisive elements, namely domination and cultural dissimilarity of colonizing powers and colonized peoples in the definition of the term, but it needs to be made more precise. According to Osterhammel, not every domination by foreigners has been perceived by its subjects as illegitimate, for example the Ottoman Empire rule of Egypt between 1517 and 1798 as its province was not considered by Egyptians as colonial territory, because of similarity of religion. He gives three additional components to a definition of colonialism: first, colonialism is not just any relationship between masters and servants, but one in which *an entire society is robbed of its historical line of development, externally manipulated and transformed, according to the needs and interest of the colonial rulers*. He differentiates ancient and modern colonialism. Modern colonialism is based on the will to make “peripheral” societies subservient to the “metropolises”. The second component which is of crucial importance is the existence of dissimilarity between colonizers and colonized. Characteristic of modern colonialism is the unwillingness of the new rulers to make cultural concessions to subjugated societies. The colonizers, mainly during in 19th century saw the colonized peoples of the south as inferior “racial groups”. Any definition of colonialism must take into account this lack of willingness to assimilate on the part of the colonial rulers. The third and final point is closely connected to the second. Modern colonialism is not only a relationship that can be described in structural terms, but also a particular interpretation of this relationship. The destruction of many nations in the south (Americas, Australia, Tasmania, some parts of Africa) was hidden under the colonizing ideology of the so-called “civilizing” of the “barbarians” or “savages,” as a “white man’s burden” that the white man was privileged to carry. This “ideological” weapon against the other peoples propagated by European colonial theorists starting from 16th century,

assumes European cultural superiority over other cultures of the south. Other colonialists also were not immune from this superiority complex. American and Japanese colonialism also made full use of this kind of missionary rhetoric. Finally, Osterhammel gives his definition of colonialism:

“Colonialism is a relationship of domination between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and minority of foreign invaders. The fundamental decisions affecting the lives of the colonized people are made and implemented by the colonial rulers in pursuit of interests that are often defined in a distant metropolis. Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonized population, the colonizers are convinced of their own superiority and of their ordained mandate to rule” (p. 16-17)⁴.

Osterhammel, in his theoretical book illustrates stages in securing interests, what he calls metaphorically by “big brothers” toward “little brothers” in the nineteenth and twentieth century. As follows:

Colonial rule (formal empire): Indigenous rulers are replaced by foreign rulers. The pre-colonial political order ceases to exist or at least stops functioning freely. The definitions of “colony” and “colonialism” proposed above apply.

Quasi-colonial control (informal empire): The weaker state remains intact as an independent polity with its own system, but the “Big Brother” determines the key decisions in relation between “Big Brother” and “Little brother”. A good example is the relation between Britain and China in the nineteenth century, so-called gunboat diplomacy.

Non-colonial “determinant” influence: There is neither formal or informal colonialism, instead, the economic superiority of the stronger national partner or of its private enterprise (e. g., multinational concerns) and/or its military protective function confers upon it opportunities to influence the politics of the weak partner that its “normal” neighbours do not possess. This is a typical pattern of relations of international asymmetry in the post-colonial world (Osterhammel, 2005 p. 19-21)⁵.

Periodization of modern colonial formation

The past five centuries (16th -20th cent.) was a period of colonial expansion around the world. Historians on colonialism have identified six periods that emerged from the continuity of expansion of colony formation. The sketch of these periods is as follows:

1520-1570: Construction of the Spanish Colonial System in Mexico. The conquest of Americas, which Adam Smith described in 1776 as a “project of conquest” in America.

1630-1680: Establishment of the Caribbean Plantation Economy.

1760-1830: Onset of European Territorial Rule in Asia.

1880-1900: New Waves of Colony Formation in the Old World. Ethiopian empire was established by Abyssinian emperor Minilik II during this historical period in the same time when Africa was colonized by Western European states.

1900-1930: Heyday of Colonial Export Economies.

1945-1960: The “Second Colonial Occupation” of Africa (p. 29-37)⁶. For a more detailed explanation of this periodization, readers who are more interested can read the above pages from Osterhammel’s book.

We can distinguish two basic types of domination: inter-group and intra-group domination. Inter-group domination is when one nation dominates other nation(s), making culturally heterogeneous society, whereas intra-group domination can be found in a culturally homogeneous society. If we take Ethiopia as our case study, we find both dominations. The domination of Abyssinia (Amhara and Tigray) over other nations like Oromo, Somali (in Ogaden), Afar, Sidama and others , who were included to Ethiopian empire at the end of nineteenth century by conquest and colonization is a clear example of inter-group domination (Haji 1995: 1-21)⁷, (Hassen 1999: 109- 158)⁸, (Bulcha 1988:32-62⁹, 2002 :11-114¹⁰, 2011: 279-456)¹¹, (Jalata1993: 47-82¹², 2013:1-42)¹³,(Holcomb & Ibssa 1990 :

71-144)¹⁴, (Ibsaa 2003:28-65)¹⁵, (Kumsa 1997: 196-254¹⁶). Amhara and Tigrians are living in one state from ancient time until today having similar languages, the same religion and similar political culture, which shows the intra-domination based on which political elite is on top at the power house's helm from Amhara or Tigrai political elite (Marcus 1994¹⁷, Henze 2000¹⁸, Zewde 1991¹⁹). The Abyssinians, in their recorded history, do not remember the conflict between themselves as one to separate from each other and build different states, but has a conflict of who will be king of kings if from Amhara or Tigrai. Their conflict was/is intra-group domination.

World history is full of examples of one society gradually expanding by incorporating adjacent territory and settling its people on newly conquered territory. In theories of state formation, one school of thought mainly formulated by Franz Oppenheimer (1975), a German sociologist, was called conquest theory. He claimed that the state originated in no other way than through conquest and subjugation, specifically that “the state, completely in its genesis, essentially and almost completely during the first stages of its existence, is a social institution, forced by victorious group of men on a defeated group, with the sole purpose of regulating dominion of a victorious group over the vanquished and securing itself against revolt from within and attacks from abroad” (p.8)²⁰. Thanks to World Anthropologists' research around the world on the early state formation, we do have detailed information how in different places in the world in different times, states were originated (Claessen & Skalník 1978)²¹ and now we do have six models of state formation (Carneiro 1977)²², in which conquest or coercive theory is only one type of them.

History of colonialism

Colonialism is a very ancient phenomenon which existed in history of humankind starting with the Sumerian empire led by Sargon (died 2273? B.C.) of Akkad as the first personality to build

colonies. Mann (1986/ 2005) in his first book of four volumes “Sources of social power” states that “the empire remained one of the dominant social forms for the thousand years in Near East and Europe and even longer in East Asia” (p.131)²³. Colonies of Sargon have very similar characteristics as the colonies of modern period, in which he sent his soldiers and traders to settle in conquered territories to control the conquered peoples. Sargon, consolidating his core area in Sumer moved in all direction to expand his empire southeast ward to Persian Gulf, westward perhaps to the Levantine Coast, northward into Northern Syria and Anatolia (P. 135)²⁴.

The history of colonialism started by expansion on land by strong states conquering their weak neighbouring states or other polities, the second type of colonialism which is known as over sea colonialism started in 1415 when Portugal occupied Ceuta the northern corner of Morocco. Starting from Sargon’s Empire, human history is full of colonialies. To take only from the historical records, the empire of Athens started to expand in 478 B.C., capturing neighbouring cities, enslaving the population and colonizing the land. The Athenian Empire was short lived because of internal instability and finally collapsed in 405 B.C. The consequence of the collapse of their empire was devastating for the Athenian settlers in colonial territories. Noted historian of the Empire, Doyle (1988) writes about the conflict between settlers and indigenous peoples of the Athenian colonies in these words: “When Athenian vigilance relaxed or when Athens was defeated, resentful cities would denounce heavy Athenian taxes and slaughter the Athenian settler-garrison” (p.58)²⁵. Athens settled many thousands of her poor people in new founded colonies from which settler gained considerable resources and richness from colonization.

Another empire which influenced the ancient world was the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire expanded from one of the hills by the narrowing of the Tiber to the dominant power in Italy by 265 B.C. The Romans used the tactics of attacking the weakest enemy first to gain boots, and

slaves for the labour work on the landlords' fields, then attacking the strongest last.

Rome in her first step divided her enemies making some, like Greece collaborators and defeating others who refused her, like southern Spain and Sicily. Colonization brought wealth for Rome from Spanish mines, cheap African grains, eastern spices which bound together the empire. The Roman Empire ended after its existence of 350 years, because Doyle (1988) illustrates "the deterioration of external conditions of differentiation of society, culture, economy, and polity" (p. 99)²⁶. The ethnic diversity of the empire was the hidden bomb which divided the empire into many different independent states.

One of very interesting part of colonialism is that Europeans conquered and colonised each other from the 10th century to the middle of the fourteenth century. A Middle Age historian of Europe, Bartlett (1994) describes that Western Europe was colonised by groups of warrior from one centre (northeast France) reaching all directions to the south until they reached Sicily in the north, controlling England starting from 1066 and to the west reaching Spain and Portugal (p. 41)²⁷. Central Europe became under their rule to the border of Bohemia. Bohemia, Poland and Hungary, built their own kingdoms by their own kings

One of the empires, which existed from 13th century to the beginning of 20th century, was the Ottoman Empire. Doyle (1986) documents how the Ottoman Empire was established by groups of warriors. It was founded by the Nomadic people of Turkish and Turcoman who migrated into Anatolia in the eleventh century and basically under tribal or patriarchal society. One of the Turkish leaders from Seljuk dynasty led by their leader Alp Arslan defeated the Byzantine Empire at the battle of Manzikert in 1071. The Seljuk dynasty Empire finally occupied the capital city of Byzantine empire in 1453 (p. 106)²⁸

The early modern colonialists studied the history of colonization mainly a Roman model. As

historian of genocide, Kiernan (2007) elucidates the link between the ancient and modern colonialism, stating that the English and Spanish expansionists linked classical accounts of the triumphs of Rome and disappearance of Carthage to re-emerging agrarian preconceptions of a rural morality and fruitful land use (p.169)²⁹.

The expedition of Columbus reaching America in 1492 was a turning point in world history. The west European states competed in a new world to occupy the largest part of it. The colonization of the Americas brought in its train two tragic events for indigenous peoples of Americas and Africa. The violent conflicts between the occupying forces from Europe and the indigenous peoples reduced the peoples of America dramatically. Ball writes for students 7-12 grade as part of history text book in USA in which he states that “ while estimates of the pre-Columbian populations must remain speculative, the population of the Americas fell from perhaps 80 million to little as five million persons during the seventeenth century” (p.8)³⁰. The causes of this annihilation of the peoples of Americas were wars by newcomers and new infectious diseases which came with the newcomers. The “discovery” of Americas brought an Atlantic triangular trade, organized by European merchants with human tragedy. They brought new modern weapons, cloths and alcohol to Africa, to exacerbate conflicts and create new violent conflicts to expand war in Africa to buy prisoners of war to force them to Americas. War and interrelated causes forced millions of Africans to die, be displaced or forced into a new type of slavery in world history. A respected scholar, Harvard University Sociology professor Patterson (1982) writes, “Millions of slaves, for instance died between being captured and being forced on board the slave ships. In order that the slave masters of the Americas might acquire 11 to 12 million slaves, at least 24 million persons were originally enslaved in Africa” (p.164)³¹. These young Africans (majority of them men) went to America as mine workers, agricultural labourers on commercial farms to produce raw materials for growing European industries. The

Atlantic triangular trade introduced into Africa new military weaponry, expanded violent conflicts in Africa, destabilized the sex ratio in African society, decreased the population of the continent, robbed their historical development and created new slave-owned states in West Africa such as Dahomey kingdom.

History of Colonialism in Africa

Colonialism in Africa can be seen as two types according to who colonised whom if we leave out the Muslim Arabs conquest and colonization of Northern Africa. The first and the oldest colonialism in Africa is when strong African states expanded their territories by conquering and occupying their neighbouring states like the Moroccan kingdom conquered and occupied the known Songhay Empire in 1591. As the late historian Davidson (1969) writes the history of this war, the Moroccan army looted the wealth of the Songhay Empire, which was used to build magnificent cities in Morocco. The cause of conquest and colonization of the Songhay Empire by Morocco destroyed one of Africa's known states and a centre of education (p80-83)³².

In the eastern part of Africa two states formed by colonization of indigenous people and reducing the population by war, slavery and consequence of both of them.

If we start with the Sudan, the Arabs who occupied Egypt in the seventh century (639-641 war) gradually infiltrated to the kingdoms of Sudan. The last Christian kingdom of Alwa resisted Arab penetration until 1504, when it succumbed to the Muslim Funj state of Sennar. American ethnologist Murdock (1959), who contributed so much to our knowledge in his book, *Africa: its peoples and their culture* elucidates how Arab Muslims conquered the Sudan region in these words, "This removed the last barrier to Bedouin expansion in this part of Africa, and Baggara or cattle breeding Arabs, poured south and west into Eastern and Central Sudan" (p.160)³³. This expansion and

colonization continued to the south until the South Sudanese concluded the horrendous long violent conflict by building their own state in 2011 building again new barrier to stop Arab colonial expansionism.

The second African state eastern neighbour of the Sudan, which conquered and colonized its neighbouring states and other polities, is Abyssinia at the end of 19th century. The Ethiopian imperial state was established by Minilik II of Abyssinia as other colonial states in Africa at the end of 19th century, from 1872- 1900, with highest human lives lost in the African colonization history

The first and largest nation was the Oromo people, southern neighbour of Abyssinia, which fought against the expanding imperial conquest for more than quarter of a century but finally was defeated like other African nations; as Ghanaian historian, Prof. Boahen (1987) quotes the Franco-English poet Hilaire Belloc, who summed up the situation aptly: “Whatever happens we have got the Maxim –gun and they have not” (p.26)³⁴.

Let us elucidate what happened to the Oromo fighters to keep out the enemy from their territory according to the eye witness of two foreigners, Russian Colonel Alexander Bulatovich (1898/20000)³⁵ who was with the Abyssinian Army in the south for years, and Martial De Salviac (1901/2005)³⁶, a French Catholic priest and ‘anthropologist’ who lived in Oromo land as preacher of Christianity and observer of Oromo social life before and during the colonial war. As prof. Bulcha (1988), showed in his study of the causes of exodus of people from Ethiopia, according to this study the longest bloody conquest war was against the Oromo nation (the second largest nation in Africa after Hausa of the West Africa), which took place from 1872 to 1899 (p.34)³⁷. This conquest war reduced the population of Oromo nation from 10 million to 5 million people as eye witnessed by Bulatovich:

“The dreadful annihilation of more than half the population during the conquest took away from the

Galla (Oromo) all possibility thinking about any sort of uprising. And the freedom-loving Galla who did not recognize any authority other than the speed of his horse, the strength of his hand, and the accuracy of his spear, now goes through the hard school of obedience ” (Bulatovich 2000, p.68)³⁸; and a French priest de Salviac (1901/2005) explained the cruelty of Abyssinian soldiers in these words:

“The conduct of Abyssinian armies invading a land is simply barbaric. They contrive a sudden eruption, more often at night. At day break, the fire begins; surprised men in the huts or in the fields are three quarter massacred and horribly mutilated; the women and the children and many men are reduced to captivity; the soldiers lead the frightened herds toward the camp, take away the grain and flour which they load on the shoulders of their prisoners spurred on by blows of the whip, destroy the harvest, then, glutted the booty and intoxicated with blood, go to walk a bit further from the devastation. That is what they call “civilizing the land” (p.349)³⁹

The Russian Officer observed that more than half of the nation’s people were killed, captured in the battle and sold into slavery by Emperor Minilik – the Butcher of Oromo. Other neighbouring nations of Oromo also faced mass killing in the hand of Minilik’s predatory army, such as Kaficho kingdom 67 % of its people, Gimira nation 80 %, and Maji 90 % were killed or sold to slavery (Hodson 1927:102 and Pankhurst: 1968, p.111)⁴⁰ The peoples south of Abyssinia were defeated in such holocaust standard and forced to be included into the new imperial state called Ethiopia; similar to the serfs of the medieval period in East Europe, they were sold as slaves under Minilik II rule, the founder of the Empire. The subjugated peoples under the Abyssinian colonial yoke faced much harsh notorious oppression, mainly the Maji and Kaffa people – southern neighbours of the Oromo nation. Slave raiding and lucrative slave trade brought great amount of wealth to colonizers. From the Amhara colonization until the invasion of Italy (1936-1941), the slave trade reached a climax of profit depopulating the region. Margery Perham, a noted British historian of African colonies in her book *The Government of Ethiopia* first published in 1949 describes eye witnesses collected from

south-west new colonial territory of Abyssinia in these words: “It would not be an exaggeration to say that in parts of the provinces of Kaffa and Maji, where much of the raiding had taken place in the past, the populations were in danger of extermination. Eye-witnesses at Maji and at other places near Sudan border stated that whole areas of the country had been completely devastated and that the remains of villages overgrown with bush could still be seen” (p. 220)⁴.

During the colonial war, one of the oldest kingdoms (Kingdom of Kaffa) of the region, after many years of defensive war (1879-1897), because of firearm at the disposal of conquering army and attack from four directions, was finally defeated and its king (Gakisharochi 1856-1919) was captured and after many years of suffering died in Abyssinian prison. As Woldemariam (2010) in his new book on history of Kaffa kingdom informs us, “The people of Kaffa, Kaffecho fought fierce battles against the force of emperor Minilik II for nine months, i.e. from December 1886 to August 1897 and finally lose its independence”(p.277)⁴. Kaffecho - the people of Kingdom of Kaffa - after being defeated reduced to slavery to be raided and sold as slaves; they suffered extremely as a noted historian of Ethiopian history Pankhurst writes (1968): “raiding automatically declined the population having been almost exterminated. Raiding sometimes extended beyond the borders of Ethiopia, the British Government declaring that raiders crossed into Kenya or the Sudan on 139 occasions between 1913 and 1927 (p.111)⁴³. It seems the Ethiopian government policy is very similar until today: though the slave raiding was stopped, destabilizing the neighbouring countries (mainly Somalia and Kenya) continued until today. Huntingford (1955), who contributed a lot to the study of these colonized peoples, reports that the Kaffa were much reduced in numbers after the Ethiopian conquest. In 1938 the population of Bonga, the former capital of the Kaffa kingdom, was 3,000 out of which about only 200 were Kaffa (p.105)⁴⁴.

The chance of the Oromo people was not different from other sister neighbouring nations who

had fallen under the Abyssinian subjugation: they were sold as slave in the market, given as a wedding gift during marriage between Abyssinian royal families, as domestic slaves and males as eunuchs. At one time, Minilik and Taitu (queen) owned a large estate of 70,000 slaves (Melba, 1988: 65)⁴⁵. The Oromo people tried all alternatives to protect themselves from this horrendous, cruel act against them. Some fled to the forest, whereas some took refuge in British Sudan, Kenya, and British Somaliland to escape slavery. As Professor Bulcha's (1988) research found out the first exodus of refugees from the Oromo land to escape slavery and Gabbar system started at this time (p. 42)⁴⁶.

The land of Oromo and other colonized nations was measured into Gasha (1 Gasha = 40 hectares) and divided to Naftanya (lit. gun-carrier, i.e., armed settler) with the people inhabit on it, to Abyssinians who came as soldiers, priests, colonial governors, irregular fighters and others. This confiscation of the land belonging to the colonized people and its distribution for Abyssinians was known as *Gabbar system*. Gabbar is an Amharic word; it means one who pays taxes or tributes, but in the Ethiopian administrative system in conquest regions the term became synonymous with serfdom.

The colonial government introduced the *Balabbat* system in which the land was divided into three parts, Markakis & Ayele (1978) inform us: "Immediately after the conquest, the northern rulers divided the southern lands into three, theoretically equal parts according to a traditional principle known as Sisso, meaning one third. They confiscated two-third outright, leaving the last third to the indigenous population" (p. 24)⁴⁷. This two-third land of colonized peoples was divided to Naftanya according to their position in the government. The left one-third was given for *Balabbat* (indigenous individuals who used to work as agents for colonial state)

A governor received 1,000 Gasha, a Fitawrari (commander of the front) 300 Gasha, a Qanyazmach (commander of the right) 150 Gasha, and soldiers according to their ranks Melba (1988) describes the division of land to Abyssinian soldiers „an ordinary soldier, depending on length of

service received from one to three Gasha; and captain of fifty men was granted up to five Gasha; commander of one hundred received up to twenty Gasha of land” (p. 65)⁴⁸.

The peoples of the colonized countries in such system were divided among the Abyssinian armed settlers (colonizers) and obliged to pay the major part of their products – up to seventy-five percent from their harvest – as tribute to the new landlords (Bulcha 1988: 42)⁴⁹. Each Gabbar (one who pays taxes or tributes) faced different kinds of onerous works for his new master. The Gabbar’s obligations were not limited; all necessary works were ordered by the Naftanya. The Gabbar works (plough, weeding, harvesting) on the field some day in the week, builds fences, kraal for his cattle; meanwhile Gabbar’ wives and children also have many duties to fulfil for the wives of Naftanya such as fetching water, grinding grains, collecting fire wood, washing clothes - generally all household duties for the families of Naftanya.

The colonization and confiscation of land established a new group of people without land ownership in a country where 85% of the population are peasants who live on agriculture. The main cause of the 1974 Ethiopian revolution was the question of landownership in the colonized territory of the Empire; as Horowitz (1985) quotes about the 1974 Revolution, “in Ethiopia, a major effect of a land reform was to take land from Amhara and distribute it to the Galla, and for a time the revolution is suspected of being a Galla plot” (p.8)⁵⁰. Galla is misnomer for Oromo which reached the international literature via Abyssinian writers, but Oromo never used it as their own name.

Political power in Ethiopia

Starting from the creation of this Empire at the end of the 19th century until today, the political, economic, military and ideological power are in the hand of the Abyssinian state elite, the only difference being the circulation of power which changed from the Amhara power elite to the

Tigrians starting from 1991. The power circulation between these two groups of Abyssinians is part of their political culture. Amhara ruled from 1270-1872, and the Tigrians 1872-1889, again Amhara 1889-1991(p.217)⁵¹.

The Tigrians came to power through armed struggle in 1991, at the end of the cold war, with the blessing of Euro-American governments, and it seems they are prepared to rule for a long time according to how they structured their empire economically, militarily and ideologically.

During the military rule (1974-1991) many National Liberation movements fought to oust the brutal military government of Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. The main strong liberation fronts were Eritrea People's Liberation Front (EPLF) with political program of liberating Eritrea from Ethiopia and establishing the Eritrea Republic(Pool 2001)⁵²; Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) aimed to free Oromo nation from the shackles of the Abyssinian colonial rule and to establish the People's Democratic Republic of Oromia(Oromia speaks 1989)⁵³; the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) declared in its original political program to establish the Republic of Tigray but later it is alleged to change its goal to rule the Empire. At the end of the cold war the Mengistu Government collapsed because of many internal and external reasons and EPLF expelled the Ethiopian Army from the Eritrean soil and became an independent state. In Ethiopia, the Amhara state elite lost their state power and TPLF captured the Minilik II palace in Finfinnee (Addis Ababa) the centre of Oromia (Oromo country). The OLF accepted the American government promise in which during the conference in London (May 1991) on the future of Ethiopia organized by the USA and chaired by Herman Cohen -undersecretary of state – it was clearly said by Cohen that “without democracy, no help”. The OLF leaders, hoping to end the century old colonial rule in a peaceful way, participated as junior partner in a TPLF-led government for one year; but when they realized that there is no open window for a democratic way of solving political conflict of the empire resigned from the transitional

government to struggle as opposition national front. The TPLF declared war on OLF and from 1992 the armed struggle continues in Oromia and Somali region of Ogaden in Ethiopia. The American Government promise at London Conference “without democracy, no help” seems to be a false promise, because now TPLF is already in power for 22 years; it seems the opposite is true in the USA foreign policy. As we know and all foreign observers have certified that each five years there were parliament and local elections in Ethiopia since 1995 and the results speak for themselves: to quote only the 2010 parliament election result, according to the Ethiopian National Election Commission the ruling party gained 99.6 % vote (Tronvoll 2010:1)⁵⁴. Political power was completely monopolized by the TPLF.

In 1991, when the TPLF captured the centre of political power in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian multi-national army was dismantled and many of its leaders were sent to jail; the Tigrian People’s Liberation Front’s (TPLF) militia became Ethiopian defence force. Census was/is government secret during all governments in Ethiopia, because they afraid of declaring officially the composition of the peoples in the Empire according to their national identities. Foreign experts on Ethiopia estimate differently the population of the empire according to national identity - let us elucidate some data according to some authors. Huntingford (1955), a British anthropologist, who studied the Oromo society at the beginning of the 1950s, estimated the population of Ethiopia as follows: Oromo (42.7%), Ethiopians 32.6 % (p.23)⁵⁵, and others; two sociologists (Cohen John C. M. from the Cornell University and Weintraub Dov from the Hebrew University (Cohen and Weintraub1975) realized a land tenure patterns research in Ethiopia during last period of Emperor Haile Selassie rule, from 1971 to 1974 , and came up with the estimation of the peoples of Ethiopia as follows - Amhara 20%, Tigre 10%, Oromo 50%, Sidama 10%, the other 10 % dominated by Gurage, Afar, Somali, Agaw and a number of other minor groups (p.23)⁵⁶ ; Holcomb and Ibssa (1990) in their book *The*

invention of Ethiopia estimated that the Oromo people represent 60 % of the Ethiopian people.(281)⁵⁷

| The Percentage Distribution of Major Ethnic Groups: 2007 population and Housing Census Ethiopia Ethnic Group | 2007 | | 1994 | |
|---|------------|------|------------|------|
| | Population | | Population | |
| | Number | % | Number | % |
| Oromo | 25,488,344 | 34.5 | 17,080,318 | 32.1 |
| Amhara | 19,867,817 | 26.9 | 16,007,933 | 30.1 |
| Somali | 4,581,793 | 6.2 | 3,160,540 | 5.9 |
| Tigris | 4,483,776 | 6.1 | 3,284,568 | 6.2 |
| Sidama | 2,966,377 | 4.0 | 1,842,314 | 3.5 |
| Gurage | 1,867,350 | 2.5 | 2,290,274 | 4.3 |
| Welaita | 1,707,074 | 2.3 | 1,269,216 | 2.4 |
| Hadiya | 1,284,366 | 1.7 | 927,933 | 1.7 |
| Afar | 1,276,372 | 1.7 | 979,367 | 1.8 |
| Gamo | 1,107,163 | 1.5 | 719,847 | 1.4 |

Note: Other Ethnic groups are excluded from the total. Percentages are calculated from the total population of each Census.

The contemporary 'Ethiopian' army leadership is completely controlled by Tigrian people, who

constitute 6.2% of people in Ethiopia. According to one document, which was published in 2011 and much discussed on it, Commanders in Different Defence Departments of the so-called Ethiopian Defence Force are 50, from these commanders only one is from Amhara nation and the other is from Agaw, which means 96% of the army leadership is controlled by Tigrians and no Oromo individual in the leadership of the army whereas Oromo is the largest nation in the country. The empirical data on contemporary Ethiopia shows that the Tigrian elite controls four sources of power (political, economic, military and ideological) dictating all sources; it is a very good example of authoritarian government in the 21st century. Finally, we want to point out those economic facts which make the rural population absolutely powerless. Ethiopia has 94 million population (2011 Estimation Fact book) out of which 85 % is peasants earning their living from agriculture. As we discussed above, at the end of the 19th century, the neighbouring nations of Abyssinia were defeated by this empire and became its colony. The land of the colonized people was expropriated by the victorious colonizing emperor and divided with the people to emperor's soldiers. The highest portion of the land went to the crown and the least amount to the private soldiers. The core of the Ethiopian students' movement during Haile Sellassie authoritarian regime was Oromo students and students from other colonized nations. The students' main slogan during this period was "Land to the tillers", meaning to distribute the land to the peasants of the colonized peoples. When military force came to power in 1974, it partially accepted the demand of landless people of the colonized region to gain support from this large group of the empire. On 4 March 1975, The Military Government of Ethiopia officially called the Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC) announced the First Proclamation of the Land Reform. According to the proclamation, all rural lands were nationalized and became the property of the state; it was promised that the land will be distributed to the peasants. Though the proclamation of the Land Reform destroyed the feudal character of the state, the Military

Government refused to distribute the land and the state itself became the only owner of the rural and urban lands. When the Military junta government was ended in May 1991, the New Tigrian minority nation elite came to power and brought other devastating project with itself: the land of the colonized nations was to be ‘ leased’ for foreign and domestic investors for up to 99 years. In a country where more than five million people are living from hand out of western countries the government of the country is selling the land of the people for commercial business people and expelling the peasants from their ancestral lands. According to Prof. Dessalegn Rahmato (2011), the best expert on Ethiopian land tenure from Addis Ababa University, lands were leased as follows:

| State (Region) | Land in hectares |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| Oromia | 1,057,866 |
| Gambella | 829,199 |
| Beni Shangul | 691,984 |
| Afar | 409,678 |
| SNNP* | 180,625 |
| Total | 3,169,678 |

Rahmato (2011:11) ⁵⁸

*SNNP= *Southern Nations Nationalities and peoples.*

The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, according to its constitution article 45, has nine member states. The state of Tigray, Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somali, Harari, Benishangul/ Gumuz, Gambela peoples and Southern nations, nationalities and peoples(Eth. Const. 1995)⁵⁹. Starting from 1920s, many experts on Ethiopian politics expressed their warnings that Ethiopian political elite uses two political games: first of all, the constitutions which were given by Emperor Haile Sellassie

(1931,1955), written and adopted by the Military Government (1987) and written and adopted by the Tigrayan Liberation Front and its allies (1994) were used to imitate their super power supporters, but the real face of these governments in the domestic governance were/is very authoritarian. Readers who are interested in more detail on the Ethiopian government human rights violation may consult reports of Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Genocide Watch, USA Government Human Rights Reports and Global Peace Index (GPI) 2013 and a report of Institute for Economic & peace.

As many people know, Ethiopia from 1974 to1991 was a socialist oriented country. The industry sector of economy was in the hand of the state. When the Tigray Liberation Front came to power in 1991, it secretly, without any legal process, divided the state property to its members in the name of privatization. Tigray, the origin of this guerrilla group was the poorest province of all the 14 provinces of Ethiopia to 1991. Within twenty years of their rule of the country, the key members of this guerrilla front became the top richest people in the state. According to the journal of *Ethiopian Review* of 2011, 16 out of 20 top richest individuals in Ethiopia are from the Tigray Liberation Front which is the core of the ruling party (Eth. Review) ⁶⁰. As we know the sources of social power are ideology, economy, military and politics. We showed empirical data from economy, politics and military, totally controlled by the Tigrayan power elite.

Finally we want to show the ideological conflict in Ethiopia. The Orthodox Christianity was the official state religion till 1974, but the removal of the Monarchical regime officially separated the state and church, in which all the religions given equal status. If we look at the practical level of the contemporary Tigrayan political elite in power, we can see they are continuing their previous trends of domination of the Orthodox Church. The conflict between Muslims and the Government is reaching the highest point in the history of the empire because of the government interference in the Muslims internal affairs, imposing new sectarian ideology which the government has imported from Lebanon.

The other conflict exists between the Oromo original belief (Waaqeffata - believer in one God, Waaqa - God, Waaqeffannaa - belief in one God) and the government, because the government refused to recognize it as religion and register it. As far as we know from the history, starting from ancient time Waaqeffannaa has been a very developed religion until at the end of 19th century when the Oromo and other Cushitic nations were colonized and the colonial government of Minilik II made it illegal(Hassen 1990:6-9, Bokku 2011, Legesse 2000, Bulcha 2011)⁶¹. The believers of this original Oromo religion applied in 1990s to the contemporary government to be recognized as a legitimate religion. According to the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, which was written by the same government states in its article 27.1

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include the freedom to hold or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and the freedom, either individually or in community with others, and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching” (Art.27)⁶²

The big problem in authoritarian states is the violators of their own constitution are the same people who wrote and given the constitution to the people they govern. The rule of law does not exist and the constitution in Ethiopia is a mechanism of cheating their supporters in West Europe and America, who keep them in power for their geopolitical strategy, and give to such authoritarian government diplomatic, financial, military armament and blocking democratic system development in developing countries. Scholars such as Prof. Monga (1999), who deals with the problems of democracy in Africa, point out that one of the eight problems with African politics is International Support for Dictatorship. Monga, a Country Economist at World Bank in Washington, D. C. observes the degree of Western contempt for the socio-political transformations taking shape in Africa. He declares that “... democratization in Africa has occurred against the wishes of France and has met

with indifference from other major Western powers that have commercial, financial and military interests there” (p.59)⁶³.

Ethiopia is a good example, which one of authoritarian state in the second decade of 21st century with the help of west European states (particularly Great Britain) and USA support, blocking democratization in the country. *Freedom House* for many years observes the development of democratic system, civic liberties and mass media. In its report of 2013 ‘*Freedom in the world 2013: The annual survey of political rights and civic liberties*’ put the world states into three categories: (a) Free; (b) partly free and (c) Not free. The organization defines these categories as follows:

1. 1. A Free country is one where there is open political competition, a climate of respect for civil liberties, significant independent civil life, and independent mass media.
2. 2. A Partly Free country is one in which there is limited respect for political rights and civil liberties. Partly Free states frequently suffer from an environment of corruption, weak rule of law, ethnic and religious strife, and political landscape in which a single party enjoys dominance despite a certain degree of pluralism.
3. 3. A Not Free Country is one where basic political rights are absent, and basic civil liberties widely and systematically denied (Freedom House 2013: 4)⁶⁴

Ethiopia is according to this survey one of the countries, which does not respect political rights of its own people, basic civil liberties widely and systematically denied (Ibid p.15) ⁶⁵, like its neighbours Sudan and Somalia. Globally, Africa has the highest number of authoritarian states compared with other continents, only in Sub-Saharan Africa, free states are 11(22%), partly free states are 18(37%) and not free states 20(41) of all states in the region (Freedom House 2013: 26). Ethiopia is on all directions of technological development, hinders its people not to benefit from this advancement. Everybody, who has friend or business connection in Ethiopia, knows very well that it is not possible to have telephone connection with individuals in the country, because Ethiopian telecom does not

want anybody to speak to the people in the country. For individuals in the country, it is possible to call to foreign country, because, the Ethiopian telecom record the talk and if there is any information in that communication, the state security agency can immediately put in prison the person who are speaking from the inside of the country. They do not allow a person (his/her origin is from Ethiopia), who is in a foreign country, because if he speaks, any sentence which the government does not want to be heard in the country, they think that it may mobilize the people against the government and they cannot catch him to put behind bars. Let us see the global wide research result of *'the freedom on the net 2013: A global assessment of internet and digital media'* published by Freedom House. According to this report Ethiopia is the only country which controls everything not to reach the people. The report states that:

“Ethiopia has one of the lowest rates of internet and mobile telephone penetration in the world, as meagre infrastructure, a government monopoly over the telecom sector. And obstructive telecom policies have notably hindered the growth of information and communication technologies (ICTS) in the country. Despite low access, the government maintains a strict system of controls over digital media, making Ethiopia the only country to implement nationwide internet filtering” (p.265)⁶⁶

Freedom on the net 2013: Ethiopia.

According to this report:

Ethiopia population: 87 million. Internet penetration 2012: one percent.

Social media /ICT app blocked: ye. Political/ social content blocked: yes

Press freedom 2013 status: not free.

| Internet Freedom Status | 2012 | 2013 |
|----------------------------|----------|----------|
| | Not Free | Not Free |
| Obstacles to access (0-25) | 22 | 22 |
| Limits to content (0-35) | 27 | 28 |
| Violation of users (0-40) | 26 | 29 |
| Total (0-100) | 75 | 79 |

Genocide Watch in its Countries at Risk Report-2012 identified process of genocide that develops in eight stages, that are predictable but not inexorable⁶⁷. At each stage preventive measures can stop it. The process is not linear. Logically, later stages must be preceded by earlier stages. But all stages continue to operate throughout the process. These eight stages are: (1) classification; (2) symbolization; (3) Dehumanization; (4) Organization; (5) Polarization; (6) Preparation; (7)Extermination; and (8)Denial.

We present the countries, which reached stage 7that includes Ethiopia, a country of our paper (Genocide 2012: 5)⁶⁸.

| Country | Genocid stage | Victims | Killers |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|----------------------------------|---|
| DR Congo | 7 | Women and children, Congo Tutsis | Ex-Rwandan genocidists, Mineral war lords |
| Sudan | 7 | Darfurese, Abyei, Nuba | Sudan army, Arab militias |
| Eastern Congo, Uganda, Sudan | 7 | Civilian, Women, Children | Lord’s Resistance Army |
| Syria | 7 | Pro-Democracy protesters | Assad ; Alwite loyalists, Army |
| Somalia | 7 | Opposition clans | Al-Shabaab |
| North Korea | 7 | Gov’t Opponents | Korean Army |
| Afghanistan | 7 | Gov’t supporters | Taliban, Al-Qaida |
| Ethiopia | 7 | Gov’t opponents | Tigrian Army |

Human Right violation against Oromo people by Contemporary Ethiopian government

Let us look at the constitution of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia, which was written and adopted on 8 December 1994 by the same government as our measurement for their actions. The constitution in its opening preamble states that “ we, nations, nationalities, and peoples of Ethiopia : strongly committed in full and free exercise of our right to determination, to building a political community founded on the rule of law and capable to ensuring a lasting peace, guaranteeing a democratic order, and advancing our economic and social development: Firmly convinced that the fulfilment of this objective require full respect of individual and people’s fundamental freedoms and rights, to live together on the basis of equality and without any sexual , religious or cultural discrimination.”⁶⁹

Let me quote some articles on human rights from the same constitution and to measure the government by its own constitution:

Article 14 of the constitution clearly guarantees human rights. Every person has the inviolable and inalienable right to life, the security of a person and liberty.

Article 15, states that every person has the right to life; no person may be deprived on his life except as a punishment for serious criminal offence determined by the law. Everyone has the right to protection against bodily harm.

Article 17 guarantees the right to liberty; No person may be subjected to arbitrary arrest; no person may be detained without charge or conviction against him.

Article 18, prohibits against inhuman treatment. Everyone has the right to protection against cruel, inhuman or degradation treatment or punishment.

Let me bring some concrete data how the same government is violating its own constitution. Oromo Support Group non-political organization based in London and led by respected British Medical Doctor, Dr. Trevor Truman for two decades documents human right violation in Ethiopia

and its records are as follows: To May 2012, reported 4,407 extra-judicial killings, and 992 disappearances, of civilians, suspected of supporting groups opposing the government. Most of these have been Oromo people. Scores of thousands of civilians have been imprisoned. Torture and rape of prisoners is common place especially in secret detention Centres, those existences is denied by the Government of Ethiopia⁷⁰.

Conclusion

The paper tried to elucidate basic theory of colonialism in order to view the historical violent conflict in the Horn of Africa through the lens of this theory. The historical development of modern colonialism was elaborated to show that every civilization has in its character to conquer and colonize other weaker nations to indicate that not only West European States were colonizers. The paper illuminates the theory with the statistic data how many people were died during the Abyssinian war of conquest, sold to slavery. The Ethiopian empire state created by Minilik II, had been ruled under three regimes- monarchy to 1974, socialist 1974-1991 and authoritarian rule of Tigrian elite from 1991-. These three regimes were only different by their names but way of governance was/is similar for the colonized nations, the relation between state and people is according to the conquest territories is relation of colonized and colonizers.

According to Oromo national movement leaders, the struggle of Oromo nation recorded some fundamental success, but a lot to be done in the future.

Let us conclude this paper by observation by Hagos W. Tecola, former political adviser of Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who characterized his former comrades in these words: “What is important to consider is the significance of the fact that the people who control TPLF (Tigrai People’s Liberation Front) and Government are very parochial minded and appalling arrogant

charlatans. They are extremely violent, insanely suspicious ... With twin character flaws of excessive love of consumer goods and obsession with status and hierarchy... Fear, blackmail, intrigue, deception, suspicion, and brutality are its defining characteristics. It is absolutely insane for anyone to expect democracy from a secretive and tyrannical organization as such the TPLF and its spawn” (Hagos 1999:66)⁷¹.

This study proves the observation of Prof. Gellner (1983) “the Amhara Empire was a prison house of nations if ever was one”⁷². The contemporary government of Ethiopia controlled by Tigrians is worse than all previous governments economically, politically, militarily and in human rights violation of Oromo and other nations which means, it is one of the worst prison houses of nations in Africa.

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