

YACHAY WASI Sacred Sites Event - Submission 11 – ETHIOPIA -

Received April 21, 2006

by Sambo Galabu sgalabu@yahoo.com on behalf of

(Dr.) Gemetchu Megerssa,

Department of Sociology and Anthropology,

Addis Ababa University,

P.O. Box 1176,

ADDIS ABABA,

Ethiopia

and

(Dr.) Aneesha Kassam

Department of Anthropology,

University of Durham,

43 Old Elvet,

DURHAM DH1 3HN,

England

email: Aneesha.Kassam@durham.ac.uk

SACRED SITES OF THE OROMO NATION OF NORTHEAST AFRICA

The Oromo nation is made up of a number of territorial groups that occupy a discontinuous area that stretches from the Red Sea in Eritrea down to the Tana River in Kenya. They are indigenous to the region. Over the centuries, they absorbed a number of other smaller groups through peaceful means and presently number more than thirty million people. They represent the ethnic majority in Ethiopia. Despite the vast distances that separate them, the different groups speak a mutually intelligible language and share core cultural values. Traditionally, they believed in a monotheistic black Celestial Deity to whom they periodically offered sacrifice. Their politico-religious life was centred on an eight-year cycle of rituals that were performed by their leaders at key sites associated with mountains, trees and natural springs. These fertility rites formed part of the sacred geography of their land. In the course of this cycle of rituals, each territorial group performed a pilgrimage to receive the blessings of their spiritual leader (*Abba Mudaa*, or “Father of Anointment”), who served to unify the Oromo as a nation.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the once culturally and politically dominant Oromo were conquered by force of arms by the minority Amhara Abyssinian group and incorporated into the Ethiopian empire. They were forced to become tenants on their own land and their feudal overlords systematically pillaged their vast herds of cattle. Their culture and religion were scorned and disparaged. They were forced to change their names and to speak the language of the colonizer. In 1900, in order to break the unity of the Oromo nation, the Emperor Menelik forbade the making of the pilgrimage to the land of the *Abba Mudaa*. The site was later taken over by Islamic converts and the pilgrimage was transformed into the cult of Sheik Hussein, which is still celebrated to this day. All over Oromo territory, the Amhara appropriated the ritual sites of the people by building churches on the land.

Only the southern Gujjii and Borana Oromo, on the southern edge of the empire, were able to continue to practise their traditional rituals within their own restricted territories without undue interference from the centre. Elsewhere, the religious practices went underground. With the overthrow of the Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, however, the new “socialist” regime of the Dergue that succeeded began to penetrate the lives of the peoples of the periphery. As part of its livestock development policy in the 1980s, it created national ranches, through which it enclosed

and alienated large tracts of Borana land, including key sacred sites. The Borana were actively prevented from gaining even temporary access to these sites.

More recently, the “democratic” regime that took power in 1995, which is dominated by the northern Tigre Abyssinian ethnic group, has created new administrative boundaries in the south, through which the Borana have lost further sacred sites to their Gujji neighbours, which has resulted in friction between the two groups. They have also lost key wells that were strategic to their traditional natural resource management system to the adjoining Somali. Most of these wells were also places of worship, and like all holy sites, they were protected by the customary environmental laws, which forbade the cutting of important species of indigenous trees in the vicinity. These rules were known as the laws of the inside and the outside (*aloof alolaa*) and formed part of the traditional eco-philosophy of the Oromo.

In the central parts of what is now the Oromia regional state, there has been a revival of the *irrecha* harvest ritual, which is celebrated annually. It is a highly publicised event. However, many of the rituals that formed part of the eight-year cycles of the different Oromo groups, and in particular that of the Borana, have never been fully and systematically documented, as each regime attempted to undermine the traditional practices. The Borana are considered to be living guardians of the Oromo culture. There is, therefore, an urgent need to study these sites and the rituals performed at them and every effort should be brought to bear by the international community to restore the traditional places of worship and wells to their rightful owners.

Key References

Bartels, Lambert. 1983. *Oromo Religion: Myths and Rites of the Western Oromo of Ethiopia. An Attempt to Understand*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag.

Baxter, Paul T.W. and Aneesa Kassam. (eds.). 2005. Special Issue of the *Journal of Oromo Studies* on Ritual and Religion dedicated to the memory of Father Lambert Bartels, 12(1&2).

Hassen, Mohammed. 1994. *The Oromo of Ethiopia. A History 1570-1860*. Trenton, N.J.: Red Sea Press.

Hinnant, John. 1978. ‘The Guji: *Gada* as a Ritual System’, in Baxter, Paul T.W. and Uri Almagor. (eds.). 1978. *Age, Generation and Time. Some Features of East African Age Organisations*. London: C. Hurst and Co., pp. 207-243.

Holcomb, Bonnie K. and Sisai Ibssa. 1990. *The Invention of Ethiopia. The Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa*. Trenton, N.J.: The Red Sea Press.

Legesse, Asmorom. 1973. *Gada. Three Approaches to the Study of an African Society*. New York: Free Press.

Megerssa, Gemetchu R. 1993. ‘Knowledge, Identity and the Colonizing Structure: the Case of the Oromo of East and Northeast Africa’, Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies.