



Oromo Studies Association

**Oromo Studies Association**  
OSA

**January, 2008**

**A message from the President**

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Greetings!

I trust you had a pleasant Holiday season and I wish you a Happy New Year!

This issue of our newsletter carries some pertinent information and comments from three different sources. The first one is an insight and observation from one of the founding members of the Oromo movement, Obbo Ibsa Gutama, about the nature of dialogue and discourse among educated Oromos. The article titled *Ilaaf fi Ilaamee: A Strong Instrument for Consensus Building* was circulated online last month and discusses from a cultural perspective the wisdom and skills our forefathers practiced in

settling differences, mediating conflicts, resolving disagreements and in managing difficult conversations. I have found the essay to be informative and thought provoking. Because of the timeliness and its instructive value, I have taken the liberty of reprinting the essay verbatim. It is my hope that readers would review the article once again and digest the essence of the message to serve as a guide in our interactive endeavors. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Obbo Ibsa for sharing his thoughts and observations.

The second brief note included in this newsletter is a reprint of a letter sent to one of our Executive Officers from a faculty member at Jimma University in Oromia. Although the writer's name has been withheld for privacy reasons, the message clearly illustrates the dire need for educational materials and audiovisual equipment to enrich the instructional environment of teaching Oromiffa and Oromo folklore at a college level. As you all know, our society is based on oral literature. Unless we take on the initiative of proper documentation, the age-old tradition of story telling and fireside chat will soon disappear from our

homes and social gatherings as it becomes difficult to compete with modern electronics gadgets and devices that are proliferating all corners of our society and are aggressively attracting the attention of children and youth. The vigorous infiltration of the new technology by itself is something that we all aspire and hope for to take place. What is perplexing is the management task of ensuring the continuity of the transmission of our cultural and linguistic heritage through the use of information technology. In this respect, institutions of higher learning are best suited to record and to leave historical facts and cultural experiences of our society for subsequent generations.

As I mentioned to OSA members in the previous issues of our newsletter, our association is perceived as an institution having the capacity to provide resources and support of the various research and instructional efforts geared to the Oromo. This rising expectation, however ambitious it might be, needs to be discussed in-depth. The creation of a well thought-out plan in this regard calls for the active participation of our members. I am once again bringing to your attention to seek suggestions for ways and approaches helpful in the development of a plan of action or actions.

The third piece of information included in this issue is a brief report about a research project undertaken by a graduate student at the University of Michigan. The student, Kat Hartman, is in the process of designing educational materials for health extension workers

in Oromia and you can read below the summary of her project.

There are other research projects in progress as well that I have been made aware in my capacity as OSA executive. Recently, I received a communication from a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Massachusetts – Amherst - informing me that she is working on a research project involving coffee farmers in Oromia. I will have the synopsis of the research project published in the upcoming issue of our newsletter. The point I am trying to emphasize here is two fold: First, the increase in research projects related to Oromia is welcome news as it brings to light issues and challenges related to the Oromo. Also, the outcomes of these projects obviously carry some sort of scientific approaches to managing and resolving difficult situations and the application of knowledge gained from such researches will be useful in advancing socio-economic developments. Second, it is also indicative that OSA is gaining grounds as one of the referral resources available to the scientific community and academics for matters pertaining to the study of the Oromo. It is indeed our role to promote OSA's historic mission in this regard; and, if you happen to come across similar research news, please let OSA know and we will disseminate the information by encouraging researchers to publish their findings in the Journal of Oromo Studies (JOS).

Best regards,

Melaku Mekonnen, Ph.D.  
President

## Mid Year Conference

As mentioned in the previous issue of our newsletter, the planning for the OSA mid year conference is near completion. The conference will be held on Saturday, March 22<sup>nd</sup> at Howard University in Washington DC. The day-long conference theme *“Differences among Oromo Political Groups: Opportunities and Challenges for the Struggle of the Oromo People”* will focus on the unity and diversity of Oromo political thoughts and realities. The conference consisting of a morning and an afternoon session will have a maximum of three speakers at each of the sessions. Our desire, in this regard, is to provide reasonably sufficient time to each of the speakers to share their thoughts and ideas as well as to provide opportunities to the audience to participate in the discussion. The sessions will have moderators and I am pleased to report that Abba Kalacha and Dr. Ezekiel Gebissa have welcomed the Executive Officers request to serve in this capacity.

Among the confirmed speakers so far are Drs: Mekuria Bulcha and Mohammed Hassen – both long-time OSA members. In addition there is tentative agreement from Obbo Lencco Latta and/or Obbo Diima Nogo, as well as Obbo Aberra Teferra and we are awaiting further confirmation from them. We hope to finalize the speakers list by the end of this month and the next issue of our newsletter will have the schedule and the program details.

As part of a follow up to the mid year conference, OSA intends to conduct a session on the same theme at the annual conference in July so that ideas generated at the March conference will be shared with a larger audience as well as expounded to promote mutual understanding and unity for Oromo struggle. I encourage you to join us at the mid year conference in Washington DC.

### Conference Proceeding – Please submit your papers!

We are in the process of compiling the proceedings of the 2007 OSA Conference. If you were a presenter at the OSA conference last July in Minneapolis, and have not submitted your article, we ask that you send an electronic copy in Microsoft Word double spaced to Dr. Abebe Adugna no later than February 29, 2008. You may email Dr. Abebe at the following address, [aadugna@verizon.net](mailto:aadugna@verizon.net)

### A letter from a faculty member at Jimma University

This letter might be a surprise to you when you receive it from someone whom you don't ever imagine. I got your email from the web page and wrote you this letter. I am writing this

letter to you because I think that you are the right person to contact and share our vision so that you will deliver my application to the board of directors of OSA to decide and seek ways of

supporting Oromo scholarship here at Jimma University. We need books and journals on Oromo scholarship as we don't have much solid literature on Oromo folklore and other aspects of Oromo studies. Jimma University is doing its level best to expand the horizon of Oromo scholarship here at home in running different degree programs and establishing hosting departments. I personally feel that this is the first step in creating educated Oromos who can contribute their share in the development of our region. Let me provide you some of the highlights of the program at the University:

1. Jimma University has offered Oromiffa language instruction for two years now and graduated two batches of students during the academic year and another batch over last summer with a bachelor of education degree. These graduates are currently serving as teachers in various high schools in Oromia National Regional State and are playing a pivotal role in the development of Afan Oromo: language, literature and culture in their respective zones they were assigned to serve.

2. In addition, this year the University developed a curriculum in Afan Oromo folklore and literature and enrolled the first group of forty students in the newly crafted program.

The crux of my note to you is that these two departments have acute shortage of books and trained manpower in the field. To solve the immediate problem of the department of folklore, we are requesting OSA and its members to donate to us used books in the English language on folklore theory and practice and AV equipments such as video and digital cameras if possible to produce documentaries about the Oromo folklore. Specifically, we need you support in donating to us the *Journal of Oromo Studies* in the future so that you can use some of the articles on Oromo language, folklore and culture as reference material to upgrade our studies in Oromo scholarship. So, I would like to ask that you kindly forward our request to the OSA Board of Directors to ruminate over these issues and donate us some books and other equipments needed for folklore studies.

### **Creating useful resource materials for Health Extension Workers.**

For her MFA thesis project for the School of Art & Design at the University of Michigan, Kat Hartman is creating an illustrated childbirth manual for the Health Extension Workers (HEW) of the Oromia Region. This manual seeks to highlight the role of the HEW within the

recently decentralized health system, as well as provide these health workers with a tool that is useful within their specific context.

Ethiopia has one of the highest maternal mortality ratios in the world. This

statistic is shouldered mainly by women living in the rural areas of the country. In order to scale primary health care within the rural areas, the Ethiopian health system has recently trained 10,000 women to live in rural areas and to provide preventative health care to their communities. The HEW program seeks to train and place 30,000 women by 2009. The quality of these health workers' training has been questioned in program overviews, as it happened very quickly (1 year) and had very limited resources both financial and human. However recent studies have outlined that though these health workers are nervous about assisting at births, they are regarded in some regions as the most qualified birth assistants. This manual hopes to serve as a cost effective intervention to improving these health workers performance in assisting with births, and further justify their presence and the government program within the eyes of the rural public.

Prior to material design and creation, Hartman spent a month interviewing 60 HEWs in the Oromia region about their role as health educators. Since HEWs are limited to preventative care, the primary responsibility of these women is to educate their communities. HEWs in the Oromia region admitted they lacked considerably in health education materials to assist them in this responsibility. They were also highly critical of health education materials showed to them during the survey. The included materials were culled from NGO libraries within Addis Abeba. The health messages within these health materials, though found in country, were found by many HEWs to be inaccessible or irrelevant due to cultural oversight, lack of clarity and use of non-local languages.

The creation of this manual is done in collaboration with the Oromia Regional Health Bureau.

### **Ilaa fi Ilaamee**

#### **A Strong Instrument for Consensus Building**

Oromo politico-social system, Gadaa is one of the inventions Oromo are proud of. It was a system that upheld liberty equality and human dignity. One of the means for realization of these was a democratic process of interpersonal communications or dialogue. In all verbal interactions between two, three or a multitude, every participant has the right and the duty to speak and to listen in turns in an atmosphere of deference and equality. That process was what they called *ilaa fi ilaamee*, a democratic element of Oromoness the lack of which is drawing out Oromo difficulties.

Literally, *ilaa* means “look” or “lend me your ears” usually to begin a discussion or dialogue. *Ilaamee* means “look please” or “give me attention” usually in the course of discussion. In short it was an art of communication, speaking and listening in turns under normal circumstances. Philosophically there is much to it.

A break down in *ilaa fi ilaamee* used to happen when society is in transformation as a result of man made calamities or natural disaster. At such a time a common purpose to listen to

each other is lost. It is a period of total chaos and anarchy. Under normal circumstances it is only the deviants that defy the rule of *ilaa fi ilaamee*. Otherwise all decisions or agreements were reached after thorough deliberation to which all participants contribute. There was no body that can impose his opinion or will on others. When elders discuss children listen and learn and were not barred from attending. They had also peer gatherings where they practice the rule. Therefore *ilaa fi ilaamee* is an Oromo method of dialogue that a child learns to abide by from childhood. Its basis is consultation not dictation. Oromo knew no dictation from above. Even, Abbaa Gadaa, the most respected and trusted head of state of the Oromo had no right to impose his will on others. If he tried to mess up with established rules he could face impeachment. Therefore even he must abide by the rule of *ilaa fi ilaamee*. Oromo civil liberties were protected not by curbing but by guarding them. Oromo had detailed rules of procedure and laws that encompass all activities of society. Incompatible behaviors and unethical standards were laid down in a tenet known as *safuu*. It was *safuu* to break proclamations legislated by the Assembly. It was *safuu* to break traditions and ethos. In simple terms, it is *safuu* means it is illegal, incompatible and unethical. Therefore it was only the deviant that breaks *safuu*. To speak and listen in turns was a rule. To break it was *safuu*. That is why it is said "rule of law" is not strange for the Oromo. Every public performance or action had to be backed by legislation. To make peace or war it must first be

discussed and common stand taken. The decision reached in that way is called *seera* or law. This word (*seera*) has gone into the rulers' language (Amharic) to mean "conspiracy". Citizens of the colonizing country had never participated in making laws. Citizens hold public gatherings only to listen to *Awaj* (proclamation) and orders when called or to conspire for rebellion. Most members of the generation that initiated liberation movement were brought up under colonial oppressive system. Since many of them had gone to school they had come in contact with other cultures as well. The forms of communication they came around were different from those of the Oromo. Some knew no turns in speaking. Some yell at each other or talk simultaneously. Authorities, be them teachers, directors or public officials, ask for no opinions but impose their will. They knew only command language in their communications. That could have been *safuu* for the Oromo. To these was added the system of "democratic centralism"; the communist model, where in practice communication was only one way, downwards from a center. All the alien ways have their part in crippling the Oromo noble tradition. Oromo cadres who tried to follow the alien ways had lost confidence of the rank and file. It will be hard for an Oromo to compromise the right to *ilaa fi ilaamee* in an Oromo setting. It would be easier for an Oromo to tolerate dictation from an alien rather than from another Oromo. Continuation of dependence may even be preferable to tinted alien autocratic practices. The handling of its internal contradiction is a symptom for

what it has in store for the future. It will be unOromo not to treat nationals as equals at all times and spaces.

The occupation has very much affected Oromo psyche. Even some of those who rebelled to reinstitute national values and pride are seen suffering from dependency syndrome. For that they are neither themselves nor fully others. The general membership in the liberation movement was socialized with the aspired values. And they expect the leadership to practice what it lectures. In theory colonial command languages were discarded. The borrowed system of democratic centralism has also failed to work. Not understanding the metamorphosis comrades failed to address each others' concerns with *ilaa fi ilaamee*, prompting dissensions.

The feeling of being denied the right to be heard and of being marginalized was among the causes for dissensions. Those mostly emanated from general ignorance and arrogance on part of the leadership. But dissenters gave different reasons as not to be blamed for trifles. Individual grudges and the feeling of "my way or the highway" has taken their toll. They could have saved the present confusion and stagnation had they staid back and fought for observation of *ilaa fi ilaamee* rather than cut and run.

Lately fundamental differences in outlook started to pop up in the liberation camp. A situation was created with third party influence creating obstacle for Oromo way of solving contradictions. *Ilaa fi ilaamee* was not tried. Aliens were given leeway to influence the struggle. Had it been used even if consensus seemed far fetched

majority voice could have kept the organization in one piece. And they could not have so easily given up on each other before trying hammering out differences what ever time and effort it might have taken. Instead they went to each others neck. Followers of each group started to behave like cattle herds rather than like responsible freedom fighters.

Use of foul language in public was safuu in Oromo tradition. Disrespect for elders was likewise. These days the breaking of safuu is becoming common place in broadcasts, in cyber space communications and postings by Diaspora Oromo. Some individuals do not feel responsibility for their acts. Traditionally such behaviors were common among hooligans and herders that were away from societal scrutiny and were responsible to no one. To be of use for the struggle the Diaspora has to reexamine the way they relate to each other. Freedom of expression and assembly are among elements of Gadaa democracy. Any intention or action to disrupt that is safuu.

One way to improve interrelations is to practice *ilaa fi ilaamee*. To reconnect the severed relations among national groups would not be that difficult for those who are Oromo at heart. The Oromo have great potentials.

Numerically they are in the majority. Their resources are immense. But like it was said "yoke is cut from the threshold of the fool", these are utilized by the enemy that is highly organized. It controls state apparatus in addition to an effective national organization. On the other hand Oromo could not coordinate the forces that were out to defend the fatherland let alone

mobilizing the whole Oromo resources. Without strong organization, common understanding and commitment to the national kaayyoo by nationalists, it is difficult to put up or negotiate with the enemy. As it stands the liberation movement is at its ebb that the enemy has no reason to give up an inch. Relation with it under this condition will only amount to surrender.

*Ilaa fi ilaamee* is one among the major traditional values that could have advanced the spirit of camaraderie among nationalists. But their past is pulling them away from the correct path, the path of freedom and independence. The past must be employed to smoothen the road ahead not to be an obstacle to it. No external relations can substitute Oromo consensus in guarantying victory. Nationalist have to go the Oromo way to achieve it. They have the population, resources and untapped potentials which they should be ashamed of for not utilizing so far. Deliberations, building consensus and trust are at the center of Oromo philosophy which every modern Oromo has to realize. If every ones concerns are addressed it will be easy to move even a mountain. That was how their forebears attained their acme.

It is said, “mari’atanii sanyii nyaatu” (you can eat seed set aside for cultivation if you discuss). It was *safuu* to eat such seed but if done with consensus there is no taboo that cannot be broken. Allow *ilaa fi ilaamee* to be part of your life, you will have solutions at your finger tips. Each voice of a national is of great value, for without it there can be no national harmony. There should be no limit to topics to be

discussed, politics, region, religion, tribe etc. with *safuu* in mind. Patience and wisdom to listen and air ones concern in turns is all the struggle demands. That is the essence of *ilaa fi ilaameetu*