

Review

Introduction of evangelical Christianity in Oromia: The five major expeditions

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This study tried to discuss the introduction of Evangelical Christianity in Oromia in five major expeditions attempts that foreign and local missionaries have made to reach the Oromo people with Gospel. To this end, the necessary information were collected from written documents related to the topic, and then chronologically ordered and narrated. As discussed in this article, the Western missionaries had given much weight to evangelizing the Oromo because they thought it would help them to reach the whole African continent through the Oromo. So, they paid great sacrifices to reach this nation. In this regard, the local Oromo missionaries who were Christianized earlier had played a leading role in the expeditions. Despite the enormous difficulties they encountered, the missionaries endeavored selflessly and enthusiastically to reach the Oromo. Then the Gospel torch that was kindled at Karkaroo in Boojjii of Wallaga province radiated to various parts of Oromia in particular and Ethiopia as a whole.

Key terms: Evangelical christianity, Oromia, Ethiopia, Western missionaries.

INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the introduction of Evangelical Christianity in Oromia in what is described as 'The Five Major Expeditions' that are the attempts that foreign and indigenous missionaries have done to reach the Oromo people with Evangelical Christianity. Before embarking on the main discussion, it briefly describes the Oromo people, and the introduction of Ethiopian Orthodox Church (here after EOC) and Islam in Oromia.

The Oromo people are the largest ethno-national group in Ethiopia. They belong to the Eastern Cushitic family of Afro-Asiatic phylum. They constitute more than 48 % of the country's population. They speak *Afan Oromo* (Oromo

language) with diversified dialects; *Afan Oromo* is the third widely spoken language in Africa, surpassed only by Hausa and Fulani (Jonko, 2012:3). Oromia is the name of Oromo's country which was incorporated into the modern Ethiopian state in 1890s. It was known as *Orom-Biyyaa* or Oromo's country (Bulcha, 2011). It is the largest regional state in Ethiopia and renders more than half of the resources of the country (Etefa, 2012). The people follow three main religions: Christianity, *Waaqeffannaa* (indigenous religion) and Islam. They developed their own democratic governing system called *Gadaa* system (Melbaa, 1999). It is a huge and complex social institution

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in which the traditional Oromo manage their socio-political and religious practices. It is a social organization of the people; a well-developed age-based grouping upon which the religious, political, economic and social life of the people was formed (Gnamo, 2014).

As Gnamo (2014) states, when Islam and Christianity came to the Oromo people who had been practicing their own indigenous religion, the people had shown both negative and positive responses. Gnamo (2014) pointed out that Islam had contact with Ethiopia since 7th century, and it expanded in the country through gradual process (Gnamo, 2014). In 1527, the great Muslim war under the leadership of Imam Ahmed Ibn Ibrahim al-Ghaz (nicknamed 'Grang') took place in Abyssinian (the modern Ethiopia). The Portuguese and the Oromo people helped the Abyssinia kings to fight against Muslims. However, nonviolent Muslim expansion has continued until today through marriage (Gnamo, 2014). The Oromo had contact with Muslim through trades in Gibe region of Oromia, and many Oromo became Muslims (Bulcha, 2011).

Yohannes IV of Tigray introduced the EOC to Oromia particularly to the Wallo Oromo when he annexed the region at the end of 1880. At the Boru Meda declaration in Wallo in 1887, he gave two choices to the people: to accept Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity and undergo mass baptism or to get massacred in mass. Many accepted the EOC and got baptized only to escape from being massacred. Yet, thousands had refused to accept his religious policy and inhumanely massacred for their indigenous religion and their identity (De Salviac, 2005, 1991). After Yohannes IV, Menelik II continued the mission of *de-Oromization* (destroying Oromo's identity) and *Amharazation* (repressing the Oromo people to accept Amhara identity, culture and language) process on Oromo after Oromia became totally subject to his Empire. He declared and implemented the policy of one culture- Amhara culture, one language- Amharic (Amhara language) and one religion- the EOC. This offended the people so they preferred to accept Islam and became Muslim (Choma, 2001). Similarly, the letter that was written by Cederqvist to the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) indicated that the Oromo people had been facing difficult situations and severe marginalization by Abyssinian Evangelical works.

For instance, the letter in the mission magazine entitled "Missions-Tidning" indicated that, the Abyssinian evangelical Christians who had been working with Onesimos showed hatred towards the Oromo language and culture. They burned many books and documents written or translated into Oromo language by the father of Oromo literature, Onesimos (Hirphoo, 2007). According to Hirphoo (2007), Cederqvist's letter reads as follows; "Those who speak Amharic language consider themselves as masters and the Oromo people as

servants, their wish is that the Oromo people learn the Amharic language whereas they were unwilling to learn the Oromo language. They think that speaking the Oromo language is shameful". " (Hirphoo 2007: 83).

According to Aren (1978), Evangelical Christianity came to Oromia in the 19th century. One of the pioneers of the Evangelical missionary societies in Europe was the Church Missionary Society (CMS), established in 1799 in England. "The CMS was founded and formed with the intention of reaching Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia. The society has sent missionaries such as Samuel Gobat, Karl Isenberg and John Ludwig Krapf to Ethiopia" (Gebissa, 2009: 79). Since Europeans started to learn about the Oromo people at least from the beginning of the second half of fifteenth century (Ta'a, 1986), some missionaries have already been informed about the people. It was Krapf, the missionary sent by the CMS, who first focused his attention on Oromo people. Krapf had read what other Europeans had told Europe about the people and he got the vision that it could be possible to reach other Africans if the Oromo as the large ethnic group was first won over to Christianity. The more he studied about the Oromo people, the more he became interested to reach them. He had a belief that if the western missionaries reach the Oromo people with the Evangelical faith it was easy to reach all Africans via this people.

He (Krapf) first visited Wallo and Showa in the early 1840s. He spent actually only a few years in Showa. He used this time to get in contact with Oromo and to learn their language. He did not only rouse interest for the (Oromo) through his writings. He also started translating portions of the scriptures in to the Oromo language. He even started compiling a small Oromo-English dictionary. Afterwards he became missionary in Kenya, hoping to meet Oromo there too. After his return to Germany due to ill health he continued to remind the Christian in Europe about the great challenge from the (Oromo) people (MYS TEE, 1992: 41).

In response to the call made by CMS, Krapf was the first person who took the initiative of going to Oromo people as a missionary. He also disclosed his interest in Oromo and said,

"The (Oromo) country south of Abyssinia in the Horn of Africa has become so extremely important to me during the past weeks that I believe there is no country more promising than this in Africa" (Aren, 1978: 105-106).

He opened a school of missionary candidates at Hermansburg on Oct. 28 1849. Thereby the German Hermansburg Mission was founded (Aren, 1978: 107). Louis Harms had done his best to reach the Oromo people but his interest was not fulfilled in his lifetime.

Even after the death of Louis Harms, it took more than half a century for Hermansiburg Mission to reach the people (Choma, 2001).

Mainly as a result of contact with British and German devoted Protestants, interest in foreign mission was awakened also in Sweden in the 19th century. Accordingly, the SEM also became interested in sending missionaries to Oromia. When the first Swedish missionaries decided to go to evangelize the Oromo, the political situation in Ethiopian empire was bad for missionaries. Many missionaries were taken into custody under Emperor Tewodros of Abyssinia (Aren, 1978). Nevertheless, Krapf wrote a letter to them insisting that they still could reach the Oromo people South of Abai River from Sudan, by passing the civil war in northern Ethiopia under Tewodros in the 1860s.

Consequently, three missionaries went to Massawa but after their arrival, they were informed that the conditions of Abyssinia under Tewodros were not promising. So they were advised by the vice/consul of France at Massawa to begin missionary work among the Kunama. Following the advice, they started work in Kunama. The missionaries were allowed to stay in Kunama and started work because at that time Kunama was not under Tewodros' control. However, after some time, because of a local war at Kunama, they went to Massawa the place commonly called Imkullu.

In Massawa, the first thing they established was a school. At that time many slaves were transported through the Egyptian controlled port of Massawa. So, the Europeans used to buy the slaves and set them free. Swedish missionaries received some of the boys who were liberated in this way and educated them in the school. Most of the liberated slaves were Oromo, and one of them was Hikaa Awwaajjii- Abbaa Gammachis (means the one who preaches peace or happiness) whose name latter changed to Onesimos when he was baptized by the missionaries on December 31, 1872. Onesimos was the one who translated the Bible into Oromo language in 1899, and he contributed substantially to evangelize his people and give them modern education (Gebissa, 2009).

According to Gebissa (2009), as a result of political circumstances in Abyssinia, travelling to Oromia by any foreigner particularly for a missionary journey was still impossible. However, the SEM's belief was that it was easier to reach the people with the Gospel using indigenous missionaries. Thus, five attempts were made by both foreign and indigenous missionaries to reach Oromia. This is what the study calls the five expeditions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was a qualitative study. The data for the study

were collected from secondary sources like books, theses and articles related to the topic. The major books and theses used in this study were from disciplines of theology and history. After collecting the data, major events that took place in different missionary expeditions were chronologically ordered, analyzed and narrated.

The five major expeditions

The study would chronologically discuss five major expeditions which were undertaken from 1877 to 1898 by foreign and indigenous missionaries to Oromia in order to evangelize the Oromo people.

First expedition (1877 to 1884)

According to Aren, the first attempt to evangelize Oromo was made by Niguse Tashu, who at the age of 40 attended the boy's school at Massawa. Niguse joined a group of Oromo traders and traveled to Jimma to spread the Gospel. It was at the time when Menelik II sent out his army to conquer Oromia in South of Abai River. So, it took him seven years to reach Jimma. After he reached there, he got land from Abba Jifar II the then ruler of the Jimma kingdom (Choma, 2001). Then Tashu was appointed to be a secretary of Abba Jifar and got a chance to preach the Gospel even to the king.

However, he was not successful because the king preferred his Muslim faith. He continued to teach around his new home and also in the slave market at Hirmata in Jimma. He used to buy slaves mainly the Oromo and liberate them. To those he liberated, he gave them refuge and also taught them the Gospel and gave them modern education as well. Choma (2001) stated that Tashu continued his work up to his death. This was the first attempt or the first expedition to reach Oromia.

Second expedition (1881 to 1882)

In the second expedition, five men, two Swedish and three Ethiopians took part. They were Rev. Gustav, F. Arrhenius, Mr. A.W. Palman, Onesimos and his first wife, Mihret Hailu and Filipos. The group traveled to Oromia through Sudan crossing the border and proceeded to what is today the province of Wallaga that is western Oromia. They crossed the desert and went up to the river Abai through Sudan, and reached Famaka, the border town on the coast of Abai (Harms, 1999). The Egyptian officer who was in charge of that border port was not happy to see the missionaries. He advised them to go via Mattama and through Abyssinia. They were near to Sibru (western Wallaga) Oromo on the border of

Beni-Shangul, but the officer discouraged them to cross the border. The group had to turn back and they left Famaka for Kartum. This attempt was not successful because of the misleading advice. The sad thing was that they lost two members in their group, Filipos and Arrehenius on the way because of fever while three of them (Onesimos and his wife, and Palman) also suffered but survived on the way back to Imkullu. Despite of all these challenges, Onesimos and his colleagues did not abandon their original plan to reach the Oromo (Hirphoo, 2007).

Third expedition (1884-1886)

As stated earlier, the attempt through Sudan was not a success. The third expedition was, however, undertaken in 1884 through Shoa. Greiner, the leader of the "Pilgrim Missionaries" wrote a letter to Menelik II and asked him to allow their team to pass through his territory (Hirphoo, 2007). Then, Menelik II promised Greiner that he would send him professional and skilled people who help them travel to Shoa. The group had five members: two Swedish (A. Pahlman and A. Bergman) and three Oromo (Onesimos and his wife Mihiret, Petros Ibsa and another young Oromo). They left for Tajura near Djibouti. From there they planned to proceed to Jimma, they had to wait for three months at Tajura until the big caravan from Shoa arrived with which they could travel. While they were on their journey to Oromia, robbers attacked many traders and killed seven of them and survivors accompanied the missionaries on their route. Since Bergman was a medical doctor, he was treating those who were wounded and continued their journey to their desired destination. When they reached Shoa, Menelik II had discovered that they missionaries were not going to serve the interest of Menelik II but to reach Oromia in order to preach the Good News or the Gospel to the Oromo people and provide them modern education. Consequently, Menelik II refused them to pass through his kingdom and ordered their immediate return to Massawa. But later, he permitted them to stay over the rainy season after he had observed that they were suffering from fever (Aren, 1978). As soon as the rainy season was over, they were expelled from Shoa. Consequently, the third attempt that was planned to reach the Oromo people via Shoa was again not successful (Aren, 1978).

Fourth expedition (1893 to 1895)

After the second and third expedition via Sudan and Shoa have failed respectively, the new plan of the missionaries to reach the Oromia was to enter from the

South, Lamu which is the town on the southern Somalia coast which is now in Kenya (Gebissa, 2009). This expedition had a group of four members set forth on journey: Rev. Karl Cederqvist (the leader of the team), Mr. Nystrom, and Rev. Nils Hylander and his wife. There was also a fourteen year old Oromo boy with them whose name was Estefanos Bonayyaa; he was originally from Lamu, Oromia. Bonayyaa was very clever student who had been educated at Geleb and Imkullu (Hirphoo, 2007).

However, some writers do not consider him as a member of the team and have stated that there were four people in the team. However, Bonayyaa helped the team to reach Lamu his homeland and to connect them with the Oromos in Lamu while the foreign missionaries need information about the political situation if it was possible to proceed their journey to Oromia. Since Bonayyaa had played an essential role to guide the missionaries to reach their desired destination via his homeland and helped the foreign missionaries to integrate with the Oromo community at Lamu to share the Good News and to get information about the political situation, the study would argue that Bonayyaa should be considered as member of the team in the fourth expedition. Hence, one could say, the team comprised of five members, not four. The group realized that it was impossible to penetrate Somali territories to Borana (southern part of Oromia) because the circumstance was not good. Somali Muslims had been weakened by the German government who controlled part of east Africa from Zanzibar to River Tana. As a result, Somali people had been in conflict with the Germans. Consequently, they tried to attack any European in their territory (Hirphoo, 2007). The European missionaries, however, only arrived Lamu in December 1883.

Nystrom had fallen ill and returned to Europe for medical treatment, and the others planned to set forth on a journey to Mombassa in order to take the route through Lake Rudolf and Lake Baringo, and then to enter the province of Kafa via Lake Stefani. However, the plan was terribly long and tiresome to reach Oromia. Consequently, Rev. Cederqvist stayed at Lamu, and Bonayyaa, Hylander and his wife have set forth on the journey to arrive in Harar through Zeila in order to arrive Jimmaa through Hara so that they may accomplish their dream to reach the Oromo people with the Good News; they eventually arrived in Harar in 1895. The governor, Dajazmach Mekonen (the later Ras Mekonen Wolde-Michael), received them on condition that they abstained from preaching and teaching. He also told them that he would present their application to the emperor Menelik II if he would allow them the pass to Jimma. They used this time in Harar to witness to many visitors. However, Menelik II was fighting with Italians during that time. He was not happy either to see the European missionaries in Harar or to let them go to Jimma fearing that the Jimma

Oromo may get weapons from them and fight him. So, he denied them permission to pass through his territory to Jimma and ordered them leave his country. So, they returned to Asmara on November 25 1896 (Aren, 1978).

Fifth expedition (1896 to 1898)

After all the earlier expeditions have failed, the endogenous missionaries set forth the fifth expedition which was the successful attempt to reach Oromia. It was made of five indigenous missionaries. For the time being only indigenous persons who would be able to reach the Oromo. These were: Abba Gebre-Egziabher Kokab-Work, a monk who studied the New Testament in 1881 at Massawa, and Qes Gebre-Ewostatewos Ze-Mikael who was an Orthodox priest from the group of Orthodox reformers in and around Tsezega in Eritrea. Gebre Ewostatewos Ze-Mikael had shown interest in Evangelical faith, and this resulted in his being excommunicated from the Orthodox Church in Eritrea. He joined the Swedish Missionaries in Imkullu where he met Onesimos who taught him *Afan Oromo*. He said, "Even though I am a Habasha, I love the Oromo people; my heart is with them." (Hirphoo, 2007: 50).

In addition to these two individuals, there was a young man named Daniel Dabalaa, who was an Oromo from Horro Guduru in Wallaga, south of Abai, Gumish who was the wife of Gebre-Egzabiher Kokeb-Work, and Tiru who was the wife of Dabalaa (Hirphoo, 2007). They were entrusted with the task of going to Jimma. It took them a long time to reach their desired destination due to war between Italy and Abyssinia. The expedition began on 11 February, 1897 from Asmara and arrived Derita in Begemidir in April, 1897. They reached Yejube in Gojam in May, 1897. Gebre-Ewostatewos and his wife have managed to reach Jimma with Oromo merchants who came from the area. Dabalaa and his wife travelled to Horro Guduru which was his homeland via Abai River hoping to evangelize to his family and his people there. He could not find any of his family members or his clan because they were killed by Abyssinians. He was taken to Gojam and forced by the EOC priests to accept Orthodox Christianity. According to Hirphoo (2007), Dabalaa left his family at Horro Guduru and joined Gebre-Ewostatewos in Jimma.

However, the prospect for evangelism in Jimma Oromo Muslim seemed rather indistinct or dim. Hence, Gebre-Ewostatewos and Daniel decided to try to make a way to Wallaga (western Oromia). Gebre-Ewostatewos went to Nakamte for inquiry. Fitawrari Dibaba, the governor of Boojjii, happened to be at Nakamte and was looking for more priests for his church (EOC) at Boojjii Karkaro in western Wallaga. Gerbe-Ewostatewos was then employed as a priest in the church (the EOC called St.

Mary Church at Karkaro). The governor of Boojjii was interested in the newly employed priests for he could read and preach in *Afan Oromo* (Hirphoo, 2007).

Both of the indigenous ministers: Gebre-Ewostatewos and Dabalaa started a school and started teaching reading. The governor and his wife also learned to read the Bible which encouraged them to listen to the preaching of the Gospel. Fitawrari Dibaba, the ruler of Boojjii believed that education was important for the people. Hence, he decided that they should learn, read and write in their own language, *Afan Oromo*. He ordered people to send their children to school at Boojjii which was opened in 1903 or 1904. The king himself and his wife enrolled and learnt how to read and write in *Afan Oromo* school. The school that opened at Boojjii for Oromo by Oromo was at Najjoo where Onesimos opened the school in 1904 to educate his people (Gebissa, 2009). Onesimos was overwhelmed by the people's desire for education and the potential of his Oromo students to learn, to discuss, and to show respect towards one another (Hirphoo, 2007). He pointed out that the Oromo at Boojjii were interested to learn and to educate their children. His letter to his friends in Eritrea clearly stated that:

"If there were enough space and teachers, hundred could have been enrolled" (Hirphoo, 2007: 69).

Choma mentioned during 1904 that Onesimos and his coworker, Aster Gano Salban, who contributed a lot in the translation of the Bible into *Afan Oromo* and his second wife, Lidiya, reached Boojjii with the translated Bible. In his translation, Onesimos used central concept of *Waaqeffannaa*, Oromo indigenous religion that helped the people to relate the message of the bible to their knowledge of *Waaqeffannaa*. When he reached Boojjii, Onesimos joined the group of missionaries at Boojjii Karkakoo and started to preach Gospel, and also gave modern education to the people (Choma, 2001). As stated earlier, the EOC denied the people not to use their language and not to practice their culture; the Oromo were forced to hear the Gospel in the Geez (the dead Ethiopian language) which they did not understand and in Amharic which only few Oromo understood.

Onesimos and other missionaries from Eritrea came to Boojjii when people were looking for other alternatives for their socio-cultural and religious freedom. These indigenous missionaries started to preach in the language of the people. Even though the priests of EOC and the representatives of the government resisted Onesimos, the Oromo community in the area welcomed him and his family believing that he and his co-workers will liberate them from the marginalization that the EOC has encumbered on their shoulders. People preferred to follow the Evangelical Christianity and abandoned the

EOC (Aren, 1978). In Nakamte, the priests of the EOC had been accusing Onesimos for preaching the Gospel and teaching the Oromo people reading and writing their language, *Afan Oromo* saying that it was "*Tsere Mariyam*" which means enemy of St. Mary. The priests of the EOC in Bojjii also persecuted Onesimos and his coworkers (Hirphoo, 2007). Emmanuel Abraham, who served as the president of the EECMY in 1980s, described this sad story of the EOC as:

The evangelicals Christians organized themselves into congregations, established their own churches, constructed their own Church buildings, trained and assigned persons to serve as pastors and made available to their believers the spiritual ministry denied them by the (Ethiopian) Orthodox Church. They proceeded to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to millions of their fellow Ethiopians who had never heard it. The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus instituted in the firm belief that to discharge this duty was acting in obedience to the divine commission given to his followers by the Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ (Abraham, 1995: 251).

The Evangelical missionaries used *Afan Oromo*, the vernacular language, to communicate the Christian faith and used the central concept of *Waaqeeffannaa* in order to convey the relevant meaning. As Gebissa asserted, this helped the people to understand the preaching of missionaries and people started to develop belongingness in Evangelical faith.

Hence, Bojjii became the birthplace of the EECMY (Gebissa, 2009). Accordingly, EECMY was founded in 1959 with 20,000 members and four synods. Today, this church has more than 5,000,000 members in Ethiopia where the Oromo constitute almost half of it. The EECMY has great contribution in preserving the Oromo language and that of other ethno-nationals in Ethiopia. There are also other evangelical churches in Ethiopia. For instance, Muluwengel (Full Gospel) and Meserete Kirstos (Christ based Church) and others (Gerbi, 2015).

Generally, in all the five expeditions mentioned, the indigenous missionaries played essential roles. In the first expedition, Tashu used to buy slaves and liberated them; and he gave them refuge and preached the Good News among them in Jimma. However, his mission work did not take root in Jimma. In the second and the third expeditions, the Swedish missionaries played significant roles together with indigenous missionaries like Onesimos (Hikaa Awajjii), the father of Oromo literature though it failed due to the Abyssinian's prohibition not to let the missionaries reach the Oromo people with Good News and modern education. The fourth attempt was set forth by both foreign and indigenous missionaries in order to reach Oromia via Lamu which was situated in the island of Somalia and failed because of German's and

Somalia's conflict. The last expedition was successfully accomplished by Eritrea and indigenous missionaries.

In summary, through all the expeditions the Abyssinian Kings and the priests of the EOC had been hindering the Good News and Modern education not to reach the Oromo people. However, both indigenous and foreign missionaries believed that Good News and education are the two vital forces that de-colonize the people, and they were determined to reach the Oromo people and they finally succeeded.

CONCLUSION

The study discussed the introduction of Evangelical Christianity in Oromia in five major expedition attempts made by foreign and local missionaries. The Western missionaries presumed the Oromo as the center of the African continent. So, they paid great sacrifice to reach them. Despite the huge problems they faced, both foreign and indigenous Evangelical missionaries strived so much to reach the Oromo people with the Gospel. The Gospel torch that was kindled in Bojjii at a place called Karkaroo radiated in various directions in Wallaga, in other parties of Oromia and in Ethiopia as a whole. The coming into existence and the development of the EECMY is the result of this Gospel torch.

The five major expeditions that reached the Oromo people were different from other missionary experiences in some African countries. For instance, many Western missionaries who came to other African countries misused the Bible to subdue African people for European colonizers (Bosch, 1991). They reached the area they needed to annex by themselves and for themselves, and used the Bible as a tool to make the indigenous people subject to the exploiters. They undermined the people's language and culture (Baur, 2009). In the case of the five expeditions made to Oromia, the foreign missionaries have had strong attachment with the indigenous missionaries especially with those they have liberated from slavery and educated. They also learnt the language of the people they aimed to reach, they set forth the journey and joined forces with the indigenous people to reach Oromia.

Conflict of interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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