THE FOUNDATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF OROMO NATIONALISM: SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

Lemmu Baissa

Introduction
Today the world is divided into nations, and nationalism is a powerful force in world politics. The nation is the source of all political and social power; and loyalty to the nation overrides all other allegiances. There are many definitions of nation and nationalism of which the following are a few. According to Walker Connor, a nation is a group of people whose members believe in their separate origin of descent. They share a myth of ties to a legendary founding figure or father. Benedict Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined community" where "in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" with the rest and where members of the community perceive themselves as free and sovereign. A deep and profound comradeship and fraternity characterises the community and members are willing to die for and kill to defend it. According to David Miller, a nation (nationality) is a community of people whose members identify themselves as distinct and separate from others. Common historical ties, a geographical homeland or territory, common values and the desire to live together are the distinguishing characteristics of a nation.

John Hall defines nationalism as "the belief in the primacy of a particular nation, real or constructed". For Ernest Gellner, "Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent. Finally, Anthony Smith defines it "... as an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity, and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential "nation".

Background of Oromo Nationalism
Paul Baxter identifies the Oromo people as a distinct nation where pan-Oromo consciousness exists separately and distinctly from loyalty to the different Oromo clans like Borana and Arssi. The Oromo share a common history, including the history of the conquest and victimisation of the last 100 years, a common language, common cultural symbols and myths, and identify themselves as a separate people distinct from others in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa.

Self-identification of the Oromo people as Oromo goes far back in history although the precise date is unknown. The Oromo trace their origin to an ancient founder called Orma. Oromos, regardless of clan differences, are known as Ilmaan Orma, that is the children of Orma.

The Oromo developed a sophisticated democratic political system many centuries ago, and had a system of laws and a government led by elected leaders called the luba. Their political administration was organised at the national, regional and local clan levels. The system was decentralised to permit self-rule by the people. The Oromo state was defined culturally like all African states, and there were no fixed state boundaries like that of the Amhara/Tigray state to the north.

The Oromo maintained a loose cultural centre at Haro Wallabu since about 1586 to which all major clans, including the Borana and Barentu and those in today's Kenya, sent their jila (representatives) for consultation on laws, culture and other concerns. The Abba Muuda, served as the centre and guardian of the culture. The jila pilgrimage continued unhampered until the conquest and to some extent afterwards. The jila took messages from their gada leaders and informed the Abba Muuda about conditions in their regions. They also brought back advice and blessings form Abba Muuda to their leaders and people. The practice was banned after the conquest to prevent contacts among the Oromos. Nevertheless, the practice was important indication and proof of the existence of a pan-Oromo consciousness dating from a much longer past than is commonly assumed.

The conquest and the resulting victimisation of the Oromo was resisted by scattered and sporadic rebellions and actions until recent years. For instance, after the great resistance of Arssi and Bale between 1880 and 1887, more rebellions took place in Ilu Abbabor, Raya and Azabo, in the Western Oromo Confederacy in 1935/36, Borana in 1942/3 and Bale between 1963 and 1970. These resistance struggles failed because they were scattered and lacked proper organisation at the time.
Modern Oromo nationalism can be traced to the 1950s when Oromo high school and college students, coming from different regions of Oromia, met for the first time at the Mekane Yesus Lutheran Church in Addis Ababa. The students discussed Oromo culture, language and general issues. Among the organizers and participants were people such as Dinas Lepisa who continued with Oromo studies. However, the meetings were stopped by Haile Selassie who warned the leaders of Mekane Yesus and threatened to close their church if its premises were opened for subsequent meetings. Despite the set-back, many of the participants continued their interest in and study of Oromo culture.

Like the students, Oromo members of parliament from most provinces met freely on the legislative premises and exchanged views and consulted one another on matters pertinent to the Oromo. In the 1960s they formed informal Oromo caucus and openly discussed common issues. Among the leaders of the group were Tesemma Negari and Fitwarari Baissa Jammo. Members of Parliament from Wallaga, Hararghe, Arsi, Shawa and Jimma and others elevated parliamentary debates and discussions showing their democratic cultural legacy.

More than the members of Parliament, it is the Macha Tulama Self-Help Association that can be regarded as a landmark for the origin of modern Oromo nationalism. Formed by prominent members of the Oromo elite, including military officers, government bureaucrats, business people and others, the association not only attempted to mobilise Oromos in Tulama and Eastern Macha but all Oromos. The main objective of the movement was general improvement of conditions for the Oromo people. Literacy, economic development and better political representations were additional goals.

The movement caused consternation among the Amhara ruling class and was banned. Some of its leaders were given heavy sentences while one was killed. The movement was not totally terminated but simply went underground, and young Oromos decided to resort to armed struggle. Even though armed struggle was delayed by the revolutionary outbreak to which the Oromo contributed considerably, the real armed struggle began in the late 1970s.

The military regime was overthrown in May 1991, and the Oromo people gained some benefits including education in their language at the elementary level, the use of qubee (Latin script), and redrawing of boundaries of Oromia as a single administrative unit. However, in reality Oromia is neither self-governing nor free. Therefore, following the nationalist patterns of history, Oromo nationalism is today broadening and widening, passing from the elite and engulfing all segments of society including the peasantry. Today, there are millions of Oromos who believe that their nations is badly and unfairly treated, misgoverned, robbed and oppressed by alien minorities assisted by external powers. Oromo nationalists are angry that thousands of their compatriots are jailed and tortured and exposed to danger and insecurity in their homeland. They are dissatisfied because their region is not receiving any development funds while their resources like coffee, chat, grain and gold are discriminatorily used for the development of non-Oromo regions. They are frustrated because their democratic rights to free and fair participation in the affairs of their country are not respected.

Oromo nationalism, like other nationalisms is today a growing force. With their large demographic size (about 25 million people), their rich cultural legacy, and their militaristic and legalistic culture, and a relatively abundant economic resources under their control, the Oromo will definitely play a determining and critical role in the politics of the Horn of Africa in the foreseeable future. Understanding Oromo aspirations and demands will help in providing pragmatic and just solutions to the problems of inter-communal conflicts in the region.

END NOTES
2. B. Anderson, Imagined Communities. 1983, pp. 6-7

Lemmu Baissa, PhD, teaches Political Science at Utica College, Syracuse University