CHAPTER 2

The Making of Oromo Kinship Identity and Structure: An Anthropological Analysis

Introduction

Millions of people, perhaps about 40 million in Oromia, Ethiopia, and the Oromo speaking inhabitants of Northern Kenya claim that they descended from a common ancestor known as Oromo or Orma. But actually, both researchers and Oromo oral historians and informants cannot say with certainty whether this mythical father, Oromo, existed or not, if he was really a biological father of all these branches claiming direct descent, or if being Oromo is rather a linguistic and socio-cultural reality which progressively emerged from an amalgamation of distinct or related communities.

For the purposes of this discussion, what is important here is not what happened in the past, but what the Oromo believed to have happened, the way they perceive their identity and the acceptance of the Oromo definition of reality by others. It is generally agreed that membership in an ethnic group is a question of definition emanating from an interaction between self-definition and definitions given by other groups. As Du Toit remarks: “...Ethnicity then would refer to the characteristics and attitudes of those who consider themselves and are considered by others to form a distinct ethnic group.”¹

Yet, in order for a large society to feel it is an ethnic group or named by others as an ethnic group or a nation, there must be some important preconditions. One of these is “having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past and cultural focus of one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood.”² In the case of the Oromo, the criteria of peoplehood, ethnicity and nationality/nationhood reside in their belief in common ancestry, Oromo (Orma), shared collective history before

and after their conquest by the Ethiopian state. Above all, the Oromo identity is rooted in common representative institutions like Gadaa and Qaalluu, the same cosmology and system of thought despite conversion to Islam and Christianity, the same patterns of kinship organization as well as a mutually intelligible common language (afaan Oromoo). Thus, the combination of these factors makes them a formidable cultural nation despite observable local or regional particularism and variation resulting from internal transformation and cultural contacts with other peoples. Yet, in spite of these incontestable ethnographic and historical characteristics and their distribution over well-defined territory, the Ethiopian rulers had difficulty in recognizing the Oromo as a unique nation with a distinct national character, but rather, simply regarded them as “a congeries of related tribes” until recent decades when they emerged as a nation within the state who account for 38 million of the Ethiopian population, estimated at 90.87 million according to July 2011 estimates.

Among many elements or cultural traits and a set of institutions characterizing “Oromo-ness,” this chapter will discuss kinship organization. Oromo kinship structure is inseparable from what is called Gosa which, with Gadaa, constitute(d), one of the major ethnographic characteristics which define the social organization and fabric and, as such, remains one of the mechanisms defining individual and collective identity. It is fitting therefore, to define Gosa and analyze its salient features in the traditional Oromo social structure.

Based on my own research conducted among the Arsi, one of the principal Oromo regional groups, and a body of anthropological data available on the Oromo, I argue that the term “tribe” or “clan” are not good descriptions of Gosa. After describing the basic rules of Gosa (patrilineal-filiation, exogamy, patrilocality, etc.), we will show the dynamic nature of the Gosa and its continual formation through the process of segmentation, fission, and fusion implying structural equivalence of the Gosas regardless of their demographic importance. Moreover, I will make a general observation about the dual organization observed in early Oromo social organization and which is still prevalent among the southern groups as well as their socio-political and matrimonial role of the moieties. Particular emphasis will be placed on the role of the Gosa in the

3 For the study of Oromo traditional religion see, among others, M. de Salviac, Un peuple antique au pays de Ménélik: Les Galla (Paris: H. Oudin, 1901); L. Bartels, Oromo Religion, Myths and Rites of Western Oromo of Ethiopia: An Attempt to Understand (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1983).

4 The World Factbook, CIA, August 23, 2011.