Odaa Nabee In Oromo Oral Tradition

By I. Gutamaa

Many trees might be compared to the odaa (a type of ficus) like qilkuu, dambii, birbirisaar, harbuu and others for their great size and the reliable shade in all weather. But only odaa has a special place in Oromo tradition as a symbol of faith, democracy, liberty and peace. These values and more are associated with the odaa tree. Could odaa mean anything other than the tree known by that name? Yes! odaa is a depiction of political power. It is also a centre of social and economic activities. For the Oromo, it symbolizes the entire corpus of their activities, history, culture and tradition.

The Oromo are one of the many groups who have inhabited the eastern part of Africa (from northern tip to the south) since time immemorial. The bokuu, the kallacha and the cadcçuu and irrechaa (irreessa) practices exhibit their extraordinary similarities with those of ancient Egypt, discovered through archeological findings. The names of places and tools found along the eastern part of the continent coincide with many Oromo names further confirming these connections.

During their movement towards the south, the Oromo had several caffee sessions under various odaas. At least one, but perhaps many of the great odaas was called Odaa Nabee. As to when the odaa came into Oromo life or where the first odaa was found is not known. Is the present Odaa Nabee (found seven kilometres to the South of Dukam, a village 25 kilometres south of Finfinne/Addis Ababa) the only Odaa Nabee? Could it be a generic name? If so could this be a general reference to any central odaa serving all the tribes of the nation in different periods of Oromo history?

It is with these and many more questions in mind that we present the legend of Odaa Nabee as transmitted to us through oral tradition. Whether it is one of the Odaa Nabees or the only Odaa Nabee, the subject of our narration is the Odaa Nabee south of the town of Dukam, in the heartland of the Tuulama region. The odaa served as a centre of power for the collectivity during and after the great exodus that re-united the dispersed branches and disintegrated territory of the Oromo nation. Many Oromos have passed away leaving their impression on generations that followed them. Some transcended their villages while others were confined to their clans depending on the time and space of their history. Nabee is one of these people, although no one knows to which group he belonged. We do know that he certainly transcended his own surroundings. In what follows, we shall focus less on Nabee the person and provide more discussion of the Odaa Nabee which could be said about Odaa Nabee as a legal and political institution, as a sanctuary for believers, as a symbol for a new national images. Much is expected of Oromo scholars in the rediscovery of Odaa Nabee.

The Legend

Once upon a time, a cow and a bull pulled out their moona (kraal) and headed northwards rutting. No other bull followed them. This was both unusual and momentous. The place was Borona land, bordered by a salty sea, in the most southern part of Oromoland. Their owner took it as an omen. He did not want to interfere. Instead he saddled his horse and followed them. Some months later, they reached a place called Odaa Nabee. This name is also a matter of legend. An odaa sprouted in the gooranno (a part of the house where calves are kept) of a man called Nabee. This was also taken as omen. Nabee was a leader an Oromo community through whom the will of Waagaa was expressed. The germination of an odaa tree under his roof was a message of the provident, an event that foretold the unification of the Oromo—the return of the dispersed tribes to re-institute the lost order. Certainly, the great repatriation was in view. As to the exact time this would take place none could tell. Even the great raagaas (prophets) could only decipher the coded symbols. Nabee left the odaa to grow strong, and later it took this name and referred to as Odaa Nabee. It became a meeting point and shelter for travellers and provided shade for cattle. As to when Nabee lived no one can tell. His name remained a legend through the odaa which later became an historic symbol of unity and democracy of the nation. It cropped up in an unusual way in an unusual place.

Returning to the long journey of the cow and the bull, the cow began to give birth under this tree. This means the journey took nine months, the time it takes from conception of a calf to its birth. The cow rested for a while and after the initial stages of labour, she headed northwards and rested again some five kilometres from Odaa Nabee, at Dhaga-Sadee. Then she moved northwards until she came to Handooobee (Handooobee Tumma) and gave birth to her calf. After observing what happened, the owner went home and told others of his experience. He told his people of the fertile land, its water and extensive pasture. He encouraged them to leave the hostile area of Boorana where there is no ample water or grass and where drought and wild animals constantly threaten the people and cattle. He convinced them that Waagaa (God), had shown them through the cow and the bull where their future capital should be. It was a foretold prophecy that had to be fulfilled.

The year in which this event took place is however not known, but it must be one of the periods when a new Gada government was formed. A campaign was organized and an army of able-bodied
persons with their family, cattle and belongings set out northwards. They were unable to re-trace the route the cow and bull took. No sign of pasture or water could be traced either. Many died along the way from hunger and thirst. As the expedition became too hazardous, they sent out horsemen in all directions to look for signs of the promised land. One of them, named Walaabu, came back with good news. He told them that he had found a space of land with springs and pasture that must be the promised land. So the caravan followed Walaabu to this land. The land was later named Madda Walaabu and it is sometimes misconstrued as the origin of the Oromo nation, a place already in Oromo legend where the first man was created from clay. Madda means fountain-head or source in afaan Oromoo. It was only a coincidence that Walaabu found the present springs in Baalee and suffixed his name to them.

Much later the raagaas re-examined the story of the cow and the bull and discovered that this place was not the foretold land. So another expedition was arranged. This time must have been during one of the periods when the Birmaji Gada came to power, but the year is yet unknown. During this expedition they crossed the river Hawaas, a big river with a forest of birbirsaa trees lining it according to the legend. They travelled a short distance and came to a big oada. They asked the inhabitants (who were also Oromos) and confirmed that it was the great oada under which the cow had her first birth pangs. Every landmark was in accordance with the tale retained in their oral tradition. They also found the place (Dhaga-sadee) where the cow rested. Then they finally spotted Haadoodee where she had her calf. It was then decided that Odaa Nabee would serve as the headquarters for the expedition.

According to legend, the caaffe (assembly) of Birmaji Gada (1578-1586) had its first session under oadaas. Later on, other oadaas were used by other Gadas (Mulata (1586-1594) and Duuloo (1594-1602). To this day the Tulamaa use these oadaas as their meeting places. Every Gada assembly starts under one of the oadaas, which are designated for each Gada group. The big oadaa, Odaa Nabee is still the assembly shade of the Oromo living in this area. After deliberations are concluded, the assembly moves to Dhada-sadée following the legendary route of the cow and bull. It spends one night at Dhaga-sadée where some rituals and remaining parts of the deliberation, if any, are concluded. The next day the whole assembly moves to Haadoodee Tuma, where the cow had her calf. The assembly also presents its final product, the tuma (proclamation), here. At midnight the laws are proclaimed and the delegates go back to their constituencies with new laws. Those who slumber at the time of proclamation go back empty handed, of course. It is only the wise and vigilant who can memorise the laws and re-tell to their people.

This is the legend of Odaa Nabee, probably the last central parliament of the Oromo nation. According to oral tradition both the Boran and Bareentuma branches (all Oromo) had their common assembly here, until they decided to develop their own regional odaas. According to prevailing collective memory, this was the only oada to which every clan and branch of the Oromo people remained loyal, probably until colonizers restricted freedom of movement and assembly in the early decades of this century. This loyalty was expressed by making a pilgrimage every eight years to express allegiance to the new Gada and receive the blessing of patriarch--Abba Muada.

The story was collected from elders sitting under the legendary Odaa Nabee. We do not claim the story is free from errors; it is up to those who have additional information to come forward and enrich it. Because they were not written down, such stories tend to be told differently at different places. Sometimes different names or interpretations may be given by different gomoos (branches, segments) of the Oromo people. All the same, the story will be an oada which was common to all the branches of the nation.

An addendum for conclusion

Whether there are odaas with similar names in different locations does not change its significance in Oromo history. The Oromo have continued to keep on reciting their oral traditions from generation to generation to maintain their identity despite the untold difficulties that befell them over the last century of our history. Oromo strength lies in the transmission of information and knowledge through channels outside the reach of their enemies. This is why no one has been able to prevent them from rewriting their history and marching towards self-assertion.

The unknowable Waaqa, and the ayyaanaa (spirit) of Oromo ancestors are all at work, guiding their herorines and heroes in their endeavour to re-institute lost dignity. Glory to the Oromo martyrs, the road to liberty is clear, the re-birth of the one great Odaa Nabee is in sight. It is only the naive who would think otherwise and place hurdles along this inevitable path. We have not forgotten our past, we shall not forget the present when the future emerges. To forgive or forget depends on the bitterness of what remains of the struggle. The past which though seemingly dead can be brought back and revived if one tries. Which aspects of this past should be revived depends on the mutual respect and understanding contenders have for each other in their present history. The present should be handled wisely if memory of the difficult past is not to spill over into the future.

Odaa Nabee is the symbol of hope, peace freedom and democracy and magnanimity. It is the signifier of the resurrection of a submerged nation. It is the image of the desired life. Whatever the cost, it shall be regained. Long live the spirit of Odaa Nabee. Long live the memory of Oromo martyrs, forward until Haadoodee Tumaal Oromo oral tradition shall remain the source of national inspirations, until Oromo historians worthy of the name come forward.

************