University of Kent

The Development of Oromo Writing System

A Thesis

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Abstract

The development and use of languages for official, education, religion, etc. purposes have been a major political issue in many developing multilingual countries. A number of these countries, including China and India, have recognised the issues and developed language policies that have provided some ethnic groups with the right to develop their languages and cultures by using writing systems based on scripts suitable for these purposes. On the other hand, other countries, such as Ethiopia (a multilingual African state) had, for a long time, preferred a policy of one language and one script in the belief that this would help the assimilation of various ethnic groups create a homogenous population with one language and culture. Rather than realizing that aim, the policy became a significant source of conflict and demands for political independence among disfavoured groups.

This thesis addresses the development of a writing system for Oromo, a language spoken by approximately 40 percent of the total population of Ethiopia, which remained officially unwritten until the early 1990s. It begins by reviewing the early history of Oromo writing and discusses the Ethiopian language policies, analysing materials written in various scripts and certain writers starting from the 19th century. The adoption of Roman script for Oromo writing and the debates that followed are explored, with an

examination of some phonological aspects of the Oromo language and the

implications of representing them using the Roman alphabet.

This thesis argues that the Oromo language has thrived during the past few

years having implemented a Roman-based alphabetical script. There have

been and continue to be, however, internal and external challenges

confronting the development of the Oromo writing system which need to be

carefully considered and addressed by stakeholders, primarily by the Oromo

people and the Ethiopian government, in order for the Oromo language to

establish itself as a fully codified language in the modern nation-state.

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Some abbreviation used in the thesis

E.C.   The Ethiopian calendar (EC) is based on the Julian calendar and lags "seven" years behind the western calendar between September 11th (12th in leap year) to January 1st; or "eight" years behind between January 1st to September 11th (12th in leap year) in western calendar. The Ethiopian calendar has 12 months of 30 days and a short month of 5 or 6 days, depending whether it's a leap year. In this thesis all years are written in western calendar unless they are indicated otherwise.

EPRDF   Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front

IPA   International Phonetic Alphabet

OLF   Oromo Liberation Front

SNNPR   Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region

TGE   Transitional Government of Ethiopia

TPLF   Tigrai Liberation Front

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Chapter I

1. Introduction

The Oromo proverb: *worqeen harkaa qaban sibiila* (a piece of gold seems like a piece of iron to its owner) indicates how human beings often take familiar things for granted and fail to appreciate the value of the precious items they own. For example, writing, which is such an integral part of the way modern society functions, is rarely taken seriously or widely discussed as to its origins and development by the wider community that uses it. People do not often stop to think about how human beings came to have the skill of graphically representing speech on a material. We rarely concern ourselves with the question of what would have happened to society if there had been no writing. Or how disadvantaged those are whose languages are not written. How are these people affected by the lack of a writing system? Do they have the right to write their own language? These and similar questions relevant to writing are not often asked even though the ability to read and write ("literacy") has long been a concern for many countries throughout world.

Writing can easily be taken as part and parcel of human existence, especially in the developed world where it has been in operation for centuries and where the literacy rate is very high. It is customary nowadays for every child

born in modern society to be taught to read and write from an early age. It is almost universally assumed that every person needs to read and write in order to live in their society. Contrary to this expectation for every person in the developed world, the acquisition of writing is not part of the way of life for many people or societies in the developing world. Indeed, there are many in the world today who do not possess the skills of reading or writing. Moreover, there are a number of languages in different parts of the world that remain unwritten and which do not have a system of writing.

The implications for people who do not have the skills of reading or writing, or who have no written language at all, are not difficult to imagine. Put simply, one who cannot read or write is often excluded from the benefits associated with being literate - for example, one cannot record his ideas, read written information or receive a school education. People who cannot read and write are disadvantaged politically, socially and economically compared to those who are literate and able to apply their knowledge for specific purposes. Similarly, people who have no option but to learn reading and writing in a second language because their first language is not written are in most cases disadvantaged when they compete for a job or promotion as they are unlikely to be as fluent as those for whom the written language is their first language.

This may result in discrimination and creates political tension, thus, leading to conflict. The political turmoil and conflicts in Ethiopia (which have been on-going for decades) are believed by many to have partly resulted from the language policies of different regimes, which were based on the promotion of one language and the repression of others in order to establish a linguistically homogenous country.

In practical terms, it is understandable that in a country like Ethiopia, where resources are limited and the number of languages spoken is large, it would be difficult to develop systems of writing for each language and enable the people to read and write in their first language, or to promote each and every spoken language to be used in offices or schools. However, in order to achieve harmony, equality, and understanding between the people it is imperative that the problems are recognized, openly discussed, and useful lessons learnt from the experiences of countries such as India, which accommodate regional and local languages as national and official languages without disintegration. Imposition of the will of the ruling group upon its population and denying people the opportunity to use their own language in writing (as has long been the case in Ethiopia) has not proved to be the best way forward for a peaceful co-existence amongst people. This has now been recognized in the country's constitution, which provides for all people to have the right to develop their own languages.

One of the languages that has benefited from the recognition of the people's rights to develop their languages is Oromo, which had remained without an officially accepted system of writing until 1991. The research presented here is concerned with the development of a writing system for this important language, which is predominantly spoken in the Horn of Africa in Ethiopia. Oromo is believed to be spoken by approximately 40 per cent of the population of Ethiopia, but it has been neglected for many years and consequently remained unwritten until recently. The economic, social and political implications of making it a mandatory requirement for people to use a second language (Amharic) rather than their first language in Ethiopia have not been investigated although it is widely believed that most people find it easier to learn in their first language rather than in a second. Nevertheless it has been an open Ethiopian policy to discourage Oromo from being used in public institutions (such as schools or churches) and for the speakers of that language to use Amharic, the preferred language of the Ethiopian rulers. Inevitably, this, coupled with prevailing oppressive political, cultural and economic situations, has caused resentment amongst some Oromo people who felt it necessary to rebel against successive regimes and play a part in the downfall of the *Derg*[1] in 1991 in order to allow the development of` their own language and culture. Although the issue of writing Oromo in the Ge'ez script was not a primary concern, the formation of the OLF resulted in a new

[1] A military government which ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991

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chapter in the development of the Oromo language involving the choice of a new script and system of writing. However, instead of being a part of a lasting solution to the conflicts that existed, this development itself has created more challenges which still need to be resolved. On the one hand, the choice of a new script (the Roman Alphabet) for Oromo in a country where the existing Ge'ez syllabary had been in use for centuries has resulted in anger on the part of those people who believed in the unity of Ethiopians via the use of a single script.

On the other hand, there is a group of people who feel that it is *their* right to make the decision about which script to use and they oppose the use of the Ge'ez script for Oromo writing. The reason given by this group is multifaceted and is examined critically in this thesis. However, it is probably true to ascertain that a script, besides being a tool for writing, can also be a means of expressing a national, regional or ethnic identity and culture as well as a source of political pride. This means that, if imposed, a script can be resisted in the belief that it is a symbol of political, social and economic oppression and exploitation.

Even though Oromo is known to have been written unofficially for many decades before the adoption of its writing system in 1991, there were no officially approved or commissioned discussions in Ethiopia on how or why it

should be written. Neither were there any discussions in Ethiopia as to the positive or negative outcomes of promoting an unwritten language to written status and using it in offices, education, the judiciary and other day-to-day activities alongside other languages that might use the same or a different script. Moreover, there have been no detailed studies of the history of Oromo writing, nor of the possible challenges faced by the people engaged in writing it in various scripts since the nineteenth century. This thesis aims to address this discrepancy by discussing the development of Oromo writing, in considering the following main questions:

- What is the historical background of Oromo writing?

- In which other scripts has Oromo been written? Is the Roman alphabet the right choice and a suitable script for Oromo writing?

- Who should decide which script to use for writing Oromo?

- Should a script other than the Ethiopic (Ge'ez) be used to write other languages in Ethiopia? And are there possible consequences of using different scripts for writing different languages side-by-side in Ethiopia?

- What are the possible challenges and prospects of the Oromo writing system based on the Roman Alphabet?

In discussing and analyzing these issues, this thesis makes reference to the available relevant literature, and the writer has interviewed Mr Taha Abdi in

London, UK, on 19 February 2005, and carried out a phonological study of the Oromo language.

The thesis is divided into ten chapters. The second chapter presents the contextual background by discussing the Oromo people and their language. It describes the social and linguistic contexts, including the geo-political conditions and the dialects of Oromo language, which can both affect and be affected by the writing system.

Chapter Three examines the historical background to early Oromo writing and considers the individuals who wrote in Oromo beginning in the nineteenth century and by looking at the ways they represented the various phonological aspects of the language in writing. It also discusses reforms and adaptations of scripts and looks at the linguistic and non-linguistic issues that need to be taken into account when adopting a script for writing a language. The non-Roman scripts, in which Oromo has been unofficially written, are discussed in Chapter Four. These included the Arabic script, the Shaykh Bakri Sapalo script and the Ethiopic (Ge'ez) script. These are all examined in terms of the extent to which each of them was a viable script for Oromo writing system.

The language policies of different Ethiopian regimes and their implications for the Oromo language and its writing system are analyzed in Chapter Five. Chapter Six examines the recent history of the Oromo writing system and looks at the sporadic - but nevertheless crucial - work recently undertaken by Oromo nationals such as Haile Fida and Tilahun Gamta. This chapter also briefly discusses the works of many other Oromo writers who wrote on different subjects in the Ge'ez script during the Haile Sellassie and *Derg* regimes, when writing in Oromo in any script was not encouraged in Ethiopia.

The adoption of a Roman script for Oromo writing in Ethiopia has brought about a contention regarding the choice of script in that country. The debate on which script Oromo's writing system should be based - a 'foreign' script (Roman Alphabet) or a 'home-grown' one (Ge'ez script) - is critically analyzed in Chapter Seven.

Chapter Eight discusses the adoption of the current Oromo writing system (*Qubee)*, which is based on the Roman Alphabet. It examines how the graphemes have been used to represent the sound system in writing. Other aspects of writing, such as the use of punctuation marks and word divisions in the Oromo writing system are also discussed within this chapter. Chapter Nine assesses the modernization of Oromo vocabulary since the adoption of

the new writing system and the changes in its status from a vernacular to official language in Oromia in 1991. It describes how the vocabulary has been modernized and how the language has come to be used for education, litigation, business as well as for official purposes. The last chapter concludes the thesis by analyzing some possible challenges and prospects of the development of the Oromo writing system and suggests further some recommendations.

Chapter II

2. The Oromo people and their language

2.1. The Oromo people

Oromo are probably one of the most misrepresented people in Ethiopia with their origin, name, population size and contribution to the civilization of the country being subjected to much debate. In order to establish a better understanding of the Oromo, it is helpful to discuss briefly first how they have been misrepresented.

As early as the mid 19th Century, Ludwig Krapf, a German missionary who visited the Horn of Africa for the purpose of converting the people to Christianity, argued the term "morma" (coined by a French gentleman to refer to the (Oromo) people) was wrong, as the people called themselves "Orma" and not "morma". Information about the people is further complicated by Krapf's reference to the country where the Oromo people lived as "Ormania" (Krapf, 1850). In this way, the name of the people and the location where they lived was misrepresented in writing even though this misrepresentation gained little publicity due to the fact that Krapf's book was not widely circulated and read.

Indeed, the confusion to the name of the Oromo people continued unabated even after Krapf's description. Almost all pre-1970's literature on the Oromo people refers to them as "Galla", a name that is derogatory and offensive to them, and which the people themselves detested. Instead the Oromo people have referred to themselves as "Oromo" ([oromo:][2]) and called their language *Afaan* Oromo (Oromo language). Non-Oromos in the Ethiopian Empire who referred to the people as Galla added the Amharic suffix [-ɲa], pronounced as "ña" (like in mañana, tomorrow in Spanish) and written with the symbols " -gna", to call the language as 'Galligna' and more recently as 'Oromigna'.

The misrepresentation of the Oromo people was not limited to the changing of their name to 'Galla'. It was also extended to the discussion of their origin and of their contributions to the so-called Ethiopian civilization as described by a British linguist, Edward Ullendorff. His comment, which indicated his bias against the Oromo people (Ullendorff, 1965:76), read: "The Gallas had nothing to contribute to the civilization of Ethiopia; they possessed no material or intellectual culture, and their social organization was at a far lower stage of development than that of the population among whom they settled." This comment by Ullendorff suggests that he was either racist or ignorant of the Oromo *Gada* way of life (see, for example, Asmerom Legesse,

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[2] From here on all words or symbols in square brackets ([ ]) indicate phonetic transcriptions.

1973, 2000). Gada is a complex system developed and practised by the Oromo people for centuries in regard to their social, political, legal, religious, and other aspects of life. It embodies democratic principles in which officials are elected to serve for a period of time, in this case for eight years. Then how Ullendorff says the Oromo have not contributed to Ethiopian civilization is hard to believe because, surely, the democratic way of life, which the Oromo are known for, is part and parcel of a civilization. In fact what is interesting here is not the question of Oromo's contribution to the so called Ethiopian civilization but the question of how the Oromo managed to practise *Gada* when they did not have a system of writing. This may appear implausible, for example to early Europeans, but it has been possible for people to live successful and complex lives without having an established writing system. However, the fact that Oromo have not had an officially recognised system of writing until recently can arguably be taken as the reason why their origin and their contribution to Ethiopian civilization have not been correctly represented. Alexander Bulatovich (2000: 68) explains about the *gada* and notes, "the peaceful free way of life, which could have become the ideal for philosophers and writers of the eighteenth century, if they had known it, was completely changed. Their peaceful way of life is broken; freedom is lost; and the independent, freedom loving 'Oromos' find themselves under the severe authority of the Abyssinian conquerors".

Representing the Oromo people in a negative way and ignoring their culture and history as if they had not existed had been the common practice of almost every writer on Ethiopia up until 1974, when a military group, the *Derg,* came to power in a revolution with the aim of implementing a socialist system of government. Indeed, it was hard to find any author in the literature on Ethiopia before 1974 who had questioned the validity of Ullendorff's claim that the Oromo "had nothing to contribute to the civilization of Ethiopia" to see if this assertion was based on any kind of historical or scientific evidence and analysis. In fact, a number of Ethiopian scholars re-inforced this negative attitude about the Oromo people by making unsubstantiated comments. For example, Mesfin Woldemariam, a renowned Ethiopian scholar, made a similar negative comment about the Oromo people when he said: "If the Amharas in Gojjam and Dembia and the Tigrians did not confront them (the Oromos) with sufficient strength and stop them, the Gallas like a flooding river, would have spilled over Egypt" (cited in Asmerom Legesse, 2000:5). Mesfin Woldemariam's analogy of a flooding river to the Oromo people (which is based on possibly hearsay rather than scientific or historical evidence) can only depict his fear of the strength of the Oromo people.

In another source, Patrick Gilkes (1994:2) states that: "In the 16th century the Oromo overran much of the highland areas of the Amhara and the Tigrayan peoples". Such statements were made to convince readers that the Oromo

came to central and north Ethiopia in the 16th century and had nothing to do with civilization of the country. While such negative opinions about the Oromo by Amhara-Tigrayan and Ethiopianist writers are prevalent, what is missing in the currently available literature on Ethiopian politics, history, geography, anthropology and linguistics, is a true and detailed discussion of how and when the Amharas and all the other peoples in the Ethiopian Empire arrived in the regions they currently inhabit and what contributions they actually made to the development of their civilization and culture. However, recently a few Oromo scholars have refuted such wrong assumptions about the Oromo (see Melba 1988; Hassen, 1990; Holcomb and Ibsa 1990; Jalata, 1993).

Nevertheless, documents that suggest a different point of view to that of Ethiopianist scholars about the origin and time of arrival of Oromo in Ethiopia are rare and sporadic. Margery Perham (1947:10), for example, states that the Oromo are one of the earliest peoples to have lived in the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, she goes on to say that the Oromo "are a very ancient race, the indigenous stock, perhaps, on which most other peoples in this part of eastern Africa (the Horn of Africa), had been grafted". Perham also indirectly challenges the Abyssinian misconception that they were the original inhabitants of the region by saying that "The emigrant Semites landed in a continent of which the north-eastern part appears to have been

inhabited…" She asserts that various peoples frequently classified as Cushitic,

included Oromos Somalis, Danakils, and Kaffas, inhabited the area before the

Abyssinians. Perham's views are supported by Albertine Gaur (1987:100) who

states that the "indigenous language of Ethiopia (or Abyssinia, as it is often

called) was non-Semitic, belonging to the Cushitic group of languages".

Mohammed Hassen (1994) is one of the Oromo scholars who have refuted the

general misconception in Ethiopia that claims that the Oromo were immigrant

invaders who moved into a country today called Ethiopia at the beginning of

the sixteenth century. Although he does not provide specific evidence for

rejecting this notion, he presents his argument by making reference to the

previous works of Bates (1979), Haberland (1963), and his own PhD thesis

(1983). Mohammed Hassen (1994: xii-xiii) writes:

> … here it would suffice to say that the
> historical wisdom that was accepted for a
> long time and which claims that the Oromo
> arrived in the Christian kingdom only in
> the sixteenth century is incorrect for the
> following three reasons among others. First,
> it is incorrect because it is based on an
> inaccurate historical premise, which seeks
> to establish the origin of the Oromo as
> outside the present boundaries of Ethiopia
> thus making them "newcomers" to the
> country.

Mohammed Hassen (ibid) further refuted the claim that the Oromo arrived in the Ethiopia region in the sixteenth century and states that the premise is based on the assumption that all Oromo were nomads before and during the sixteenth-century. He argued that the premise was wrong because it stipulated that all the Oromo people lived in one place before their sixteenth-century migration. Mohammed Hassen (1994:xiii) emphasized that: "In reality, a group of pastoral Oromo lived in what is today the administrative region of Sidamo, while others lived in what is now the administrative region of Bale".

In a workshop[3] that was organized in London on 4th July 2009, Professor Mekuria Bulcha of Malardalen University, Sweden, presented a paper under the title: "The Militarization of the Gadaa Institution in the 16th & 17th Centuries: Critical Reflections on the Historical Location of the Centre of Oromo Expansion and Direction of their Movement". This presentation was detailed and provided evidenced account of the Oromo people in Ethiopia. The contents presented at this workshop by Professor Mekuria Bulcha were expanded and included in his latest book (Mekuria Bulcha, 2011). In his presentation at the workshop and in his book, Professor Bulcha rejects the

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[3] This was the 3rd workshop organised by some Oromo individuals at City University, London, under the title of "London International Oromo Culture and History Workshop – 4th July 2009".The proceedings from the workshop are not available but the information is included in his recent book (Mekuria Bulcha, 2011).

assertion that the Oromo people migrated to the area they presently inhabit beginning in the 16th Century. By triangulating information he collected through various sources and methods (such as analyising names of places, and conflict episodes), Mekuria Bulcha argued that there is no doubt Oromo were living in the Southern Plateau or Shawa (Central Ethiopia) during the medieval period.

Another interesting analysis concerning the origin and time of arrival of the Oromo in the Horn of Africa is proposed in Ulrich Braukämper (1986). In this article Braukämper concludes that the country of origin of the Oromo people included Walabu, Mormor and Liban, all in the southern part of Ethiopia, and he goes on to say that there is no solid basis for the argument that the Oromo came from outside of Africa. All of these analyses and works indicate that the Oromo did not come into the Ethiopian Empire but have lived and moved from place to place within the region.

Described as Cushitic, the Oromo people today inhabit an area that extends from the highlands of Ethiopia in the north, to northern Kenya in the south,

and from Ogaden and Somalia in the east, to the Sudan in the west (see

Appendix I)[4].

Reliable censuses are difficult to come by in Ethiopia, but it is widely believed

that the Oromo people form the majority group among the seventy or so

ethnonational groups that live in the Ethiopian state. Estimates of the exact

number of the Oromo people, however, vary greatly. A number of writers (for

example, Christopher Clapham (1969), Mohammed Hassen (1986), Gada

Melba (1988), and Holcomb and Sisai Ibsa (1990)) argue that the Oromo

people constitute at least fifty per cent of the Ethiopian population. A study

by Feyissa Demie (1996) indicates that the Oromo people accounted for over

50 per cent of Ethiopia's total population of 54 million. Asafa Jalata (1993:12)

believes that for political reasons, the Ethiopian rulers do not want the actual

number of the Oromo population to be known; however, he claims that the

Oromo are the largest ethnonational group in the Ethiopian Empire and the

Horn of Africa.

A World Bank Study (2005:3) estimated the population of Ethiopia to be 67

million in 2002, of which the two largest are Oromo and the Amhara

comprising 40 and 30 percent respectively. A population census undertaken

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[4] However, this remains a politically contentious issue with the boundaries around the land in which the Oromo live being depicted by official Government figures as a much smaller area (see Appendix II).

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by the Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia (CSAE) in 2007, and released

through its own website - *http://www.csa.gov.et/* - declared that the Ethiopian

population was a staggering 74 million with a projected annual growth rate of

2.6 million people. This estimate of the total population of the country seems

to be conservative when compared to *The Economist Pocket World in Figures*

(2009), which indicates that the population of Ethiopia in 2006 was actually

over 79 million. What is interesting in the latest 2007 population census of

Ethiopia is that the number of the Oromo people is said to be only 25.5

million, which equates to approximately 34.5 percent of the total population

of the country. This latest census and all the other figures given above by

various people are not consistent with each other and, as a result, are likely to

be unreliable even though they all demonstrate that the Oromo are by far the

largest ethnonational group in terms of population numbers in Ethiopia.

Gada Melba (1988) claims that the Oromo people in Ethiopia live in all

regions except the Gondar region as defined during the *Derg*. He further

asserts that they also make up a large proportion of the population of the

regions, which have been known as Illu Ababor, Arsi, Baale, Shawa, Sidamo

and Kafa. The land, which is inhabited predominantly by the Oromo, is now

officially known as the Oromia region.

The Oromo also live in Kenya where they are named according to their extended clan families: Borana, Orma, Gabra, Sakuye, Ajuraan, Munyo, and Waata (Stroomer, 1995). The Oromo in Kenya are estimated to be around 200,000 and they live in three provinces, namely, the Eastern Province, the Northern Province and the Tana River District of the Coast Province.

In Ethiopia, about 88% of the Oromo people live in rural areas and only 12% live in urban areas or towns of about 2,000 inhabitants or more (Feyissa Demie, ibid). The Oromo are primarily farmers and pastoralists. Their land is usually fertile and they grow different types of grains such as wheat, barley, maize, *tef* or (*taafii*), sorghum, beans, and lentils and in many areas cash crops such as coffee and *chat* (a stimulant shrub). They are also known as cattle herders (Huntingford, 1955), and keep cows, sheep, goats, donkeys, mules, horses, camels, and chicken. Minerals such as gold, silver, iron, etc. are said to be abundant in various regions of Oromia (Gada Melba 1988).

Oromia encompasses a number of major and minor rivers such as the Blue Nile, the Awash, Gannalle, Wabee, Gibe, Baroo, Dhidhesa rivers, and many others. Lakes such as Qoqaa, Abbaya, Bishoftu, and Langano are also found in Oromia. A wide variety of bushes, trees, and wild animals are abundantly found all over the Oromo land.

In conclusion, the Oromo are an indigenous African people who, despite over

a century-long suppression of their culture and of their *Gada* democracy

(Asmerom Legesse, 1973; 2000), have kept their identity. Influenced by the

proximity of and exposure to various foreign groups, some of the Oromo

people today are of the Christian faith while a substantial number are

Muslims. Yet, there are also a great number of the Oromo people who practise

the Oromo indigenous religion known as *Waqeeffata.* This religion was

associated with the *Gada* system and, as the Oromo word [wa:k'a] (God)

indicates, it simply means believing in God. Having discussed the Oromo

people and the geographical areas where they inhabit, it is appropriate to

examine their language, Oromo, in the following section.

2.2. The Oromo language

Afaan Oromo (literally Oromo mouth) or the Oromo language, belongs to the

Cushitic branch of Afroasiatic language phylum (see Figure 1, languages of

Africa), which is reckoned to be divided into six major branches or families

(Hayward, 2000:75). The Cushitic branch itself is divided into a further four

groups of North, Central, South and East and *Afaan* Oromo is one of the

languages of Lowland groups within the East Cushitic group (Figure 1).

According to Gene Gragg (1982), *Afaan* Oromo is probably the third-most

widely spoken Afroasiatic language in the world, after Arabic and Hausa. In

Ethiopia, *Afaan* Oromo is used as a lingua franca and as a day–to-day means of communication by a great many people of various ethnonational groups other than its native speakers (Bulcha, 1993).

Detailed comparative phonological, morphological and lexical studies of the dialects of Oromo have not been available and are interesting areas for future investigation. The existence of a detailed study or knowledge on the degree of the differences between the Oromo dialects would be beneficial for the development and standardization of the writing system. Nevertheless, brief, but useful accounts on the divisions within the Oromo language have been made at different times by some scholars. For example, B.W. Andrzejewski (1957) explains that the Oromo language in Ethiopia has many divisions, though it is not clear just how many of these divisions really are differences in speech and how many of them are simply geographical. B. W. Andrzejewski (ibid) does not say whether these divisions in any way hinder communication between the speakers.

Much earlier on, Enrico Cerulli (1922) divided the Oromo language into three major dialects: Macha, Tulama, and the Eastern Oromo. Bender, et al. (1976)

have, however, divided Oromo into five major dialects, namely, (1) Macha[5] (western); (2) Tulama (central); (3) Wollo, Raya (both northern); (4) Eastern; and (5) Arsi, Guji, and Boran (the last three southern). Gragg (1976) stresses our current ignorance in the area of dialect differentiation of Oromo, but he notes that Oromo dialects fall into three large groups: Western (including Wallaga), Eastern (especially Harar) and Southern (e.g. Borana), with a large transitional area in the centre (Shawa). Gragg (1976:173) lists features that he believes distinguish northern dialects from southern ones:

> 1) a simplification of the system; 2) replacement of a grammatical by a natural gender system; 3) simplification of noun plural marking system; 4) disappearance of feminine ("t") series in the demonstratives (no tana "this" as opposed to "kana") and possessive pronouns (no -tee "your", -teenna "our", etc. as opposed to -kee, -kenna).

It would be supportive of this to point out that features 2), 3) and 4) are still used in Southern dialects. Both Stroomer (1987) and Andrzejewski (1957) describe the 'fuller' systems of the Southern Oromo varieties. Andrzejewski (1957) presents Borana forms, and also his 1966 paper in *Africa* 30, pp62 - 75,

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[5] Macha is also written as *Matcha* or *Macca* dialect, of which the present writer is a native speaker.

and also pp88-98 in *Proceedings of the Third International Congress of Ethiopian Studies.* Andrzejewski's comments on tone in *The Proceedings of the Third Congress* are greatly expanded by Owens (1980).in African *Language Studies* 17, pp141 -196. Gemetchu Megerssa and Hayward show how simplified this tonal system has become in Western Oromo (see pp21 – 36 in Hayward and Lewis (eds.) 1996).

In any case, as one travels from one Oromo location to another, one can clearly observes variations in some words and in pronunciation and lexicon. A good example of work looking at the differences in the lexis of some Oromo dialects is the compilation *English-Oromo Vocabulary* by Yon Leus (1992), which presents some 7,700 English words with their approximations in the Macha (Western), Guji and the Borana (Southern) dialects. The definitions of the following English words (Table 1) taken from Yon Leus (1992) demonstrate that one Oromo dialect is not so much different from the other.

For example, "land" in (fatherland) below is given as "biyya" in Macha and Guji dialects, and "lafa" in Borana dialect. "lafa" also means (land) in all Oromo dialects thus preventing a chance of misunderstanding by various dialect users[6].

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[6] All transcriptions throughout this thesis are in Qubee unless otherwise indicated. For further discussion of the Qubee writing system see Chapter IX.

Figure 1 The Afro-asiatic language family

```
                              ┌──────────────┐
                              │  Afroasiatic │
                              └──────────────┘
        ┌──────┬──────┬──────────┬───────────┬──────────┐
   ┌────────┐┌────────┐┌──────────┐┌────────┐┌──────────┐┌────────┐
   │ Chadic ││ Berber ││ Egyptian ││ Semeti ││ Cushitic ││ Omotic │
   └────────┘└────────┘└──────────┘└────────┘└──────────┘└────────┘
                              ┌──────┬──────┐   ┌──────┬──────┐
                         ┌────────┬─────────┐┌────────┬────────┐
                         │ North  │ Central ││ South  │  East  │
                         └────────┴─────────┘└────────┴────────┘
                              ┌──────┬──────────┬──────┐
                         ┌──────────┐┌──────────┐┌─────────┐
                         │ Highland ││ Werizoid ││ Lowland │
                         └──────────┘└──────────┘└─────────┘
```

┌────────┐   ┌───────────┐   ┌──────────┐   ┌────────┐   ┌────────┐
│ Somali │   │ Saho Afar │   │ Arbore   │   │ Burji │   │ Oromo │
└────────┘   └───────────┘   │ Dasenech │   │ Deleba │   └────────┘
┌────────┐   └──────────┘   └────────┘
│ Boni │   ┌──────────┐
└────────┘   │ Rendille │
                             └──────────┘

┌─────────┐┌──────────┐┌──────────┐┌─────────┐┌─────────┐
│ Eastern ││ Southern ││ Northern ││ Central ││ Western │
└─────────┘└──────────┘└──────────┘└─────────┘└─────────┘
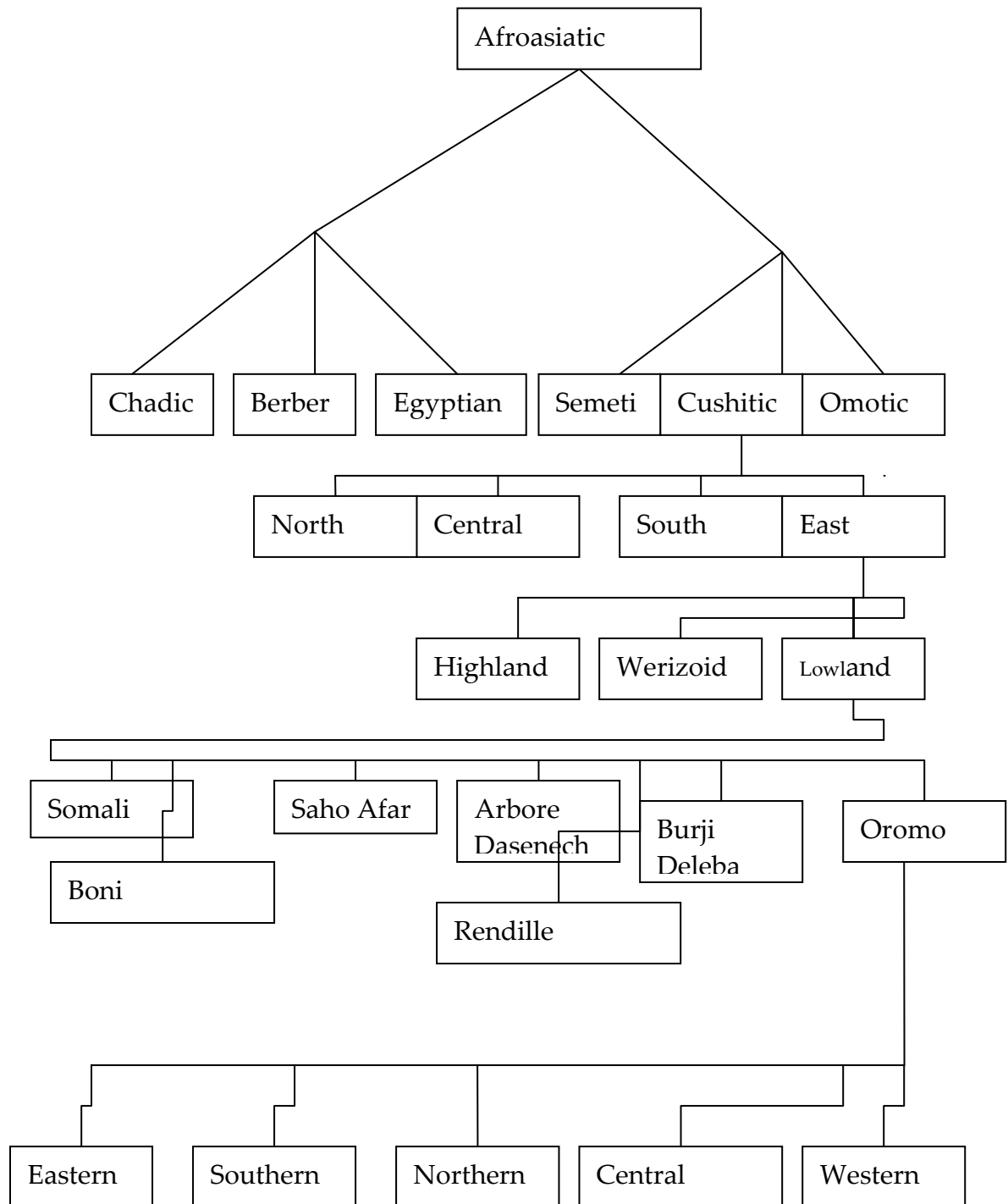
Source: My own diagram based on the information compiled by Hayward, 2000, pp74-81 and Bender, et al. 1976

Table 1. Examples of Oromo dialects with minor word variations

English	Macha	Guji	Borana
fatherland (n)	biyya abba ofi	biyya abbaa	lafa ufi
fear (n)	soda, shakki	sodaa	sodaa, naasu, giddi
lie	soba, kijiba, dhara	soba, kijiba	dhara, soba
middle	giddu, walaka	jiddu, wodakka	Jiddu, wadaka
honey	damma, nadhi	damma	damma
sheep	hoolaa	hoole	hoola
milk	annan	aanan	anani

Source: Collated by the author based on Yon Leus (1992)

There are a few cases, however, when some items or concepts in various

Oromo dialects have unrelated words (Table 2).

Table 2. Examples of Oromo dialects with major word variation

English	Macha	Borana	Tullama
egg	hanqaaquu	kille	bupha
married man	subo	goomara	nama dubra fudhe
porridge	marqaa, mooqa	bulluqa	uji
tent	dunkaana	lukkassa, daase	waro
chicken	Handanqo	lukku	lukku

Source: Compiled by the author

Despite these occurrences of word variations and some differences in

pronunciation, it needs to be underlined that all Oromo varieties are mutually

intelligible, and all Oromo people understand one another without great

difficulty. There is a general misconception in Ethiopia that the Oromo language spoken by different Oromo people from different localities is unrelated. This is a misconception because there is no evidence to support that the varieties of Oromo spoken in different areas are not related. Contrary to this assertion, the Oromo language has become a bond and a symbol of unity for the Oromo and has continued to survive and thrive as one language without having an unqualified institutional and government support, for the Ethiopian governments, especially those of the Haile Sellasie and the *Derg* regimes, have tried to suppress *Afaan* Oromo and replace it with the Amharic language (see Chapter V). It was due to the Oromo national struggle (Mekuria Bulcha, 1993:15) that it has been allowed to write and teach in the Oromo language since 1991; and it is likely to continue to thrive, even without adequate support from the government, as long as the people have the desire and will to use it in writing.

Undoubtedly, there are variations in the Oromo language as there are variations in any other language, including, for example, English, which has been written for centuries and has been used widely in the media of radio, television and the press, all of which can help to standardise or reduce variations in pronunciation or vocabulary. In Ethiopia itself, there are pronunciation, lexical and syntactic differences between Amharic speakers, and it is not difficult to distinguish the Amharic of Gojjam (northern region)

from that of Shewa, also spelled Shawa or Shoa (central region), for example.

The dialectal variations in the Oromo language are relatively negligible given

the fact that it is spoken over a large geographical area and it had not been

written or used for official purposes until recently. As it was observed a long

time ago by A.W. Hodson and C.H. Walker (1922:9):

> The uniformity of the dialects (of Oromo) is
> under the circumstances striking, separated
> as are the tribes by the most formidable
> natural barriers of mountain, river, forest or
> desert. These physical obstacles are
> immense and are intensified by the
> administration which makes it almost
> impossible to pass from district to district
> without written permits.

Even though speakers of all branches of Oromo understand one another

without much difficulty and the Oromo varieties have the same phonemic

inventory of consonants and vowels, and have a common denominator in

many phonological and morphological rules, there are some dialect

differences which cannot be underestimated especially with regard to the

development of Oromo writing system. This is because a writing system,

unlike the spoken form of a language, needs to be standarised in order to

foster, among other things, political and cultural unity. A standard written

form also facilitates communication and is beneficial in education. The

process and implications of this are discussed in Chapter X.

2.3 Phonemic inventory and phonology of Oromo

An understanding of the phonemic inventory and phonology of a language is vital in the discussion of a writing system. This section discusses briefly phonemic and phonological aspects of the Oromo language.

2.3.1. The Oromo consonants

Tables 3 and 4 below show the twenty-six phonemes that comprise the Oromo consonant system. For the purpose of this study I will employ the letters listed below in Table 4 on the left-hand side in the column labelled 'phoneme' when writing Oromo words. I will also use colon marks (:) after a consonant or a vowel to denote a consonant is geminate or a vowel is long. Note that Oromo examples given under Tables 1 and 2, and some Oromo words cited earlier have been written with double consonants and double vowels to denote gemination and long vowels, respectively. For the remainder of this chapter, colon marks (:) are used to denote gemination and long vowels.

Table 3. Consonant phoneme chart

	Stops	Lab.	Alv.-den.	Pal.	Vel.	Laryn.
	voiceless	(p)*	t	tʃ	k	ʔ
	voiced	b	d	(z) dʒ	g	
	ejectives	p'	t'	tʃ'	k'	
	implosive		ɗ			
spirants		f	s	ʃ		
nasals		m	n	ɲ		h
sonorants			r l			
glides		w	j			

()* segments in parentheses appear in loanwords.

Source: Gragg (1982:xviii)

Table 4. Examples of realisation of principal allophones

	Phonemes	Realisation of Principal Allophones	Examples in Oromo Phonetic Transcription	Examples in Oromo Qubee Transcription	Gloss
1	/p/	[p]	po:lisi:	poolisii	police
2	/p'/	[p']	p'ap'ari:	phapharii	kidney beans
3	/b/	[b]	ba:du:	baaduu	cottage cheese
4	/d/	[ɖ]	dam:a	dam:a	honey
5	/ɗ/	[ɗ]	ɗada:	dhadhaa	butter
6	/t/	[t̪]	tok:o	tokko	one
7	/t'/	[t']	t'iy:a:	xiyaa	bow
8	/tʃ/	[tʃ]	atʃi	achi	there
9	/dʒ/	[dʒ]	dʒa:ma:	jaamaa	blind
10	/tʃ'/	[tʃ']	tʃ'ab:i:	cabbii	snow
11	/k/	[k]	kan:i:sa	kanniisa	bee
12	/k'/	[k']	k'aw:e:	qawwe	gun
13	/g/	[g]	ga:la	gaala	camel
14	/ʔ/	[ʔ]	doʔi:	Do'i:	watching
15	/f/	[f]	farda	farda	horse
16	/s/	[s]	soda:	sodaa	fear
17	/ʃ/	[ʃ]	ʃan	shan	five
18	/z/	[z]	zabaɲ:a:	zabanya:	guard
19	/h/	[h]	har:e:	harree	donkey
20	/m/	[m]	mana	mana	house
21	/n/	[n]	nama	nama	person
22	/ɲ/	[ɲ]	ɲa:ra:	nyaaraa	eyebrow
23	/w/	[w]	Wa:k'a	Waakaa	God
24	/l/	[l]	lo:mi:	loomii	lemon
25	/r/	[ɾ]	rafu:	rafuu	to sleep
26	/j/	[y]	yero:	yeroo	time

Source: collated by the author

2.3.2. Loan phonemes/consonants

The two loan segments (/ p / and / z /) are becoming more and more common in the Oromo vocabulary especially since 1991 as a result of mainly of the process of modernisation of the language. For example, in his Oromo dictionary, published in 1982, Gragg has three words beginning with /p/ whereas *Galmee Jechoota Afaan Oromoo,* another dictionary published in (1996) enters nine words beginning with / p /. Gragg (ibid) has no entry for / z / at the beginning of a word while *Galmee Jechoota Afaan Oromoo* (ibid) cites nine words with a / z / sound in an initial position. However, / z / is not usually pronounced by those Oromo who have not been exposed to Amharic or other foreign languages; they have the sound as / s / or / ʃ /.

Figure 2 / p / and / z / in loanwords.

/ z /	[zabaʃ:a]	guard's man (from Amharic)
/ z /	[zama:tʃa:]	campaign (from Amharic)
/ z /	[muzik'a:]	music (from English)
/ z /	[mu:zi:]	banana (from Arabic)
/ p /	[po:lisi:]	police (from English)
/p/	[ispo:rti:]	sport (from English)
/ p /	[ripo:rteri:]	reporter (from English)

The segment / p / also occurs as an allophone of /b/ when it is followed by

/ s /.

Figure 3 [b]→ [p]

[obse:] →   **[o[p]se:]**   patience or a person's (female) name

[tʃ'absa] → **[tʃ'a[p]sa]**   I break

[k'abso:]→ **[k'a[p]so:]**   struggle

2.3.3. The glottals /h/ and / ʔ /

The Oromo language has two glottal segments, the fricative / h / and the stop

/ ʔ /, both of which occur only single. This feature makes the Oromo glottal

segments different from the other consonants, which generally occur both in

single and geminate forms. The Oromo segment / h / is believed by Maria-

Rosa Lloret-Romanyach (1988) to occur only word-initially but examples

contrary to this can be found in the language (Figure 4).

Figure 4 Examples of Oromo / h / occurring word medially (phonetic and Qubee transcriptions)

[**baha:] "bahaa"** or [baʔaː] "ba'aa"   get out (plural or respect)

[**baha] "baha"** or [baʔa] **"ba'a"**   east, for example, as in sun rise
[**baha biːftuː] ('baha biiftuu')**

[**daho:] "daho"** or **[daʔo:] (da'oo)**   hiding place

In word-initial position, in some but not all words, / h / can be dropped

without any defined conditioning (Stroomer 1987:16) (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Dropping of / h / at word initial position (phonetic transcription)

[**humna]→ [umna]** energy   [**hu:ru:] →[u:ru:]**   mouth area

[**hiy:e:sa]→[iy:e:sa]** poor   [**hindʒir:n]→[indʒira:n]** lice

The glottal stop / ʔ / is known in Oromo as [**huɗa:]** "choke" and more often

appears word-medial than word-initially. There are very few examples of

entries (Figure 6) in *Galmee Jechoota Oromoo* (1996) where / ʔ / appears at the

start of a word.

Figure 6 Examples of / ? / at the beginning of a word

[ʔoʔisa:]   [7]   re-heat (plural or respect)

[ʔo:la:]   sheep

[ʔo:gana]   raw, unprocessed butter

The glottal stop is realised as an allophone of the implosive / ɗ / when

immediately following / l / (Figure 7).

Figure 7 / d / → / ? /

 [falɗana]→   [falʔana]   (spoon)

[walɗana:] →   [walʔana:]   (look after (plural or respect))

The glottal stop / ʔ /, in spite of its common occurrence in the Oromo

language, has only relatively recently been represented in the writing system

as a distinct letter by Oromo writers (see Chapters III and VI). However, its

---

[7] Note that in Macha Oromo the initial / ʔ/ is dropped or replaced by / h /
resulting the above being as:

[(h)oʔisa:]   re-heat (plural or respect)
[(h)o:la:]   sheep
[(h)o:gana]   raw, unprocessed butter

phonemic significance as shown above cannot be doubted. In Figure 8, the addition of the glottal stop in the second word results in a completely different syllabic structure, pronunciation and meaning from the first word.

Figure 8 Example of a glottal stop as a phoneme

    [**bala:**] hazard   ↔   [**balʔa:**]   wide

Furthermore, the glottal stop occurs very often as a cluster with / r / and / l / (Figure 9).

Figure 9 The glottal stop as a cluster with / r / and / l /

[**harʔa**]	today	[**dilʔu:**]	afterbirth
[**gurʔu:**]	udder	[**ja:ʔle**]	friend, comrade
[**hirʔu:**]	not full	[**jalʔa**]	bent, not straight

The glottal stop in the Oromo language has an important phonological function in separating two consecutive vowels which are either qualitatively different because of length or due to other phonetical features. This particular phonological behaviour helps to explain why diphtongs or sequences of qualitatively different short or long vowels, or sequences of two long vowels

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are not permited (Figure 10). This phonological fuction of the Oromo glottal

stop seems to have been neglected by Bender, M.L. (et.al), 1976:131, when

they wrongly stated that sequences of non-identical vowels could occur in

Oromo and listed examples which included *fe:u* "to saddle"; *mariu* "to

advise"; and *jia* "moon". In reality, there is a glottal stop between each of

these so called sequences of non-identical vowels and the words would have

been written as fe'u [feʔu], *mari'u* [mariʔu], and *ji'a* [jiʔa] respectively.

Figure 10 Other phonological functions of the glottal stop

(1) [kaʔa:] **get up (plural or respect)**   (2) **[ka:ʔa:]**   **store (plural or**

respect) it

(3) [bua:] **profit**   (4) **[buʔa:]**   **profit**

In Figure 10, the medial vowel in (1) and (2) is [a], short and long. It is because

length, the first being short and the second long, that [ʔ**]** was required. In the

same Figure, example three is not permitted, and [ʔ**]** is required to separate the

vowels as in (4) in Figure 10.

2.3.4. Ejective and implosive sounds

/ p' /, / t'./, / tʃ' /, / k' /, and / ɗ /

Among the ejective and implosive sounds, the ejective series / p'/ is very limited in its occurrence in word-initial position but is common in word-medial position. Gragg (1982) asserts that this segment does not at all occur in initial position in the Macha dialect whereas Tilahun Gamta (1989) lists three words (Figure 11) beginning with / p'/. The author of this thesis was able to to find another word beginning with / p'/, **[p'arp'arsa]** "coward", to add to the list.

Figure 11 Examples of words beginning with / p' /

[p'ap'ari:]   kidney bean
[p'iri:]   kind of worm
[p'alp'al dʒetʃ**:u:]**   to shine

The remaining ejectives, / t' /, / tʃ' /, / k' /, commonly occur word-initially and word-medially. The Oromo language is peculiar in that it has ejective / p'/ and voiced / b / but lacks the voiceless / p /. Gamkrelidze, (cited in Lloret-Romanyach, 1988), believes that one would expect the absence of the ejective series, which usually are functionally weaker than the simple plosive series,

as is usually the case with most languages. Lloret-Romanyach (1988) also

thinks that the fact that the Oromo language has ejective / t' / and the

implosive / ɗ / makes the language peculiar as most East Cushitic languages

have only one glottalised coronal stop, either / t'/ or / /ɗ/. / t' / is a dental

ejective and is common in the language at word-initial as well as word-medial

positions. (Figure 12).

Figure 12 / t' / at word-initial and word-medial positions

[**t'aba** tʃu:]   playing   [**hat'a:ri:**]   shrewd (person)

[**t'a:ʔo:**]   fertilizer   [**k'ut'i:su:**]   younger

/ tʃ'/ is phonologically glotalised (ejective) palatal (see Table 3) but it appears

to this writer to be alveolo-palatal affricate phonetically, and it occurs

commonly in word-initial and word-medial position (Figure 13).

Figure 13 / tʃ' / at word-initial and word-medial positions

[**tʃ'ab:i**:]   snow   [k'otʃ'o:]   yam

[**tʃ'id'a**]   party, wedding   [**ba:tʃ'a**]   joke

/ k' / is a glotalized (an ejective) velar (Table 3) and occurs in both word-initial

and word-medial positions (Figure 14).

Figure 14 / k' / at word-initial and word-medial positions

[k'aw:e:]   gun   **[wa:k'a]**   God

[k'oma]   chest   **[mak'a:]**   name

2.3.5. The implosive / ɗ /

The Oromo / ɗ/ is described as 'glottalized' by Tilahun Gamta (1988) but as

'implosive/glottalised' by Lloret-Romanyach (1988). Impressionistically, /ɗ/,

as produced by this writer using laryngography[8] at the School of Oriental and

African Studies phonetics laboratory, seems implosive when geminate but

more like a palatal lateral approximant [ʌ] with an accompanying glottal

stop or simply laryngealised voicing when single. Whether / ɗ / as a rule is

voiced or voiceless, is not clear. However, it can be argued that / ɗ / is

generally[9] voiceless since a laryngyographic printout (Appendix IV) shows a

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[8] For detailed information on the application of laryngography please refer to Fourcin,
1974; Catford,1988.
[9] The qualification 'generally' is added because electropalatographic (EPG) printout
(as produced by the researcher at the School of Oriental and African Studies phonetics
laboratory) of geminate / ɗ / appears to be voiceless while single / ɗ / is realised as
voiced. For further information about EPG, see 3.3.8. below.

waveform whose peak to valley curve was diminished indicating that the vocal folds are kept tightly together, with hardly any vibrations, for a considerable amount of time.

In the Macha dialect the segment /ɗ/ is sometimes pronounced as / ʔ / by some speakers, thus removing the question of whether the segment is voiced or voiceless. The examples given under Figure 7 above also demonstrate that / ɗ / when occurring as a cluster with / l / can be in free variation with the glottal stop (/ ʔ /).

2.3.6. Consonant clusters

The Oromo language allows a maximum sequence of two different single consonants within a word, but never at the beginning of a word. Consonant clusters occur as part of root word (Figure 15) or arise as a result of inflections (Figure 16).

Figure 15 Examples of consonant clusters as part of root word

[farda]　　horse

[hantu:ta]　　mouse

Figure 16 Consonant clusters resulting from inflections

[**raf+na**]→   [**rafna**] we will sleep

[**kan+isa**] → [**kansa**]: his

If a sequence of more than two consonants were likely to appear in a word, a

vowel would be inserted to limit the maximum sequence in a word to two

consonants. For example, the suffix [-na] was attached to the verb [**raf**]

(sleep) to make it [**rafna**] (we will sleep) but in a word where the base has an

apparent final consonant cluster (c.f. shadow vowels below) the same rule

does not apply. Thus, in Figure 17 the vowel / i / is employed to avoid three

consonants occurring in sequence.

Figure 17 The vowel / i /

  [ar:abs] swear at→ **[ar:absina]** we will swear at him, her, etc.

  [tʃ'abs] break →[tʃ'absina] we will break

The fricatives / f / and / s / are in free variation when they are immediately

followed by a suffix beginning with a nasal sound.

Figure 18 / s / and / f / (free variation)

[ba:s]   [ba:sna] →[ba:fna]   [ba:sne] →[ba:fne]   reveal
(command)
[aj:e:s]   [aj:e:sna]→ aj:e:fna   [aj:esne]→[aj:efne]   kill
(command)

Consonant clusters are not permitted in word-initial position and it is because

of this rule that borrowed words with initial clusters such as [sp] in "sport"

are written in Oromo as [**ispo:rti:**].

Consonant clusters are in general allowed only word medially. The sonorant

segments / l /, / m /, / n /, or / r / are usually the first element of a cluster in a

morpheme as shown in Figure 19. Note that the translations of the words are

loose as there are no equivalent English words for terms such as [**mart'o:**].

Figure 19 Examples of consonant clusters where / l /, / m /, / n /, and / r / are the first elements

l		m		n		r		Second Consonant
albu:	anklet	**simbo:**	charm			**sirba** dance		**b**
				anc'o:te: akind of potatoe		sorc'a: reminant		**c'**
jalde:sa	monkey			**gundo:** flat basket		**farda** horse		**d**
wald'a:nu:	look after	**hand'u:ra**	navel					**d'**
kolfu:	to laugh			**danfu:** boil		**arfa:sa:** winter		**f**
galgala	evening			**hinjira:n** lice		**urji:** star		**j**
halkan	night					**morki:** contention		**k**
k'ulk'ul:u:	clean			**ank'a:k'u:** egg		**mark'a:** porridge		**k'**
silmi:	tick (parasite)	**humna**	energy			**harma** breast		**m**
salp'a:	light, not heavy							**p'**
		adamsu:	hunt	**gansi:su:** betray		**gorsu:** advice		**s**
mi:lto:	companion			**intala** girl				**t**
k'ilt'mi:	bone					**mart'o:** apron		**t'**

It must be noted that geminate segments do not usually come immediately

after or before another consonant to form a cluster. However, there are some

exceptions where the segment / **tʃ** /, which has been described as a geminate

by Lloret-Romanyach (1988), occasionally occurs (see Figure 20) as a cluster

with a sonorant.

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Figure 20 Examples of / tS / as a consonanat cluster

[**bultʃa:]**   administrator

[**galtʃa:]**   make them enter, for example, cows into pens

[**bak:altʃa:]**   morning star

2.3.7. Gemination

Gemination is an important area that needs to be considered in the
development of Oromo writing system. Unless gemination is appropriately
represented in the writing system, a word can assume a different and an
unexpected meaning thus resulting in confusion. Hence, a selection or
development of a system of writing for Oromo needs to consider that the
system allows gemination to be clearly represented. Here, it is worth noting
Haddis Alamayyahu's (1990) claim that the Ge'ez script has a deficiency in
effectively representing gemination in Amharic. From this it is not too hard to
deduce that the Ge'ez script would not be the most effective to represent
Oromo, a language known for its common feature of gemination (see Lloret-
Romanyach (1988).

All Oromo consonants except / h / and / ʔ/ have geminate forms. In the Oromo

literature, geminates are commonly known as [**dʒabaː]** (strong) while the

single consonants are referred to as [**laːfaː]** (soft). Oromo geminates seem to

differ from their single forms in physical qualities such as voicing and place of

articulation. For example, an elecropalatographic (EPG)[10] recording at the

School of Oriental and African Studies phonetics laboratory by the author

showed that the position of parts of the tongue in the oral cavity is more front

during the articulation of geminate coronal stops than during the production

of their counterpart single segments. This research looked at the four Oromo

coronal stops (/ t /, / d /, / t' / and / ɗ /) both in plain and geminate forms by

choosing two words in which each sound was the penultimate syllable. In all

cases the sounds were preceded by a short vowel and followed by long / a /,

and to limit the influence of intonation, [dʒ eɗaː] (say, plural/respect

imperative), was articulated after each of the words. The EPG investigation

was to enable the author to determine the place of articulation of the stops. It

was also a useful way to compare and contrast the sounds against each other

and the single forms against the geminate not only in terms of their place of

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[10] In an EPG, the subject wears a thin acrylic palate which, in the author's case, has 62
silver electrodes mounted on the surface. A low voltage signal, derived from an
oscillator, passes through the subject's body; when the tongue contacts one of the
electrodes, a circuit is completed, and a signal conducted via lead-out wires to an
electronic processing unit, in this case an IBM personal computer. The computer
processes the signals and records the timing and location of the tongue and the palate
in speech. For full description of how EPG is used the reader is referred to Hardcastle
(1984).

articulation but also in terms of their duration of articulation. In this case the study revealed that geminate segments required comparatively more time and area of tongue contact in their occlusion process than the single segments. Some geminates also appeared to differ from their single counter parts in the voicing quality. An example here is the implosive / ɗ / which was voiceless when geminate and voiced when single.

Like long vowels, Oromo geminates have phonemic value and, as can be seen from the following example (Figure 21) the minimal pairs are the result of the middle consonant being single in the first and geminate in the second set of words.

Figure 21 Minimal pairs resulted from geminates

[**samu**:] (to rot)   [**sam:u**:] (brain)

[**soda**:] (fright)   [**sod:a**:] (in-law)

[**ro:bi:**] (Wednesday)   [**ro:b:i**] (hippopotamus)

[**hatu:**] (to steal/   [**hat:u:**] (thief)

[**bada:**] Highland   [**bad:a:**] (run away)

Gemination in Oromo also commonly occurs through assimilation (regressive

and progressive) as can be seen in the examples below.

2.3.8. Assimilation

Assimilation is a common phonological process in Oromo. The following

tables provide some examples:

2.3.8.1. Regressive assimilation

/l - n/→/l:/	/ tʃʼa:l -na/	→	/ tʃʼa:l:a/	we exceed
/m-n/→/m/	/nam - ni/	→	/nam:i/	the man
/d - t/→/d:/	/bad - ta/	→	/bad:a/	you get lost
/tʼ- t/→/tʼ:/	/litʼ -ta/	→	/litʼ:a/	you enter
/r -n/→/r:/	/bar -na/	→	/bar:a/	we learn
/j -t/→/j:/	/fadʒadʒ -ta/	→	/fadʒadʒ:a/	dull

2.3.8.2. Progressive assimilation

/t-n/→/n:/	[gud:at-na]	→	[gud:an:a]	we will grow
/d-n/→/n:/	[bad-na]	→	[ban:a]	we get lost/run away
/g-n/→/n:/	[ɗug-na]	→	[ɗun:a]	we drink
/q-n/→/n:/	[ɗak'-na]	→	[ɗan:a]	we go

It must be noted that progressive assimilation does not always result in gemination. In 2.3.10, lack of gemination is compensated for by the lengthening of the vowel.

2.3.9. Gemination – compensation

/ ɗ-n /	[**goɗ-na**]	[**go:na**]	we will do
/ ?-n /	[**ha?-na**]	/ **ha:na** /	we will play a game of 'hockey'

2.4 *The vowels*

Phonemically, Oromo has five short and five long vowels (Figure 22), which can occur word-initially, medially or finally. A description of the present writer's articulatory impression of Oromo vowels in medial environment (Figure 22) is as follows:

/ i / The Oromo / i / coincides with the high-front cardinal vowel. It is the closest vowel with no obvious rounding of the lip.

/ e / appears to be lower and more open as compared to cardinal vowel 2.

/ a / Repeated visual and auditory perception of this vowel reveals that / a / is not as open as cardinal vowel number 4; and is apparently not either as front as cardinal 4 nor is it as back as cardinal 5. The short form of / a / sounds like /ʌ/while the longer one is relatively more open.

/o/ There is a degree of lip rounding in the articulation of /o/ and the tongue position is between that of the cardinal vowels 6 and 7.

/u/ is more or less like cardinal vowel 8 with its qualities of high back tongue-position and the rounding of the lips.

Figure 22 Short and long vowels in word medial position

/i/	[**bira**]	nearby	[**bi:raa**]	beer
/e/	[**kel:a:**]	fence	[**ke:l:o:**]	wild grass
/a/	[**rafu:**]	sleep	[**ra:fu:**]	cabbage
/o/	[**boru**]	tomorrow	[**bo:ru:**]	unclean water
/u/	[**muka**]	wood	[**tu:ta**]	crowd

Except for / a /, mentioned above, the short and long forms of the vowels

seem to be similar with regard to tongue and lip position and the Oromo

vowel chart can be seen below.

Figure 23 The Oromo vowel chart

	Short			**Long**	
i		u	**High**	i:	u:
	e	o	**Mid**	e:	o:
	a		**Low**	a:	

All Oromo vowels, both short and long, can occur word initially, medially or

finally, though the rounded vowels (/ o / and / u /) only rarely occur in short

form in word final position (Figure 24):

**Figure 24 Examples of short and long Oromo vowels in various positions in
            a word**

	word-initial	**word-medial**	
Short Vowels	[abdʒu:] dream	[mana] house	nama person
	[in:i] he,obj.	[da:kij:e] duck	[ka'i] get up
	[eda] last night	**[jeɗe]** he said	[dʒeɗe] he said
	[odu:] news	[bok'ol:o] sweet corn	[tok:o] one
	[urdʒi:] star	[buna] coffee	[soromu:] become rich

	word-initial	**word-medial**	
Long Vowels			
	[a:da:] culture	[aj:a:ntu:] graceful	[busa:] malaria
	*	[di:ma:] red	[abdi:] hope
	[e:ge:] tail	le:t'a: single	[on:e:] heart
	[o:gana] raw butter	k'o:da portion	[k'o:nk'o:] throat
	[u:ma:] creation		[lak:u:] twin

*Gragg (1982) has two words that have long / i / word initially. The first one
is an exclamation "ii!" and the second is "iitoo", which in fact could also have
been written as [ɗi:to:] or ***dhiitoo*** (boil) in qubee.

Oromo vowels, at least the Macha dialect, do not exhibit diphthongization,
even though Hodson and Walker (1922:11) wrongly indicated the opposite by
writing **[ei]** as in *kaleissa* (yesterday). In Figure 10 earlier examples were given

of how the glottal stop was employed to separate two different vowels, in either short or long form, so they did not immediately follow each other. Lloret-Romanyach (1988), quite rightly, proposes that Oromo, at least that of the Macha dialect, does not allow long vowels in two successive syllables, unless the second is also word final. This is a useful point to be taken into consideration in the development of the writing system. Another important phonological aspect is that while all Oromo words, at least underlyingly, end in a vowel, this does not always seem to be apparent. This is because of the qualitative change in which, depending on their environment, vowels get not only reduced in length but also glottalised or become voiceless especially prepausally. These tendencies are schematised by Lloret-Romanyach (ibid) as in Figure 25.

Figure 25 Lloret-Romanyach's scheme showing qualitative changes of Oromo vowels at word-final position

	C[-voice] — #	C[+voice] — #
Reduced	[v̥] > [v]	[v] > [v̥]
Short	[v] > [v̥]	[v] > [v̥]

Source: Lloret-Romanyach, 1988: 97.

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Her scheme shows that Oromo vowels in word-final position change quality by becoming either devoiced or reduced in length. This means that short vowels become devoiced, long vowels become short, and The examples given under Figure 17 [**ar:abs] (**swear at)→ **[ar:absina]** (we will swear at him, her, etc.) and **[tʃ'abs]** (break) → [**tʃ'absina**] (we will break) indicate that the / i /, at a word final position, is unrecognisable to the ear and consequently as a result it has not been graphically represented. While all the Oromo vowels reduce their length or change their quality at word final position by, for example, becoming voiceless, / i / gets reduced more than any one of the others to the extent that it is inaudible and only is a shadow of itself. This does not mean that the vowel / i / is totally absent at word final position; what it means is that it becomes short and voiceless. The implication for Oromo writing system is that these 'shadow vowels', despite their length or prominence to the ear, need to be recognized and represented, in some cases, as in *galatoomi (*Thank you) and *ajjeesi (*Kill*).*

2.5 Tone

Tone in Oromo has not been given due attention by scholars who have studied the language. However, it has been long recognized that tone exists at morphological and syntactical levels in Oromo. For example, Owens, (1980; 1985); Hayward and Gemetchu Megersa (1996); and Lloret-Romanyach (1988)) make references to tone in Oromo without asserting the language to be tonal with a significant number of minimal pairs resulting from tone. Among these writers, Lloret-Romanyach (ibid: 28) claims that "tone in Oromo has a phonemic status because it distinguishes different words and morphemes as well as different grammatical relationships". It cannot be concluded from this that Oromo is not 'strongly tonal language' although the southern dialects make much more use of tone than Macha, or other central, western and northern varieties and this does not hinder comprehension between the varieties. However, there is evidence that 'minimal pairs' are effected by tones. The minimal pairs, in Figure 26, belong to different lexical classes (noun, verb, etc.) so the role of tone for differentiating words is very slight.

Figure 26 Examples of tone having a phonemic value in Oromo

gógáa (dry)   g ògáa (skin)

mák'áa (name)   màk'áa (change route)

fáy: áa (wellbeing)   fày: áa (get well)

The implications of tone representation in Oromo writing will be discussed in

Chapter VIII.

In summary, the Oromo people in Ethiopia form the majority of the

population and inhabit a large geographical area of the country. Their

language is divided into four main dialects but all varieties are mutually

intelligible.

The next chapter now discusses the history of how this language then

gradually progressed into a written form.

Chapter III

3. The early history of Oromo writing

This chapter will discuss the early history of the Oromo writing system. In order to understand how this system has developed, we will firstly discuss a brief overview of the reforms and adaptation of scripts in general, and then apply this to how it has unfolded in the experience of Oromo. This will then enable us to contextualise why it became imperative for Oromo to adopt a written form.

3.1 Reforms and adaptation of scripts

Language first developed as a written form so that humans could represent their ideas in a graphic form. The terms script, orthography and writing system are often used interchangeably in ordinary conversations, and are often easily misunderstood. These terms have technical definitions and are quite distinctive from one another. A *script* is defined as "a set of distinct marks conventionally used to represent the written form of one or more languages" (Sproat, 2000:13). From this definition it is clear that a script is not tied to any one language but, if needs be, can be used with two or more languages. The Roman script, as can be seen in Table 5, is used for writing a number of languages in North and South America and Africa. Table 5 also

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shows that the Arabic alphabet is used in many Asian and African countries. Wellisch (1978) states that the Hangul script is unique to the Korean language.

Orthography, on the other hand, is defined as "a set of rules intended to serve the general purposes of written communication for the literate members of a language community" (Wellisch, 1978:4). He elaborates that this set of rules is uniform, integrated, and standardized. It is possible that a written language can have more than one orthography based on the same or different scripts at the same time. Wellisch (ibid.) discusses various kinds of orthographies and gives Hebrew and Serbo-Crotian as examples of languages that have two standard orthographies. A standard orthography consists of a set of rules of proper spelling, punctuation, layout and numeric symbols (Mountford, 1996:630). Meanwhile, a writing system is "a set of conventions used to represent a language in writing". It is a system of "rules governing the recording of words and sentences of a language by means of conventional graphic signs" (Wellisch, 1978:13). Wellisch elaborates on this further by stating that a writing system is entirely abstract and generic, and it is neutral as to function or typology. Each written language has its own writing system by the virtue of its unique phonology and morphology. In other words, writing systems are "arbitrary inventions, accepted and observed by those who wish to communicate in writing in a certain language" (Wellisch, 1978: 14).

It is important to note that a writing system, despite being unique to a certain language, can have wholly or partly the same script, letters, or signs, punctuation marks or other elements as other writing systems. A writing system does not necessarily use all the available marks in particular scripts but only chooses those distinctive marks or graphs in the script that suit the purpose of a given language. This means that some graphic marks may be omitted in a writing system of a language that has adapted a particular script. For example, if the Oromo language (as spoken in the Horn of Africa) were to adopt the Roman Alphabet or Ge'ez script, the symbols ñ and ጸ (/v/ and /ṣ/ ([ts]), respectively, would become redundant as Oromo does not have sounds corresponding to these graphemes. Similarly, a writing system may need to make modifications to existing graphs or may need to create new letters for some of the sounds for which there are no equivalent symbols in the script to be adapted. For example, the Oromo language has a phoneme (/ɗ/), which does not have an equivalent symbol in the Ge'ez or the Roman script and if one of the scripts were to be adopted, a new symbol would be needed to represent the phoneme. Wellisch (1978, pp46-47) lists five most frequently used methods of adaptation as follows:

1) The use of letters that are redundant in in Latin to differentiate between phonemes for which there is no equivalent in Latin. (For example, the Polish and Czech languages use **'c'** for the phoneme [ʧ]).

2) The combination of two or more letters to represent a single phoneme.

3) The addition of letters from other alphabets

4) The invention of entirely new letters(for example, ŋ, ɔ, ɣ) to represent specific sounds of some African languages that adopted the Roman script, and

5) The addition of diacritical marks to the basic letters of an alphabet (for example, 'ñ' in Spanish).

Writing systems can be classified according to their respective sociolinguistic functions: orthography, stenography, cryptography, paedography, technography, and machinography (see Wellisch, 1978[11], and Mountford,

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[11] Wellisch (1978) also defines the other classifications of a writing system:

Stenographies are writing systems devised for the purpose of the fast recording of (mainly spoken) language. They follow standardized rules that are normally available to anybody interested in using these writing systems.

Cryptographies are writing systems whose primary purpose is secrecy. They also follow standard rules but these are not available to members of the language community in general.

Paedographies are mainly intended for language teaching.

Techonographies are close to paedographies but more aimed at specialists. The IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) is an example.

1996). On the basis of these definitions, it can be arguably inferred that a script can be borrowed fully or partially to write a language for which it had not been originally invented or developed. Orthography and a writing system, on the other hand, are specific to a language for which they are developed. Indeed, most languages are written in a script which had not been primarily invented for them, but each one of them has a system of writing or orthography known to and accepted by its users. As has been illustrated in Table 5, below, there are a limited number of scripts in which quite a number of languages are written.

Table 5. Scipts used in different continents – numbers in the matrix refer to the number of countries where the given scripts were being used by 1976

Continents	Roman	Arabic	Cyrillic	Ge'ez*[12]
South America	12	0	0	0
Africa	36	7	0	1
North and Central America	15	0	0	0
Asia	7	16	0	0
Europe	25	0	3	0
Total	95	23	3	1

Source: Wellisch, 1978, 235-238

Machinographies are writing systems specially adapted for the direct and automatic use by machines, such as Morse telegraph keys or the printout devices of computers.

[12] The Ge'ez script, also in some literature referred to as the Ethiopic script, has been used to write Amharic, Ge'ez, Tigrinya, Tigre, and various of the Gurage languages in Ethiopia.

Wellisch (1978:42) discusses examples of reforms, adaptations and impositions of scripts on various languages, and he describes how the Roman alphabet followed the Roman Catholic Church throughout Europe and later to the colonies established by European powers in Africa, Asia, and the Americas.

Similarly, Gaur (1987) discusses the Cyrillic alphabet, which she argues followed the Patriarchal cross of the Eastern Orthodox Church throughout the Russian empire and across a large part of the Balkans. She goes on to state that during the Soviet era, Cyrillic became the main script as it replaced all other scripts in the European as well as the Russian part of the Soviet Union (Gaur, 1987: 126). According to Wellisch (ibid) the Arabic script followed the faith of Islam and was used by Muslims in Africa, Europe, Middle East and Asia to write their own particular languages.

However (as pointed out above), there are other factors that may also influence the spread or adoption of a script. One of these would be for political reasons. For example, the imposition of the Cyrillic script on many previously written and unwritten languages in the Soviet Union, prior to the collapse of socialism in the late 1980's, was imposed by the government on its citizens. This decision was politically motivated, because it was generally

believed by those in power, that this would enable the country to achieve "unity" through the use of one script (see Wellisch, 1978). In a similar way, the Roman script was adopted in Albania and Turkey, instead of the Arabic script which was previously in use in these countries. This decision was mainly politically motivated by the people in power who wanted to promote their own political beliefs and move away from strong historical Islamic influences associated with the use of the Arabic script and the promotion of Arabic culture.

In an ideal situation, according to Wellisch (ibid), the need to adopt a script to create a new writing system or to reform an existing one ought to be driven by reasons specific to a social group which seeks for that language to be written and used. Such a scenario could only occur in an environment where the people and the government have the foresight and understanding to intellectualise the implications of their decisions to reform their language. However, even in this kind of ideal situation, a writing system does not develop smoothly and quickly. By and large, in most cases, where the developments of writing systems had been planned, they generally took place gradually over a long period of time and with some challenges (see for example, Gregersen, 1977). If we take the English writing system, too, we can observe that it is only through use and the efforts of large groups of people over a period of many years that it has reached the current stage of its

development. Indeed the development of a language or its writing system can never be said to be complete as it is an evolving and dynamic process. Even after centuries of intensive use in publication, education and written communication, it is true to state that the English spelling system is today neither perfect nor easy to use. This is despite the significant improvements that were likely to have been made through its continuous and wider use over many centuries.

A fundamental difficulty with the graphic representations of spoken languages is that the graphemes or symbols and the way they are arranged in the language change less than the spoken form. Pronunciation may vary not only through time but also across space between classes within a given time span. Some of the discrepancies in the English spelling system can be accounted for by the fact that the pronunciation of the words may have changed over time, while their written representations did not similarly evolve and the original forms were retained. A simple illustration of this is a consideration of the silent letters in words such as *knee, know, knight, folk, would* and *alms* which, according to Bryson (1990:119), are "shadows" of a former pronunciation and clearly show that the spellings of these words have remained as they had been whereas their pronunciation has changed.

As stated earlier, in some countries reform of a script has been largely influenced by political factors. For example, according to Wellisch (ibid) two different scripts, the Roman alphabet and Cyrillic alphabet, were used to write the same language (Serbo-Croat) in Croatia and Serbia. These two countries were formerly part of Yugoslavia. The use of two scripts for the same language was a political decision rather than a linguistic one. Script in some situations is considered to be a symbol of oppression. The case of Turkey is an interesting one as it illustrates how where the cultural and linguistic identity of the people took priority over the religious identity where the choice of the script was concerned. This, arguably, could also be based on the decision to reform Turkey and make it a secular state, and in this case it could be said to have been a political decision.

The Turkish language has been written in Cyrillic, Arabic, Greek and Roman at different periods over the long period of its development (Gelb, 1963). The most surprising aspect in the conversion of a script in 1928 in Turkey was the fact that the writing system was changed from the Arabic (a script associated with Islam) to Roman (a script mainly used in countries practising Christianity), and this took place in a predominantly Muslim country. Surprised by this outcome, Palmer (1930:3) commented: "When a country half-Christian, half-Mahammedan took such a step, it showed that in the

opinion of the leaders, religion and alphabet were not necessarily two sides of the same thing".

Further similar examples are Somali and Hausa, which are African languages spoken in Somalia and Nigeria respectively. These were previously both written in Arabic but later changed to the Roman alphabet. Just as with Turkey, these scripts were also changed from the Arabic script to the Roman alphabet despite Islam being the religion of the overwhelming majority of the people speaking the languages in both countries. Yet another example is Indonesia, where Bahasa Indonesia, usually referred to as the language of "national unity", is written with the Roman alphabet, despite the long Islamic religious practice in the country. One reason for this could be the relative unsuitability of the Arabic script to represent vowels of these languages.

However, there are instances where religion has been the major (though not the only) factor driving the choice of script. King in Coulmas (2003:23) cites the example of the case of the Urdu and Hindi languages which are both widely spoken in India. Urdu is a similar and related dialect of Hindi, and was written in Perso-Arabic script because it was brought to India by Muslim invaders (Coulmas, ibid). In contrast, Hindi, which is similar to Urdu in its spoken form, is written in Devanagari script. This clearly demonstrates how two languages that are so similar in their spoken forms and which can be

classified as near dialects of the same language are still very different in the way that they are written because of the influences of their origins.

The fact that a single script has been used to write different languages (for instance the Roman alphabet is used for writing most European languages) as shown above in Table 5 demonstrates that most of the world's languages have adapted their writing systems from scripts that were not originally designed for them. This includes English, French, Spanish and indeed all those languages in Europe, Africa, America and Asia which use the Roman alphabet for their written form. In Ethiopia, the Ge'ez script, which was and is used to write Amharic, was not only an adaptation from the Sabean script (Getachew Haile, 1996) but was also initially used to write the now non-spoken (except by the clergy in the Ethiopian Orthodox church) Ge'ez language. Hence, the adaptation of a script in the development of a writing system is not a phenomenon unique to any one language or nation, and indeed, as Gelb (1963) contends, no writing system can ever be considered as "pure" as there is no such thing as a "pure" language just as there can arguably be no such thing as a pure race. A simple example which can elaborate this can be the use of what is generally called Arabic numbers, which are used across many writing systems based on various scripts including the Arabic script, Roman alphabet and the Ge'ez script.

3.1.1. Criteria for the adaptation of scripts

The terms adoption and adaptation are used to mean slightly different things in this thesis. Adoption is used in the sense that a script, that had not been originally designed for writing a language, has been chosen as a basis for its orthography. For example, the Roman Alphabet, not the Arabic script or the Ge'ez syllabary, may be adopted for writing a language. However, in order for the Roman Alphabet to represent the phonological and other aspects of the language in writing, some changes or adaptations would need to be made. Adaptation, therefore, refers to the process of the changes made to a chosen script for writing a language.

As Table 5 above shows, a limited number of scripts have been adapted or converted to write languages spoken by people who often live geographically far away from each other in different continents. Even those languages that are used by people living near to each other in the same continent or the same country are different by virtue of simply being separate and independent languages, any script adapted to write them needs to be crafted and adjusted to become suitable to the purposes of each of the "target" languages for which it is chosen. It is important here to note that the discussion at this point is restricted to the adaptation of alphabetic scripts in general and to the Roman alphabet in particular.

Despite the prevalence of adoptions or adaptations of scripts across the world for centuries, there is a dearth in the information currently available regarding criteria that have been employed in the conversion of a script. Since a script is independent of a language and, indeed, since theoretically, any script can be extended to write any language other than that for which it had not been designed, questions need to be asked regarding the process of its adoption and adaptation. Gregerson (1977:174) points out that "more than one script can be used for the graphization of any single language". This statement then begs three questions:

a) *how* is the decision about the suitability or otherwise of a script made when adapting it for writing a language?

b) *who* decides which script to use?

c) *what* are the driving factors?

The answers to these legitimate questions are not always readily available. This researcher has not come across any case where the adoption or adaptation of a script has taken place on the basis of pre-defined criteria. However, Wellisch (1978) and Berry (1968) suggest that there are some parameters that ought to be (and generally have been) considered during the process of adoption or adaptation of a script. These parameters involve the

consideration of 1) technical or linguistic issues (that is the graphic representation of the phonological system of the target language) and 2) non-linguistic issues. These two issues are briefly discussed below.

3.1.1.1. Linguistic Criteria

As described above, a script may be adopted and be used to write any language. This does not, however, mean that a script can simply be adopted as it is for writing a previously unwritten language. This is because each language has its own distinguishing features and these need due consideration. Indeed the decision as to which script will be chosen and which system can be adapted can be made after a reflection on factors such as linguistic, social and cultural requirements. In addition to these factors, it is useful to think about how easy, complex or difficult a script is for learning and using when adopting it. Understandably, it is difficult to speculate that a particular script is easier than another one in learning or using it in writing. Venezky (1977:37), in his discussion about the goals involved in designing a new writing system to bring about literacy or to replace an existing writing system, argues that each of the goals requires unique considerations that relate to the more general problems of developing an orthography so that it is mechanically suited to the language it is to reflect. He also suggests that there are five other factors that ought to be considered before the adoption or adaptation of a script. According to Venezky, these are:

a) accuracy: i.e., no phoneme is left unsymbolized.
b) economy: i.e., only phonemes are symbolized.
c) consistency: i.e., letters are mutually exclusive.
d) monography: i.e., one letter per phoneme.
e) sufficiency: i.e., no phoneme-letter value is dependent on any other.

It is notable in the above list that the criteria proposed seem to have mainly alphabetic writing in mind as they underline the importance of representing a phoneme with a letter. This indicates the fact we have already discussed above that alphabetic writing systems are the most commonly adapted systems compared to syllabic or logographic systems. It also offers useful guiding principles to be considered when adapting a script for writing another language.

Gregersen (1977) supports Venezky's idea of the factors to be considered when developing a new orthography (Venezky's, ibid) and states that a good writing system is one that is easy to acquire; easy to write; easy to read; essentially phonemic and at least able to include the basic repertoire of phonemes. If the goal of introducing a writing system for an unwritten language or of adapting a new script for a written language is largely to promote literacy and thereby to catalyse and facilitate social and economic development, etc., then all the above factors are critical and fundamental considerations that those responsible for making the decision about which

script to adapt should bear in mind, alongside whatever other agenda they may have.

3.1.1.2. Non linguistic considerations

Having looked at the linguistic factors, it is also important to consider non-linguistic issues that might affect the choice of script. Indeed, it is arguable that however suitable a new orthography is to the linguistic features of the language, its success also depends on other various factors such as the following:

a) The involvement in and support of the people who use the system. This factor is as crucial for the success of the system as the choice of the script and design of the orthography. A system that is not endorsed or accepted by the people for whom it is intended would most definitely not be successful as they would not take ownership of it. Hence, it is imperative from the outset to obtain the endorsement of the users so they become active participants in the use, if not the choice, design and development, of the system. It is in line with this that Kemal, the Turkish leader (quoted in Wellisch (1977:56)) appealed to his people "to learn the new Turkish writing system quickly; to teach it to their compatriots, to women and men, to porters and boatmen".

b) Equally important for the success of a new writing system is the existence or availability of a favourable political climate to give the writing system legal authority as it becomes the platform for the formulation of reforms, policies and managing resources for development. Somalia's modern writing system is a good example as it was initiated and resourced by the government in 1972 in order to make the system a success (see, Caney, 1985). In contrast, it can be argued that the success of a new writing system would be doubtful in an environment where there is no political will to provide support and encourage its widespread usage by citizens across the country or in the mass media of radio, television and press, as well as in day-to-day official use and in schools.

3.1.2. Standardisation

Standardisation, according to Ferguson (1961), is a single, widely accepted norm, used with only minor modifications or variation for all purposes of language use. Ferguson explicitly distinguishes between this general notion of "standard" and the degree of native literacy ("writing") in a speech community. The maximum degree of native literacy is manifested within a speech community when original scientific research is published regularly. At the top of the standardization scale there are communities in which there is minimal variation of form in both the spoken and the written language.

Following Ferguson's definition, standardization should thus be regarded as the process of language unification in a given community, affecting written as well as oral communication. Ray (1963) is not as strict with respect to the possibility of a co-existence of varieties or different vernaculars within the speech community, alongside the "standard". The standard itself, however, is considered to be a language variety the use of which is unified in writing, grammar and the lexicon. The need for a normative language usage correlates, according to Haugen (1966), with the function of writing as the medium of communication between speakers separated in time and space and unable to rely upon prosodic, extra-linguistic or even plain linguistic

explanatory strategies in order to smooth out misinterpretation. Haugen (ibid) goes on to elaborate language standardization and planning by stating that they involve preparing normative rules for the guidance of writers and speakers especially in non-homogeneous speech communities. A "standard" is thus a set of widely accepted rules serving as a norm primarily in writing. Its emergence and distribution is dependent upon several phases, the first of which is defined as "norm selection" or the choice of the variety that is to become the standard. The second, "codification" (developing a writing system), presupposes norm selection. Once both these steps are fulfilled, the "stabilization" of the norm can begin. Most unification efforts may actually be inserted into this slot for it is during this phase that the production of dictionaries, grammars, style manuals and other normative instruments is most important. Haugen (1966) goes on to state that the future of the standard written variety of a language will depend on its "implementation", i.e. its acceptance by institutions, writers, publications and especially mass-media communication.

An important question that comes to mind here is to ask why is it necessary for a community to standardize its language, especially when this would mean that varieties or dialects are undermined when a standardized form is developed? Since dialects, like languages, are important to individuals and communities in representing their socio-cultural identities and constitute an

integral part of their rights, the functions of standardisation need to be clearly

identified, and the approaches to be followed carefully considered. In a

presentation made to the 2nd International Congress of the Catalan Language

at Palma de Mallorca, Balearic Islands, P.L. Garvin (1993: 47-48) outlines

standardization of a language as having five important functions for a

linguistic community:

> 1) unifying function - this is the function of a standard language to service as a unifying bond in spite of dialectical and other differences;
>
> 2) separatist function - this is the function of a standard language to affirm the separate identity of speech community in the face of other speech communities;
>
> 3) prestige function - this is the function that confers a certain prestige on a speech community that possesses a standard language and on an individual that masters it;
>
> 4) participatory function - this is the function of a standard language to allow a speech community to use its own language in order to participate in the cultural, scientific, and other developments of the modern world;
>
> 5) frame-of-reference function - this is the function of a standard language to service as a frame of reference primarily in matters of language correctness but also in other aspects.

Among these functions, the unifying link is "the most widely developed standard language function in the great speech communities of Europe where traditionally the differences between dialects have constituted a barrier to understanding" (Garvin, ibid). A standard variety serves as a means of communication and a unifying bond in communities where there are dialectical differences. Furthermore, in most cases it is the standard language, not a local dialect, which serves as a means of national identification with respect to foreigners. In explaining the separatist function of a standard language, Garvin (ibid) states that "it is by developing its own standard language that a speech community moves from the status of being a dialect community to the status of being a language community, thus distinguishing itself from another language that may be related and/or politically dominant".

Achieving a degree of standardisation in language, and indeed in writing is not an easy process with a simple formula. Different developed countries with standardised languages are not known to have achieved this goal overnight or through one defined procedure. For example, the standardisation of the English writing system, which had been achieved without having to an established language academy (unlike Italian and French[13]), took centuries and still its spelling system continues to be a subject

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[13] According to Wikipidia the Accademia della Crusca (Academy of the Bran), was founded in Florence in 1583, and was the oldest linguistic academy in the world, and

of debate (Bryson, 1990). In Africa, Swahili is one of the languages that have been going through the process of standardisation. Mhina, George A (1976), citing W. H. Whitely (1959), observes how a standardisation of a language and orthography could be a lengthy and complex undertaking when he discusses the standardisation of Swahili. He reveals that the Inter-Territorial (Kiswahili) Language Committee of East Africa, which comprised governments from four British territories (Kenya, Uganda, Tanganika and Zanizibar), played a significant role but the standardisation of Swahili is still an ongoing process. While this indicates how a challenging a task it is to achieve standardisation of a writing system, it also demonstrates that a lack of standardisation is not as such a critical or detrimental factor to a writing system, because the fact that there are some differences in the spelling of British and American English have not created huge communication problems. In fact, language, as it is, is dynamic with characteristics of variations in pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax as a result of time and place. Although, in addition to its functions that are discussed above, a standard language is a necessary precondition for the use of the language in a modern, literate society and for an elimination or reduction of confusion in communication in writing, the procedures to follow to achieve it can be difficult or controversial even an established language academy. Selecting one

the most important institution responsible for regulating the Italian language. Meanwhile, L'Académie française or the French Academy was established in 1635 to regulate matters relating to the French language.

variety amongst several other dialects of a language can alienate the people

whose dialects are not chosen. Therefore, it is imperative that a conscious and

informed approach is followed by those people responsible for the

development of a writing system when embarking on a standardization of a

language. Each linguistic and community context must be taken into account,

without ignoring the political implications, cost benefit analysis, and the

rights of individuals and communities, when standardizing a language and

its writing system.

Applying this in the context of Oromo we will now discuss an overview of the

early history of the development of Oromo as a written form.

3.2. *An overview the early history of writing Oromo*

This section discusses the early history of Oromo writing. It also analyses how

different early Oromo writers used the Roman alphabet to represent aspects

of the language.

Oromo is widely believed to have not been written until the early 1840's[14] -

and indeed the first available evidence for written Oromo is a book on the

elements of the language, which was written by Krapf in 1840. Another book,

Vocabulary of the Galla Language, followed this immediately in 1842 by the

---

[14] However there were other forms of communication used as a precursor to the written system, such as messages conveyed via knots tied in a piece of a rope or rituals incorporating the use of footprints left by hunters, etc.

same author, who lived and travelled extensively as a missionary among the Oromo people in Ethiopia. Before the end of the 19th century other notable writers such as Tutschek (1844; 1845); Massaia (1867), Viterbo (1892), and Onesimus Nesib (1894, 1899) wrote or translated various books (but mainly parts of the Bible) into the Oromo language.

By and large, it was the European missionaries, scholars and diplomats, who were responsible for making pioneering efforts to translate Oromo into written from the 19th century. The Europeans' interest in the Oromo language was mainly driven by their motivation to spread the Word of God amongst the Oromo people as well as their desire to teach the language to their fellow Europeans. In his preface to Krapf's book (1842:i), C. W. Isenberg explains the reason why the author was engaged in collecting Oromo vocabulary:

> I think it proper to observe, that Mr. Krapf sent this vocabulary last summer from Shoa; having prepared it in Galla and German, not with a view to have it printed, but only to communicate it into those who might probably be sent to his assistance, in order to aid them in preparing themselves for their work.

Foot, a British Diplomat, who wrote in Oromo some seventy years after Krapf, had a similar purpose for his efforts. Foot (1913: VI) writes:

> I venture to publish this book in the hope
> that it may prove of service to those of my
> country men whose duties, official or other,
> may call them to have dealings with Gallas.

Even though the interests and objectives of the early Oromo writers have been primarily to facilitate the teaching-learning of the language to their fellow Europeans and to spread the Word of God, their efforts in writing the language have undoubtedly contributed to the development of Oromo writing. For example, it can be claimed that the works of early Oromo writers have become a foundation or a stepping stone for subsequent Oromo study and writing. It was not an easy undertaking for the early Oromo writers to write a language that had never been written. Their salient contribution lay primarily not in their accurate, effective, or otherwise representation of the aspects of the language, but in their mere attempt to write in a language that had previously not been written. This had an obvious symbolic significance for the Oromo because it would play a role in making the Oromo people believe that their language could be written just like other languages, such as Amharic, which they would be probably aware of as having a written form. The other point worth mentioning here is that the early Oromo writers did not shy away from writing in Oromo despite the difficult and challenging political circumstances that existed in Ethiopia (see Chapter V).

The possible motivational and inspirational role of the early Oromo writers for the latter Oromo generations becomes clearer when the history of Oromo writing system is considered as a whole. This entails looking at the works of prominent Oromo writers and an investigation of how the official Oromo writing system evolved. Of particular note here is Onesimus Nesib, an Oromo person known primarily for his translation into Oromo of the Bible. Even though all of Onesimus Nesib's works were written in the Ge'ez script, his subjects and presentation were similar to that of the Oromo pioneer writers, such as Krapf. Just like Krapf, Onesimus Nesib wrote a dictionary, *The Galla Spelling Book* and translated a faith book, the Bible, into Oromo. Both writers chose similar subjects to translate or write in Oromo. Although Onesimus Nesib did not give a reason for his use of the Ge'ez script in his Oromo writing, it might be the case that he was inspired by Krapf in his translation of the Bible because Krapf's Oromo translation of *The Gospel according to St John* had already been written in the Ge'ez script.

Since most of the early Oromo writers were foreigners with limited Oromo knowledge in addition to the prevailing unfavourable political conditions which discouraged the promotion of Oromo, their task of learning and writing in Oromo was clearly demanding. The lack of consistency in the written representation of some Oromo sounds could be a manifestation of the writers' limited knowledge of the language and the absence of political

support in providing them the resources they would have required. The fact that the early writers wrote in two different scripts, the Roman and the Ge'ez, without a full commitment to one or the other, indicates the presence of confusion in the choice of script for Oromo writing. This has been and, to some extent, remains to be a subject of wide debate among some people in Ethiopia (see Chapter VII).

A study of the works of the early Oromo writers reveals that the choice of a script was a recognized issue by the writers; but it was not taken seriously by any one person, for example, by way of presenting and following up a debate for or against one or the other script. As stated above, Krapf did not offer the reason why he had to use the Roman alphabet to write his *Vocabulary of the Galla language,* and the Ge'ez script to write the *Gospel According to St. John.* Hodson and Walker (1922) were similar to Krapf in using both the Roman alphabet and the Ge'ez script. But they were different from Krapf in stating their reason for their use of both scripts. Thus they write:

> It was at one time intended to print all the sentences in the Ge'ez or Amharic characters as well as in Roman, but the idea was abandoned as unpractical so far as the more grammatical part of the work was concerned. (Hodson and Walker (1922: 9)

Hodson and Walker (ibid) go on to explain the reason why they had to use the Ge'ez script as being to "widen the utility and scope of the Grammar". According to Hodson and Walker (ibid) the use of the Ge'ez script would assist an Oromo learner to gain access to the Works of Onesimus Nesib. They also believed that there were a great number of Oromo people who could already read and write in the Ge'ez script and who could benefit from their book at that time.

There were some early Oromo writers who stated clearly the reason why they chose the Roman alphabet for Oromo writing. For example, Tutschek (1945:1), one of the earliest writers in Oromo in Roman alphabet, describes his reasons for not using the Ge'ez script as follows:

> If the Gallas have a written language, which is rendered possible by recent accounts, it must have a peculiar alphabet or syllabarium, as more of those hitherto known can express with exactness, all the sounds that are found in it. Hence alone it follows that the Galla cannot be written with the Amharic syllabarium, as has been attempted by the translator of the Canticles in Bruce's travels II-104, since notwithstanding its richness that syllabarium fails to convey many of the sounds to be met with in Galla, and on the other hand it contains not a few of which no trace is to be found in the language. It appears to me that the adaptation of Roman characters to Galla sounds, as far as it is possible, is the only way of making this interesting language accessible, and it

would lose nothing of its practical usefulness even though a method of writing peculiar to the language were to be discovered and deciphered.

Another early Oromo writer who preferred the Roman alphabet to the Ge'ez script in writing Oromo was Cerulli (1922:15):

The author or authors (of the Galla Spelling Book) write the Galla in Ge'ez characters; therefore, they are obliged to use a very complicated transcription to express the sounds of the Galla language with the letters of the Ge'ez alphabet which express very imperfectly even the sounds of Ge'ez language.

As can be seen from the above quotations, neither Tutshcek nor Cerulli provided a reason for choosing the Ge'ez script as a basis for Oromo writing system. Both of these writers state that Oromo "cannot be written with the Ge'ez script" (Tutschek, ibid) which is imperfect even in representing the Ge'ez language (Cerulli, ibid). Despite of a lack of a convincing reason for their choice of a script for Oromo writing, the influence of the early Oromo writers on the immediate and latter generations has been in evidence by the fact that Oromo has continued to be written in various scripts until the beginning of 1990's.

Tutschek (ibid) and Cerulli's (ibid) comments that the Ge'ez script was not suitable for Oromo writing have remained an important topic of discussion and an issue of concern for academics and scholars in contemporary Ethiopia (Chapter VII). Tutschek and Cerulli's assertions, quoted above, raise not only the debate as to whether the Ge'ez script or the Roman alphabet is more suitable for Oromo writing (see Chapter VII), but encourage one consider how best to use effectively any chosen script to represent aspects of a language in writing. In this regard, despite their efforts and contributions to Oromo writing, the early Oromo writers (see below) - and in particular those writers who used the Roman alphabet - at best struggled to achieve consistency and uniformity in representing the sounds of the language. Below, selected works of four early Oromo writers (Krapf, Foot, Cerulli, and Hodson and Walker) are examined with a view to analysing the representation of some Oromo consonants, geminates and vowels in writing.

3.2.1. Consonant representations

The early Oromo writers who used the Roman alphabet were similar in their representation of most of Oromo sounds. They differed, however, in their representation of sounds such as affricates, ejectives and the glottal stop, which had no equivalent graphemes or letters in the Roman alphabet. Table 6

gives a list of some sounds that had been represented in various ways by four

early Oromo writers.

Table 6. List of Oromo sounds differently represented by some early Oromo writers

	/ s′ /	/ k′ /	/ t′ /	/tʃ/	/ tʃ′/	/ d′ /	/ dʒ /	/ p′ /	/ n′ /
Krapf	sh	k	t	tsh	tsh	d	tsh	p	gn
Foot	sh	k	t	ch	ch	d	j	p	ny
Cerulli	š	q	ṭ	č	ç̣	ḍ	ǧ	Ṗ	ñ
Hodson and Walker	š	q	ṭ	č	ç̣	ḍ	j	p	ñ

Source: Compiled by the author based on Krapf (1842), Foot (1913), Cerulli (1922), Hodson and Walker (1922)

It is evident from the table above that Krapf used the same triagraph "tsh" to

represent three segments / tʃ /, / tʃ′/, / dʒ /) which would make reading

confusing or difficult. The following words illustrate how Krapf used "tsh" to

represent three segments in his *Vocabulary of the Galla language* (Krapf, 1842).

Figure 27 Examples of Krapf's use of "tsh" to represent different phonemes

ratsha [ra:tʃa] frog

mutsha [mutʃ′a:] child

hūtshi [hudʒi] act, action

Foot (1913) used the diagraph, **"ch"**, to represent more than one sound:

Figure 28 Examples of "ch" representing two phonemes

    racha   [ra:tʃa]   frog

    mucha [mutʃ'a:] child

From Table 6 it is clear that Cerulli, and Hodson and Walker were similar in their representation of many of the Oromo consonant segments. They differed, however, in their representation of the phonemes / tʃ' /, / dʒ /, and / p' /.

Unlike Cerulli, and Hodson and Walker, Krapf and Foot did not differentiate glottalized and plain segments in their writings (see Table 6). This aspect makes reading their works more confusing since, in effect, a character or a symbol is used to represent two or more phonemes. It is also confusing because unlike, for example, the English spelling system where a letter may occasionally represent one or more sounds as in the letter 'c ' representing / s / ('city') and / k / ('cat'), Krapf and Foot's systems of representing Oromo phonemes continuously employ a letter or letters for writing two or more distinct phonemes:

Figure 29 Examples of words from Krapf's Vocabulary of the Galla language where a letter has been used to represent glottalised and plain segments

letters	used as plain	Gloss	used as Glottalised	Gloss
/ k / and / k' /	**kulkullu** [kʼulkʼul:u]	pure	**bokaia** [bok:a:]	rain
/ d / and /ɗ/	**dagma** [dam:a]	honey	**der'da** [ɗaɗa:]	butter
/ t / and /tʼ/	**toko**　[tok:o]	once	**taba** [tʼaba]	joke

Figure 30 Examples of words from Foot's Galla-English-Galla Dictionary where a letter has been used to represent plain and glottalized segments

Letters	used as plain	Gloss	used as Glottalised	Gloss
/ k /and / k' /	Kamisa [kamisa]	Thursday	kulkulu [kʼulkʼulʔu]	pure
/ d / and /ɗ/	damma [da:ma]	honey	dada　[ɗaɗa:]	butter
/ t / and /tʼ/	toko [tok:o]	one	taba [tʼaba]	joke

Given the inconsistency in the representation of gemination in early Oromo writing (see below), the representation of two or more sounds by the same letter would make it more difficult to read books written by Krapf and Foot. For example, in Figure 30, the letters / k / and / t / were used to represent the

ejective consonants in the words "**kulkullu"** (pure) and **"t'aba"** (joke)

respectively. Both words can assume different meanings if the letters / k / and

/ t / were pronounced as plain (/ k / and / t /), rather than ejective / k' / and

/ t' /. Thus the words would be:

kulkullu   [kulkul:u]   calling chicken
taba   [tab:a]*   hill, highland

*Here, note that the fact that / b / is geminate would not have made a

difference since gemination has not been consistently represented (see 4.3,

below).

Of the four early Oromo writers discussed here, Cerulli (1922) was unique in

identifying and representing the Oromo glottal stop by an apostrophe (/ '/)

mark. He was also different from the other early Oromo writers in trying to

deal with the problems of word division (i.e. whether or not (for example,

bound morphemes, possessive pronouns, conjunctions, and compound

words) should be written conjunctively (joined) or disjunctively separated). –

for further discussion see Chapter IX) especially when a word with an initial

vowel is preceded by a word with a final vowel in a sentence. For example,

Cerulli (1922:192) wrote the following:

Háarkā͡bba tokkótti ibíddā qabú͡nsodātánu

[harka abba tok:ot:i ibida kʼabu: insoda:tanu]

("One does not get frightened to touch a fire as long

as it is in someone else's hand" - My translation).

3.2.2. Gemination representation

An examination of early Oromo writing shows that gemination as a feature

has been recognised and marked, albeit inconsistently, from the beginning by

Krapf and by some Oromo writers who used the Roman alphabet. Invariably,

the early Oromo writers who marked gemination did so by using double

letters as a mechanism of representing germination in writing. However, the

works of Hodson and Walker (1922) do not show a representation of

gemination as a feature either by way of doubling letters or by any other

means. While some writers have been meticulous and consistent in their

representation of gemination (for example, Cerulli (1922)), others have been

less consistent in identifying and representing geminates. Foot (1913) was the

most inconsistent writer in geminate representation as can be illustrated in

Figures 31, 32, and 33.

Figure 31 Examples where double letters are used by Foot (1913) to represent geminates

. **chabbi**   [tʃʼab:i:]   snow

damma   [dam:a]   honey

happi   [hapʼ:i:]   thin

gudda   [gud:a]   large

abba   [ab:a]   father

Figure 32. Examples where Foot (1913) used double letters to represent single sounds

Double letters used to represent a phoneme		Gloss
laffe	[lafe:]	bone
horri	[hori:]	money
manna	[mana]	house
sarre	[sare:]	dog
malla	[mala:]	boil
kalle	[kale:]	kidney

Figure 33. Examples where Foot (1913) used single letters to represent geminate sounds

toko   [tok:o]   one

soda   [sod:a]   brother-in-law

bupa   [bup':a]   egg

hari   [har:i:]   grey

koto   k'ot:o: axe

waga   [wag:a]   year

In *Vocabulary of the Galla language*, Krapf marked gemination by using the

doubling of the letters (Figure 34):

Figure 34 Krapf's representation of germination

dibba   [ɗib:a]   hundred

kulkullu   [ku'lk'ul:u:]   pure

adda   [ad:a]   brain

Just like Foot, Krapf was also not consistent in his use of doubling letters to

represent gemination. There have been a number of words in which he either

incorrectly used or omitted double letters to represent gemination.

Figure 35. Examples of words where Krapf (1942) did not double letter(s) to represent gemination

budena	[bud:ena]	bread
dukana	[duk:ana]	darkness
obolésa	[ob:ole:sa]	brother

Figure 36. Examples of words where Krapf (1942) used double letters

laffa	[lafa]	earth
lamma	[lama]	twice
madda	[mada:]	boil
manna	[mana]	house

3.2.3. Vowel representations

The five short Oromo vowels (/a, e, i, o, u/ have been represented by all the early Oromo writers in a similar way. However, Oromo long vowels were represented by the writers in different ways. It needs mentioning here that none of the early Oromo writers used double vowels, as some did use double letters to represent geminated (see above) to represent long vowels.

Among the earlier writers of Oromo in the Roman alphabet, Cerulli (1922:18) stands out in his use of twenty vowels differentiated by superscript, as follows:

a, ā, ä, å, ī, e, ë, ie, ę, ę̄, ĭ, i, ī, o, ō, ŏ, u, ū, ŭ, ūō

Since Cerulli's work dealt mainly with songs, proverbs, folktales, stories etc., and because he did not provide us with lists of words or examples as to how or where these symbols were used to represent the "vowels", it has not been possible to present examples illustrating how each of the twenty vowels is used. However, the following Oromo song is a quote to demonstrate how Cerulli laboriously attempted to differentiate Oromo vowel quality the way he perceived.

***Sidâm*ā gárā ǧábsā**	[sida:ma gara: c'absa:]
durisa͡mbullú mití	[durisa imbulu miti]
ǧimmiččâ kabâ galčâ	[jim:č:a kaba: galč:a]

1. The Sidâmā with broken belly, 2. We will not dwell before him. 3. Let the native of Ǧimmā return to (his native) walls (Cerulli, 1922:51).

It can be noted in this example that Cerulli introduces (/ **â** /), a vowel he has not used with the same diacritic mark, in addition to the twenty vowels listed

above. Despite Cerulli's identification of twenty five vowels, this author considers that there are only actually five short and long vowels and the remaining fifteen are either non existent (for example, *ie* and *ūō*) or have no phonemic value being simply allophones.

Foot (1913) was the only early writer in Oromo who has not made a distinction between short and long vowels throughout his writing. For example, Foot enters "**lafa**" and **"kufa"** twice in his book with different meanings. However, each of the words can assume a different meaning if the medial / a /and / u / are written differently. Thus:

"lafa" ([lafa]) with short medial / a / is "ground", "land" or "earth"

'lafa' ([la:fa:]) with a long medial / a / has a meaning 'soft'

'kufa' ([k'ufa]) with a short medial / u / has a meaning 'cough'

'kufa' ([k'u:fa:]) with a long medial / u / has a meaning 'rich' or 'wealth'

Similarly, Foot does not make any length distinction when he uses / e /, / i / and / o /:

dera	[ɗe:ra:]	long
demi	[de:mi]	go
diga	[ɗi:ga]	blood
hinafa	[hina:f:a:]	envy
toko	[toko]	one
nora	[no:ra:]	chalk

Contrary to Foot, Krapf occasionally represented long vowels by using various marks as can be seen in the following examples:

tshōma	[tʃ'o:ma]	fat
obolésa	[obole:s:a]	brother
dumésa	[dume:s:a]	cloud.
Hantūta	[hantu:ta]	mouse
arāra	[ara:ra]	peace

Although, unlike Foot (1913), Krapf had represented, albeit intermittently, long vowels, an examination of his works shows that there has been no distinction made between the short and long / i /. For example, Krapf (1942)

wrote '**diga'** (blood), whereas it should have been written with a long / i: /, by

doubling the 'i' as in '**diiga'** ([ɗiːga]). Similarly, Krapf wrote the Oromo word

for 'sheep' ([hoːlaː]) with an 'o' even though it should have been written with

a double 'o' to indicate that the segment is a long vowel.

Hodson and Walker acknowledge and explain in their introduction to their

book that there were various vowel qualities in the Oromo language. They

identified five short and five long vowels. They also distinguish long vowels

by putting a horizontal line above the letters (see Table 7).

Table 7. Hodson and Walker's (1922) Oromo vowel representation:

Short Vowel	Long Vowels in words	Gloss
a	ā **gāri** [gaːriː]	good
i	ī **nīti** [niːtiː]	wife
o	ō **dulōma** [duloːmaː]	old
u	ū **gūtu** [guːtuː]	full

Despite their explanation in their introduction to use a line above a symbol for

a short vowel, for example, / ē / to represent the long / e /, Hodson and Walker

invariably used / ei / to mark the segment within the text. A close examination

of their book, *An Elementary and Practical Grammar of the Galla or Oromo Language*, shows that / ei /, not / ē /, has been consistently used to represent long / e /.

Figure 37 Example of words where /ei / is used by Hodson and Walker to mark long / e /

kaleisa   [kale:sa]   yesterday

gangei   [ga:nge:]   mule

gaḍei   [gad'e:]   bad

adeim   [ade:m]   go

boyei   [bo:y:e:]   pig

In contradiction to the proposition that Oromo does not allow diphthongs (see Chapter II), Hodson and Walker (1922:11) claim that the Oromo language employs the following diphthongs:

ai as in aisle or I   ei as ei in eight

au as au in Mauser or o in how   uo as uo in quorum

The author has searched for examples of Oromo words with 'diphthongs' that have been used in Hodson and Walker (ibid) but has only been able to find

very few words with / ai /, / uo / and / au/. Some of the words found however are listed below (Figure 38):

Figure 38..Examples of diphtongs in Hodson and Walker (1922)

jawei [dʒ aw:e:]   python

hintāu [hintaʔu]   it cannot be

faiya [fay:a]   well

ḓio [ɗiʔo]   near

kuotu [kot:u]   come

Except for / ei /, the other sequence of vowels have been rarely used by Hodson and Walker. It has been noted earlier in this chapter that / ei / has in fact been used as a representation of long /e/. This thesis claims that / ei / used by these writers (at least based on the Macha [matʃ':a:] dialect) represents a long /e/ rather than a diphthong. Similarly, it can be claimed that one of the two consecutive vowels in a word in Hodson and Walker (ibid) is either redundant as in the first / a / and / u / in the words **faiya** ([faj:a]) "well" and kuotu ([kot:u]) "come" or simply indicates an omission of the glottal stop, as in **hintāu** ([hintaʔu]) "it cannot be" and "dhio" ([ɗiʔo]) "near". This proposition can be substantiated by considering the Oromo word for "moon"

which Hodson and Walker wrote as *jia* rather than [dʒiʔa] with the glottal stop.

In summary, the early history of Oromo writing is relatively a recent phenomenon and dates back to 1840s. Except for Onesimus Nesib, an Oromo national who used the Ge'ez script in his translation of the Bible to Oromo and in his other writings such as the *Galla Spelling Book,* most of the early Oromo writers were Europeans who, by and large, used the Roman alphabet in their translation of parts the Bible into Oromo. It has been noted that the writers did their best to represent the phonological aspects of the Oromo language in writing. However, they were not always consistent in their representation of some aspects of the Oromo language, in particular the geminates, affricate consonants phonemes and long vowels.

It can be argued that Oromo as a written form has continued to evolve through many stages from its earliest inception as a result of the country's transitional societal, political, religious and economic changes. The impact of this now leads us onto a discussion of the use of non-Roman scripts in Oromo writing.

Chapter IV

4. Writing Oromo in non-Roman scripts

In addition to the Roman script, discussed above, Oromo has been written to varying degrees in three other scripts: namely, the Ge'ez script, Arabic alphabet and the Shaykh Bakri Sapalo orthography. Among these, the Ethiopic (Ge'ez) script interests us most because it is widely used for writing Amharic, the official language, and some other languages such as Gurage, Tigrinya and Tigre in the country. Moreover, the Ge'ez script is believed by many Amhara academicians (for example, Baye Yimam (1992) and Ayele Bekerie (1997)) to be more suitable than the Roman alphabet for Oromo writing. Before examining the extent to which this holds true, it is necessary to look at the two other scripts (the Arabic alphabet and the Shaykh Bakri Sapalo orthography) in which Oromo has also been written as a basis for comparison.

4.1. The Arabic alphabet

The Arabic alphabet is not widely recognised as a script that has been extensively used to write Oromo. Apart from verbal confirmation of some friends (Taha Abdi and Elemo Ali), the researcher has not come across Oromo

materials written in the Arabic alphabet. The two Oromo friends stated that they had seen copies of parts of the Quran written in Oromo in the Arabic alphabet in Harar, a city located in eastern part of Oromia. Professor Richard Hayward of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, also informed the author before his retirement that he had seen the Arabic alphabet being used to write Oromo by Muslim Sheiks in Wollo in north Ethiopia during one of his visits to the area. These opinions are supported by Andrejewski (1980), who stated that the Arabic alphabet, (modified by a few diacritical points), was used to write the Oromo language in both the Harar and Bale regions. He further noted that the Oromo texts in the Arabic script were used mainly for the transcription of religious materials, such as texts of the poems used during the *dhikr* meetings of the *Sufis*, praise poems for the saints and some religious instruction materials. These Oromo texts in the Arabic scripts did not have a wide circulation and indeed, as far as the researcher is aware, there are no existing collections of the manuscripts for reference. Andrejewski (ibid) claims that he had difficulty in obtaining copies of these documents or permission to photograph them, because of the prevailing sensitivity of the issues relating to the Muslim community in Ethiopia at that time.

According to (Wellisch, 1978), the Arabic alphabet is believed to have evolved in 4th Century A.D. and is generally considered as having been used to write many other languages in the world besides the Arabic language itself. For example, Turkish has been written in Arabic for centuries but only recently, in 1928, it was changed to the Roman alphabet following the presidential declaration of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Wellisch, ibid). Other languages that were written in the Arabic alphabet included Croatian, Kashmir, Kazak, Kurdish, Malay, Punjabi, Sindhi and Urdu. In Africa, Hausa, Somali and Swahili are some of the languages that have been written in Arabic but all of them later adopted the Roman alphabet. Despite the recent tendency of many nations to abandon the Arabic script in favour of the Roman alphabet, the Arabic script is still popular and is used to write some languages in non-Arabic speaking countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Iran, Israel and China to write one or more of the official national languages, which include Pashto, Punjabi, Urdu, Dari, Persian, Kashmiri, Sindhi, and Uyghur (Wellisch, 1978).

In comparison to the other scripts (such as the Roman alphabet) the Arabic script was swift in its imposition on and adoption by a large number of people across the Middle East, Asia and North Africa in a relatively short length of time. This was achieved partly due to the association of the script to Islam and

due to the imposition on all Muslims to read and recite the Quran and other liturgical and theological literature in no script other than Arabic (Wellisch, 1978).

The Arabic alphabet has twenty-eight letters many of which look similar but they are able to be distinguished from one another by dots above or below their central part. Most Arabic letters change form depending on whether they appear at the beginning, middle or end of a word, or on their own (see Figure 40). There are also a number of vowel diacritic lines and points for short vowels (see Figure 39) which are usually omitted in commonly written Arabic, except in the Quran or in the text and grammar books. Consonant gemination is also represented in the Arabic system by means of diacritic marks. The Arabic system is written from right to left contrary to the present system of writing from left to write in the Roman alphabet system. Furthermore, unlike the Roman alphabet which has upper and lower cases, the Arabic Alphabet has only one case. Another unique aspect of the Arabic script is that it is always written in a cursive form whether printed or written by hand.

Figure 39 Arabic vowel diacritics and other symbols

لا   بُّ   بِّ   بَّ   بْ   بَّ   بُو   بِي   بَا   بُ   بِ   بَ

lām 'alif   šadda   sukūn   ḍamma   kasra   fatḥa

lā   bbu   bbi   bba   bb   b   bū   bī   bā   bu   bi   ba

Figure 40 Arabic consonants

IPA	Latin	Name		Final	Medial	Initial	Isolated	IPA	Latin	Name		Final	Medial	Initial	Isolated
[ṭ]	ṭ	ṭā'	طاء	ﻂ	ﻄ	ﻃ	ط	[ʔ]	'(a)	'alif	ألف	ﺎ	—	—	ا
[ẓ]	ẓ	ẓā'	ظاء	ﻆ	ﻈ	ﻇ	ظ	[b]	b	bā'	باء	ﺐ	ﺒ	ﺑ	ب
[ʕ]	'	'ayn	عين	ﻊ	ﻌ	ﻋ	ع	[t]	t	tā'	تاء	ﺖ	ﺘ	ﺗ	ت
[ʁ]	ġ	ġayn	غين	ﻎ	ﻐ	ﻏ	غ	[θ]	ṯ	ṯā'	ثاء	ﺚ	ﺜ	ﺛ	ث
[f]	f	fā'	فاء	ﻒ	ﻔ	ﻓ	ف	[dʒ]	ǧ	ǧīm	جيم	ﺞ	ﺠ	ﺟ	ج
[q]	q	qāf	قاف	ﻖ	ﻘ	ﻗ	ق	[ħ]	ḥ	ḥā'	حاء	ﺢ	ﺤ	ﺣ	ح
[k]	k	kāf	كاف	ﻚ	ﻜ	ﻛ	ك	[x]	ḫ	ḫā'	خاء	ﺦ	ﺨ	ﺧ	خ
[l]	l	lām	لام	ﻞ	ﻠ	ﻟ	ل	[d]	d	dāl	دال	ﺪ	—	—	د
[m]	m	mīm	ميم	ﻢ	ﻤ	ﻣ	م	[ð]	ḏ	ḏāl	ذال	ﺬ	—	—	ذ
[n]	n	nūn	نون	ﻦ	ﻨ	ﻧ	ن	[r]	r	rā'	راء	ﺮ	—	—	ر
[h]	h	hā'	هاء	ﻪ	ﻬ	ﻫ	ه	[z]	z	zāy	زاي	ﺰ	—	—	ز
[w]	w	wāw	واو	ﻮ	—	—	و	[s]	s	sīn	سين	ﺲ	ﺴ	ﺳ	س
[j]	y	yā'	ياء	ﻲ	ﻴ	ﻳ	ي	[ʃ]	š	šīn	شين	ﺶ	ﺸ	ﺷ	ش
		hamza	همزة	ء	—	—	—	[ṣ]	ṣ	ṣād	صاد	ﺺ	ﺼ	ﺻ	ص
								[ḍ]	ḍ	ḍād	ضاد	ﺾ	ﻀ	ﺿ	ض

The author has not been able to unearth in this study the details of any changes that were required for the adoption of the Arabic alphabet to write Oromo nor the names of the people or group of people who were originally responsible for the use of Arabic Alphabet to write the Oromo language. Hence, it has not been possible to comment on the effectiveness or otherwise of the adoption of the Arabic alphabet in writing the Oromo language. However, it can be deduced from the literature on the arabification of languages and experiences of many other languages previously written in the Arabic alphabet that the system has not been successfully used and in many cases (for example, in the case of Turkish, Somali and Swahili) it was discarded. The dogmatic application of the script to the other languages, which often made writing and reading ambiguous, has been cited as being one of the reasons for many societies to abandon the Arabic script (Wellisch, 1978). Of course some countries, for example, Turkey, according to Wellisch (ibid.), have had political reasons for abandoning the Arabic script and opting an alternative one (in this case the Roman alphabet).

The viability of the Arabic script for Oromo writing has not been widely tested as the script has been reportedly used by very few people for limited purposes. It can be argued, however, that the script can be adapted with the addition of dots, and can be used to write Oromo as it has been done to write many other languages. One problem that can be anticipated, though, is the

fact that the Arabic script is associated with Islam, a religion practised by a significant percentage of the Oromo population. Since there are also Oromo people with other religions including Christianity and *Waaqefatta* (Oromo traditional religion), the use of Arabic for writing Oromo could be a reason for misunderstanding and division among the Oromo. Fortunately for the Oromo, neither the Arabic alphabet nor the Ge'ez script had been officially and widely used enough for the people to have formed a bond with it. But it is to be remembered that even in countries with a population of predominantly Islamic religion believers (for example, Turkey and Somalia), the allegiance of the people to the Arabic script and the division between them had been limited. So we cannot stipulate one way or the other that the Arabic script would have continued as a basis for Oromo writing system had it been previously permitted and used for Oromo writing.

Political and religious factors aside, linguistically *prima facie,* it appears that there would not be significant problems if the Arabic script were to be adapted for writing Oromo, as it possesses the essential features such as the representations of vowel length, geminates and glottal stop which are suited for the writing and pronunciation of its words. The lack of these features in the Ge'ez script is often presented by the proponents of the *Qubee* (the new Oromo writing system) as the reason for not using the script (see Chapter VII) for Oromo writing. This is not to claim (or recommend) at this point that the

Arabic script should be considered as a writing system for Oromo. Indeed, to be in a position to make a suggestion like that would require an indepth study on the advantages of the proposal as well as its feasibility and acceptability amongst the people. It would be helpful to note that Shaykh Bakri Sapalo (Hayward and Mohammed Hassen, 1981) and Sheekh M. Rashaad Kabir (interview with Taha Abdi (one of the founders of the Oromo Liberation Front), 19 February, 2005), who knew how to read and write in Arabic, did not choose this script even though both men were very much concerned about Oromo being an unwritten language. Shaykh Bakri Sapalo, who also knew Ge'ez, preferred an alternative script to both Arabic and Ge'ez and went on to invent a bespoke Oromo script that he believed would suit writing the language better. The next section discusses Shaykh Bakri Sapalo's script.

4.2. The Shaykh Bakri Sapalo script

The Shaykh Bakri Sapalo script (Figure 41) was an attempt by an Oromo native speaker to create a fully-fledged "home born" writing system for the Oromo language in the 1950's (Hayward and Mohammed Hassen, 1981). Like the use of the Arabic alphabet for Oromo writing, the use and existence of this script had not been widely known to Oromo or Ethiopian writers until the publication of an article by Hayward and Mohammed Hassen in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, (*Vol. XLIV, Part 3, 1981). Hayward

and Mohammed Hassen (ibid) offer a detailed explanation of the obstacles Shaykh Bakri Sapalo encountered in the process of realising his effort to develop a home-grown Oromo script. They claim that Shaykh Bakri Sapalo was probably the first Oromo to see the problems inherent in trying to write the Oromo language by means of scripts that had been devised primarily for other languages. According to Hayward and Mohammed Hassen (1981), Shaykh Bakri Sapalo was probably inspired and motivated to undertake this exercise by strong nationalistic sentiments and convictions. They report that he stated "…that a people such as the Oromo, possessing glorious historical traditions and a uniquely democratic society, was nevertheless condemned to obscurity without a means of writing" (Hayward and Mohammed Hassen, (1981: 553). According to them, due to a negative reaction and intimidation by the Amhara officials, Shaykh Bakri Sapalo was forced to flee Ethiopia to Somalia, where he was able to develop and use his orthography and where he finally died in 1980 at the age of 85.

After developing the alphabet, Shaykh Bakri Sapalo taught it to his students and used it for writing poems and manuscripts, and copies of these are reported to be in existence (Hayward and Mohammed Hassen, ibid: 553). It is also claimed that there are still people in Oromia, who can use and are familiar with the Shaykh Bakri Sapalo's alphabet.

The Figure below is a copy of Shaykh Bakri Sapalo's core alphabet which has been compiled by Hayward and Mohammed Hassen (1981:556) on the basis of the Shaykh's manuscripts. To the left of each row is written the consonant letter corresponding to the consonant base for the forms of the row. There are thirteen columns in Figure 41 and each one corresponds to a different vocalization or other phonologically relevant feature added to the base.

Hayward and Mohammed Hassen (ibid: 564) conclude their article by saying that the Shaykh's alphabet will probably be of no practical use, it nevertheless remains "on record as being a highly efficient way of writing the Oromo language". Apart from making this positive comment about the script, the authors do not explain why it should or should not be considered to be Oromo orthography. Indeed, we understand from the article of these writers that Shaykh Bakri Sapalo was a person who studied both in the Ge'ez and Arabic scripts in addition to the one he designed for Oromo. What can be concluded from Shaykh Bakri Sapalo's action in this regard is that he rejected Ge'ez and Arabic scripts, which he was familiar with, believing that they were not the most suitable scripts for Oromo writing. His decisions could as well be based on his feeling of nationalism reflected in the above quotation "that a people such as the Oromo, possessing glorious historical traditions and a uniquely democratic society," (Hayward and Mohammed Hassen, ibid) rather than on linguistic, social, economic, etc. consideration. His contribution

and efforts to develop an indigenous Oromo writing are admirable and

would be a useful subject for further study.

Figure 41 The Shaykh Bakri Sapalo Syllabary

Source: Hayward, R. J., and Mohammed Hassen (1981). The Oromo Orthography of Shaykh Bakri Sapalo. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 44. pp550-66.

4.3. The Ge'ez writing system

The Ge'ez [gi:z] script (also referred to by western writers (see for example Wellisch, 1978, and Daniels, 1996) as the Ethiopic script is primarily used to write Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, and Tigrigna, another Semitic language spoken in the north of the country and in Eritrea. The script was originally used for writing Giiz (Geez), a language that is not used any more except in the Orthodox Church and the Monasteries in Ethiopia. Despite the Ethiopian governments' policies of suppression of Oromo (see Chapter V), the Ge'ez script has been used to write Oromo for many decades for different purposes.

The origin of the script has been a subject of controversy with some scholars such as Baye Yimam (unpublished) arguing that it is a home-grown writing system, "…not an immigrant; it is indigenous" (see Baye Yimam, unpublished.). A number of writers including, Diringer (1947), Mercer (1920), and Bender (1976) believe that the Ge'ez or the Ethiopic script was brought to Ethiopia from South Arabia. In their discussion on the origin of the Ge'ez, Diringer (ibid: 231) state: "…South Arabian colonies established in Abyssinia in the second half of the first Millennium B.C. introduced into the territory the south Semitic speech and script".

The Ge'ez script is written from left to write and it consists of thirty-three

basic characters each of which is modified for six 'orders' of vowels (Table 8)

by way of an attachment of diacritic marks either to the right or left, or at the

top or bottom, or by shortening or lengthening one of the strokes. In addition

to these characters numbering 231, the system has forty characters (see Table

9) which represent special features such as labialization. Each character

represents a consonant and a vowel, which means that the vocalic element is

always attached to include the consonant element. The system has symbols

for the Roman equivalent vowels (see Table 11) but these stand on their own

in their own right and are not considered to be vowels. Thus, these symbols

and the orders that are used to represent the Amharic sounds, አ and ዐ, (/a/)

are actually not vowels. It is for this reason that Appleyard (1995:7) concludes:

"The Ethiopian script is not strictly speaking an alphabet, but is what is called

a syllabary." The Ge'ez script, contrary to this generalization, does not show

characteristics whereby syllables and graphemes correspond to each other.

For example, the monosyllabic words ሰው (säw) 'a person' and አንድ (änd) 'one'

respectively contain two and three graphemes. From this we can deduce that

in most cases a grapheme represents a consonant and vowel but this does not

mean that, in writing, each grapheme necessarily represents a syllable.

The Ge'ez writing system also uses special numerals (see row 18, Table 8) which Diringer (ibid) believes them to have been borrowed from the Ancient Greeks. It is interesting to note that the Ethiopian numeral system does not have a representation for "zero" (**0**) and is not convenient for arithmetic or calculations. Hence, the numerals are mostly used for recording calendars or page numbers in books. For accounting or mathematical purposes, the Arabic numerals are used along with the Ge'ez script in Ethiopia.

Table 8. The Ge'ez Script

	Roman[15]	ä	u	i	a	e	ï	o
1	h	ሀ	ሁ	ሂ	ሃ	ሄ	ህ	ሆ
2	h	ሐ	ሑ	ሒ	ሓ	ሔ	ሕ	ሖ
3	h	ኀ	ኁ	ኂ	ኃ	ኄ	ኅ	ኆ
4	l	ለ	ሉ	ሊ	ላ	ሌ	ል	ሎ
5	m	መ	ሙ	ሚ	ማ	ሜ	ም	ሞ
6	s	ሠ	ሡ	ሢ	ሣ	ሤ	ሥ	ሦ
7	r	ረ	ሩ	ሪ	ራ	ሬ	ር	ሮ
8	s	ሰ	ሱ	ሲ	ሳ	ሴ	ስ	ሶ
9	s'	ሸ	ሹ	ሺ	ሻ	ሼ	ሽ	ሾ
10	k'	ቀ	ቁ	ቂ	ቃ	ቄ	ቅ	ቆ
11	b	በ	ቡ	ቢ	ባ	ቤ	ብ	ቦ
12	t	ተ	ቱ	ቲ	ታ	ቴ	ት	ቶ
13	t'	ጠ	ጡ	ጢ	ጣ	ጤ	ጥ	ጦ
14	č	ቸ	ቹ	ቺ	ቻ	ቼ	ች	ቾ
15	c'	ጨ	ጩ	ጪ	ጫ	ጬ	ጭ	ጮ
16	n	ነ	ኑ	ኒ	ና	ኔ	ን	ኖ
17	n'	ኘ	ኙ	ኚ	ኛ	ኜ	ኝ	ኞ
18	a	አ	ኡ	ኢ	ኣ	ኤ	እ	ኦ
19	a	ዐ	ዑ	ዒ	ዓ	ዔ	ዕ	ዖ
20	k	ከ	ኩ	ኪ	ካ	ኬ	ክ	ኮ
21	h	ኸ	ኹ	ኺ	ኻ	ኼ	ኽ	ኾ
22	w	ወ	ዉ	ዊ	ዋ	ዌ	ው	ዎ
23	z	ዘ	ዙ	ዚ	ዛ	ዜ	ዝ	ዞ
24	ğ	ዠ	ዡ	ዢ	ዣ	ዤ	ዥ	ዦ
25	y	የ	ዩ	ዪ	ያ	ዬ	ይ	ዮ
26	d	ደ	ዱ	ዲ	ዳ	ዴ	ድ	ዶ
27	j	ጀ	ጁ	ጂ	ጃ	ጄ	ጅ	ጆ
28	g	ገ	ጉ	ጊ	ጋ	ጌ	ግ	ጎ
29	ts	ጸ	ጹ	ጺ	ጻ	ጼ	ጽ	ጾ
30	ts	ፀ	ፁ	ፂ	ፃ	ፄ	ፅ	ፆ
31	f	ፈ	ፉ	ፊ	ፋ	ፌ	ፍ	ፎ
32	p	ፐ	ፑ	ፒ	ፓ	ፔ	ፕ	ፖ
33	p'	ጰ	ጱ	ጲ	ጳ	ጴ	ጵ	ጶ

---

[15] The column 'Roman' is the researcher's representation in Roman of Amharic sounds. These letters are used when there is a need to transcribe Amharic sounds.

Table 9. Characters representing special phonetic features such as labialized Amharic sounds.

H	ሐ				
h	ኋ	ኍ	ኈ	ኊ	ኈ
l	ሏ				
m	ሟ				
s	ሧ				
r	ሯ				
s	ሷ				
s′	ጿ				
k′	ቋ	ቍ	ቊ	ቋ	ቌ
b	ቧ				
t	ቷ				
t′	ጧ				
č	ቿ				
t′	ፏ				
n	ኗ				
n,	ኟ				
k	ኳ	ኵ	ኰ	ኴ	ኰ
h	ኻ	ኽ	ኸ	ኼ	ኸ
z	ዟ				
ǧ	ዧ				
d	ዷ				
j	ጇ				
g	ጓ	ጕ	ጐ	ጔ	ጐ
^	ጷ				
f	ፏ				
p	ፓ				
P′	ጶ				

Table 10. The Ethiopian numerals

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
፩	፪	፫	፬	፭	፮	፯	፰	፱

10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
፲	፳	፴	፵	፶	፷	፸	፹	፺	፻

There have been concerns in Ethiopia as to whether or not the Ge'ez script

should be reformed in order to make it more efficient and user friendly for the

purpose of reading, writing, and learning Amharic. The most publicized

concern was that of Haddis Alamayyahu (1990), the author of *fiqir eska*

maqaabir, an Amharic novel. In his Introduction to the book, Haddis

Alamayyahu (1990: 7) writes:

> ዛሬ፡ ለማንኛዉም፡ ነገር፡ አቀዋራጭ፡ መንገድና፡
> ቅልጥፍና፡ በሚፈለግበት፡ ጊዜ፡ የፊደሎቻችን፡
> ያለመጠን፡ መብዛት፡ ትምህርታችንንም፡ ሆነ፡
> ስራችንን፡ ሳያስፈልግ፡ አስቸጋሪ፡ አድርጎብናል።

> In this day and age, when simplicity and
> efficiency are required, the existence of a
> large number of characters in our writing
> system has made our education and jobs
> unnecessarily cumbersome (My
> translation).

Haddis Alamayyahu recommended four points that ought to be considered in

modernising the Ge'ez script. Three of these dealt with the number of

characters that the system had and how to manage especially the superfluous

symbols. Haddis Alamayyahu's fourth concern was the obvious lack in the

Ge'ez system of distinguishing geminate and single sounds. By way of

implementing his ideas, Haddis Alamayyahu decided to use only one form

from each of the so called superfluous characters (such as the ones given in

rows number 1, 2, 3, and 21 (see Table 8)), all of which represent the sound

/ h /, in his novel, *Fiqir eska maqaabir*. It can be seen from Table 8 that the

phonemes / s / and / ts / are represented by two characters each ሰ and ሠ,

and ጸ and ፀ respectively which Haddis Alamayyahu decided to use only one

from each and left out the others as redundant. In his effort to solve the lack

of geminate representation in the Ge'ez script, Haddis Alamayyahu used a

dot mark on top of a character that needed to be geminated. Thus he wrote ገና

[gan:a:] with a dot above the character representing [n:a] (ና) to make it

geminate, and omitted the dot when writing the same characters (ገና) so that

ና was plain and consequently the words were distinguished and meant

"Christmas"; and "yet" or "still" respectively. Haddis Alamayyahu's efforts

were considered by students and teachers of the time of the publication of the

book to be revolutionary as he creatively and courageously deviated from the

status quo and not only suggested but also implemented the reduction of the

superfluous characters and the representation of geminate sounds with a dot

on top of the relevant characters. Bender et al. (1976) support Haddis

Alamayyahu's efforts by asserting that the problem of geminate

representation in the Ge'ez script can be solved by putting dots (¨) on top of a symbol to show that it is a geminate. Haddis Alamayyahu was consistent throughout his book in using the same character in spite of the traditional association of some of them to specified words or concepts. For example, he used ሃ instead of ሃ which is traditionally used to write ሃይማኖት [ha:ima:no:t], "religion".

The problems associated with the use of the Ge'ez script for writing Amharic and the need for its reform was acknowledged and recognised well before the publication of Haddis Alamayyehu's *Fiqir eska maqaabir*. Abraham Demoz (1983) presents a survey of efforts made to reform the Ge'ez script. According to him the first effort goes back to the fourteenth or sixteenth century, about two centuries after the ascendancy of Amharic as a court language in the reign of Yekuno Amlak (1270 - 1285). Abraham Demoz (ibid) argues that this reform involved the creation of palatal symbols by the addition of small horizontal lines on the top of the symbols for the corresponding non-palatal lines.

Abraham Demoz (1983) also discusses the endorsement by King Menelik (1889 – 1913) of a new alphabet for writing Amharic. However, he did not specify the details or background of this "new alphabet" except for stating that this general reform was not actually ever implemented due to the

opposition it received from the clergy who "regard the Ethiopian script as a special gift from God not to be tampered with by mere mortals, at least not by the laiety" (Abraham Demoz, 1983:394). He further goes on to discuss the other reform efforts which he states included the wide discussion of issues of using the Ge'ez script in early Amharic newspapers such as *A'emero* and *Berhanenna Selaam* and the engagement in the modernization of the script by a concerned group which called itself "Lovers of learning". This group was revolutionary in that it stressed that: "the idea of using Latin characters in an auxiliary capacity to the unreformed Ethiopian script should be seriously considered for implementation" (Abraham Demoz (ibid: 402)).

Five main points are presented here as reasons why the Ge'ez script ought to be reformed:

a) <u>Overabundance of symbols</u> - As given in Tables 8 and 9 there are over 270 symbols and this is a major drawback because it makes the script difficult to learn and cumbersome to use in machines.

b) <u>Irregular vocalization</u> – Although vocalization is indicated by the addition of regular signs to the basic symbols, there are nevertheless many exceptions, some of which are imposed by the shape of the basic symbol itself. This is believed to make the script more difficult to learn and more unwieldy for machines to use.

c) <u>The absence of a sign for gemination</u> – There is no marking in the system to show a sound is geminate. This causes some problems of reading especially to non- native speakers of the language. Amharic writing (which is based on the Ge'ez script) is affected by the lack of gemination marker in the writing system. For example, the words for 'still' and 'swimming' ገና [gana:] and ዋና [wa:na:], both with single / n /, can also respectively mean 'Christmas' and 'chief' or 'main' when the / n / 'ና' / in both words is geminate and the words are pronounced as [gan:a:] and [wa:n:a:] respectively. The lack of gemination mark in the Ge'ez system is relevant to the discussion of the choice of script for Oromo as gemination is a common lexical and morphological feature of the language. In Chapter II it was discussed that except / h / and / ? / all Oromo consonants have single and geminate forms. / tʃ / is the only consonant which always appears in a geminate form in Oromo language. Bender et al. (ibid) suggest that the problem of gemination marking can be alleviated by the possible use of some notational device, for example by putting dots (") on top of a symbol to show that it is a geminate.

d) <u>The double value of the sixth order</u> – The sign of the sixth order indicates both a vowel-less consonant and a consonant with the high central vowel. Therefore, this creates serious difficulties in reading.

e) <u>The non-cursive nature of the script</u> is a defect because it leads to slow freehand writing.

In addition to this, when writing by hand, the Ge'ez characters almost always require the writer to make different lines or shapes and join them. This means that the writer has to separate a pen or pencil from paper at least two times while writing even a basic or simple character such as የ [ye]. An extreme example of a character where the pen would be needed to be separated from the paper at least seven times is ጇ [ʤi]. No doubt, the system slows the speed of writing by hand. Bender, et al., (1976) also believe that the Ge'ez system slows down typing, as well as making the use of machines for writing difficult to operate and expensive to manufacture. Another minor issue is that the Ge'ez writing system does not have strict rules relating to the way compound words should be written so much so that some compound words and combinations of bisyllabic prepositions with nouns are written as a word or separate words:

eg:		[wet'bet] can be written as ወጥቤት or		ወጥ፡ ቤት

		[wedebet] can be written as ወደቤት or		ወደ፡ ቤት

Despite the recognition of the problems associated with the use of the Ge'ez

script for writing Amharic and in spite of the attempts made by individuals

and groups to reform the system, the script remains substantially unchanged

and, given the circumstances in the country, it is unlikely that any previous or

future reform propositions would be implemented, at least in the near

foreseeable future. This is mainly due to two reasons. Firstly, a strong

opposition to the reform of the script comes from the Orthodox Church as

highlighted by Abraham Demoz (1983) and it would be difficult for any

group or individual to overcome this force. Secondly, there are a number of

people in Ethiopia, mainly from the Amhara, who are opposed to the

reforming of the script in the belief that it is an indigenous script that needs to

be retained, not reformed or tampered with, regardless of any apparent

deficiencies.

4.4.1. The superfluous symbols

The sounds / a /, /h/, / ts / and / s / (as shown in Table 8) have more than one

representation in the Ge'ez script and some words are traditionally (at least in

Amharic) written with one rather than the other symbol. This system creates a problem when the adaptation of it to another language is being considered, unless a decision is made at the outset as to how the symbols would be used. The study of the works of Krapf, Onesimus Nesib and indeed some Oromo literature written in the Ge'ez script is evidence that there have been inconsistencies regarding the use of the superfluous symbols. Before attempting to analyse the works of few prominent individuals who used the Ge'ez script to write Oromo, it would be useful to point out that in addition to the Ge'ez superfluous characters, Oromo has some sounds for which the script has no symbols as well as there are some symbols in the script for which there are no equivalent sounds in Oromo.

As far as adaptation of the Ge'ez script for writing Oromo is concerned, the latter would not be a problem as the "unwanted" symbols such as /ts/ and /ʒ/, for which there are no equivalent sounds in Oromo, can be left out without having a clear impact on the writing system. However, the absence of an equivalent symbol for the implosive /d'/, a lack of marks for representing some long vowels and gemination would clearly pose challenges that would need in-depth consideration if the Ge'ez script is to be adapted as a writing system for Oromo.

The following examples from Krapf (1871) demonstrate how the symbols for the sound / a /, አ and ዐ, (the initial symbols of the first and second words) are used inconsistently without any apparent explanation:

አ and ዐ, አ ኒስ፡ ዓ ርጌ፡ ዱጋስ፡ ሂሜ፡ ካና፡ ኢልጋ፡ ዋቃዮ፡ አ ካ፡ ተኤ።

Similarly, it can be seen how the superfluous symbols, *ህ* and *ሐ* (/ h /), and *ሰ* and *ሠ* (/ s /) are interchangeably used to represent the same sound in Krapf's (1871:47) translation of *The Gospel According to St. John:*

የሱሲ፡ ዴቢሴ፡ ጀዴስ። ኩኒስ፡ ሂንሁብነ፡ አባዎኔሳስ፡ ሂንሐማኔ። ሁጀ፡ ዋቃዮ፡ ኢቲ፡ ሣቀሙደፈ፡ መሌ።
(Jesus said in return. He did not understand. His father was not cruel. He wanted to let him know the work of God).

In these sentences there are two symbols, with vowels attached, for / s / **"ሰ"** and **"ሠ"**, and two for / h / **"ህ"** and **"ሐ"**.

A close observation of Onesimus Nesib's (1886) works reveals that the superfluous characters representing / h / are occasionally used in specific ways. For example, in the following words **"ህ"** has been used with a short vowel / o / and "ሐ" has been used with long / o /.

/ h / + [o]	/ h / + [o:]
ሆሪ [hori:] "money, wealth"	ሐሪ [ho:ri:] "tartar, unclean teeth"
ሆማ [homa:] "nothing"	ሐማ [ho:ma:] "mass of people, animals

Whether Onesimus Nesib purposefully decided to use ሀ and ሐ with short and long vowels respectively or whether the symbols are simply used by coincidence is a matter of speculation since there is no evidence to confirm the intention of the author for his irregular use of the characters in the above example and since the symbols are not in any case used consistently throughout the book.

It is also interesting to observe how some of the superfluous characters are differently used by Krapf (ibid) and Onesimus Nesib (1886) to represent the same sound. An example of this is the name "Oromo" [oromo:] which is written in two different symbols - that is the seventh order of / a /, as ዮሮሞ and አሮሞ by Krapf and Onesimus Nesib respectively.

4.4.2. Gemination and the Ge'ez script

Single and geminate sounds have been written without a distinction by early Oromo writers who used the Ge'ez script. This obviously makes reading

difficult for all people but especially for new learners of the language. In Onesimus Nesib's (1886) *The Galla Spelling Book* the following words have been entered twice in exactly the same way using the same symbols. Notice that each pair of words has been written exactly in the same way in the Ge'ez script while actually the pairs in the second column are different from the first both in their phonological structure and meaning. Thus, the penultimate consonants of the words in the second column are geminate and have new meanings.

ሀሬ [hare]   "he cleaned"   ሀሬ [har:e]   "a donkey"

ደላ [ɗala:]   "female"   ደላ [ɗal:a:]   "a boil"

ሮቢ [ro:bi:]   "Wednesday"   ሮቢ [ro:b:i:]   "hippopotamus"

ሁቱ [hatu:]   "to steal"   ሁቱ [hat:u:]   "thief"

Krapf also used no special marks to distinguish single and geminate sounds in his book, *The Gospel according to St John.* For example, ማ / m / in ለማፋስ [lam:af:asi] "secondly" should have been differentiated from ማ / m / in ነማ [nama] "man" since the first ማ / m / is geminate and the second is single. Krapf's full sentence reads thus:

- ለማፋስ፡ ነማ፡ ጀማ፡ ተኤ፡ ሠን፡ ዋመኊ፡ ጀደኔንስ [lam:af:asi nama ja:ma: ta'e san wa:mani: jeɗanis] ("Secondly, they called the blind man and told him").

Besides leading to confusion within the language, the absence of a mechanism to distinguish single and geminate sounds when writing Oromo in the Ge'ez script creates more complications and misunderstandings for people who also read and write Amharic in the same script. The following Oromo words, taken from Onesimus Nesib (1886) can be read as Amharic words with different and sometimes unintended and "embarrassing" meanings:

Ge'ez representation	Oromo pronunciation and Oromo meaning	Amharic Pronunciation and Amharic meaning
ቁላ	[k'ul:a:] "naked"	[k'ula:] "penis"
በዳ	[bada:] "disappear"	[bad:a] "had intercourse"
ደፉ	[dafa:] "hurry up!"	[daf:a] "he threw away"

An example of an attempt to represent Oromo geminate sounds using the Ge'ez script is found in Launhardt (1973). Here the writer tried to introduce additional two dotes (¨) on top of a symbol to mark gemination. The following examples illustrate how the 'dotes' were used above some Ge'ez characters to represent Oromo geminate sounds (Launhardt, ibid: 221):

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ኦሮሞኑ ፡ ኬሱማ፡ ባይዔ፡ ኡልፌሱ።ኬሱማዳፍሰ፡ ሐመ ፡ ደንደዐሜፍት፡ ኛተ፡ በኤሰ፡ ኬኑ፡ ጀለቱ።

[oromo:n:i: kes:m:a: bay'e: ulfe:s:u. kes:ma: ɗa:fis ham:a danda'ame:fitiɲ a:ta ba'e:s: ken:u: ja:latu] "The Oromo people respect guests. As much as they can, they like to provide their guests with the best food".

Note that due to problems with the font, I have used a sign rather than two dotes as used by Launhardt. And also note that only two consonant symbols have been distinguished with the two dotes above them in the Ge'ez script version of Launhardt whereas there are actually five consonants that can be identified as geminates with the colon marks (:) in my phonemic transcription of the sentence.

Despite Launhardt's intentions to distinguish Oromo geminate sounds when using the Ge'ez script, no other example is available to suggest that the method has been followed by other writers of Oromo in the same script.

4.4.3. The implosive / ɗ / and the Ge'ez script

The implosive / ɗ / has no equivalent symbol or representation in the Ge'ez

script. It is probably because of this that Krapf (ibid) used the symbol ደ to

represent both / d / and / ɗ /. In the example given below the symbol ዺ

represents / d / in ዺቢሴ [debise] "return" and [ɗ] in ጀዼስ [jeɗesi] "said".

"የሱሲ፡ ዺቢሴ፡ ጀዼስ። "ኩኔስ፡ "[yesu:s debise jeɗesi. kunis] (And Jesus replied. (and)

said, "This…") .

However, Onesimus Nesib modified the symbol for /d/ ደ by adding a line on

top of it and using it to represent / ɗ / in some cases. The words ጀዼ [jeɗe]

"said" and ዼማፍናን [ɗama:fna:ni] "distressed" in the following sentences

demonstrate how Onesimus Nesib (1886:36) modified the Ge'ez symbol ደ to

represent / ɗ /:

"ጋፍቶኮ፡ ጫካ፡ ኬሰት፡ ወራቢሰኒፍ፡ ዋንጎን፡ ወልትዶ-ፈኒ። ወራቢስቾስ፡ እሴ፡ ቀበቴ፡ ተከ፡ ብሳን፡ ናፍዲ፡
ተከ፡ እደ፡ ታዑምሳ፡ ናቶልቺ፡ ጀዼ፡ እሴ፡ ዼማፍናን፡ ጀቴኒ።" ["ga:ftok:o tʃ'a:k:a kes:ti
wara:besani:fi wa:ngo:n walit ɗfani. wara:besi tʃ'is ise: k'abate: tak:a bisan
na:fidi, tak:a id:o: ta:'umsa: na:tol tʃ'i jed'e: ise: ɗama:fna:n jet:eni:"].

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("Once upon a time a hyena and a fox met in a forest. The hyena distressed the fox by ordering her to bring him water and by asking her to make him a place to sleep. And the fox said").

4.4.4. The glottal stop and the Ge'ez script

Krapf and Onesimus Nesib did their best to not only recognize but also try to represent the Oromo glottal stop when using the Ge'ez script. Thus Krapf used the Ge'ez characters የ or ያ (the symbols for / j / "y") to represent the Oromo glottal stop, while Onesimus Nesib used ዐ or ዓ (/a/ "a") to represent the same phoneme. Below are examples of possible glottal stop representation by both these authors.

1. Krapf (1871)

ሂንደንደዩ። [hindanday:u] › [hindanda'u] "They cannot" page 13.
ደገያኒሲ [ɗagay:anisi:] ›[ɗaga'anisi:] "If they listen" page 65.

2. Onesimus Nesib (1896)

በልዓ [bala:]   [bal'a:] "wide" page 18.
ምዐኤ [miae:]   [mi'a'e:] "became expensive" page 18.
እነዐረ [ina:ra]   [ina'ra] "it smokes" page 67.

Despite the best efforts of these individuals, both methods have not been known to have been followed by any Oromo writer in the Ge'ez script. Both systems are also not effective in that they misrepresent the usage of the glottal

stop unnecessarily. This is because the glottal stop is different from both the

Ge'ez characters employed to represent it by Krapf and Onesimus Nesib.

In summary, the people who used the Ge'ez script to write Oromo have and

continue to face challenges (which were referred to by Abraham Demoz

(1983)) when using the script for writing Amharic. For example, the absence

of letters or marks for representing geminates and the glottal stop, and the

existence of superfluous letters in the Ge'ez script, which are used for writing,

were a few of the common problems for those people who use the script for

writing either Oromo or Amharic or indeed any other language which has

gemination and glottal stop as features. Additionally, Oromo has an

implosive / ɗ / ("dh" in qubee) for which there is no equivalent representation

in the Ge'ez script. Onesimus Nesib's creativity to modify and use the Ge'ez

symbol ዶ / d / for ዾ / ɗ / as in ጀዾ (he said) was a significant endeavour for any

of the people who used the Ge'ez script in writing the Oromo language.

4.4.5. The Oromo vowels and the Ge'ez script

Each consonant in the Ge'ez script is written with six vowels attached to it

and the system does not have representations for long /e/, /o/ and /u/ (see

Table 8) which, together with long / a / and / i /, are common in Oromo

morphology. In order to do justice to the graphical representation of the

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Oromo long vowels, it is therefore necessary naturally for a Ge'ez script user to make some changes to the system. If changes are not made to the symbols to differentiate long and short vowels, confusion is inevitable and even occasionally words can have unintended meaning, as this example from Krapf (1871:5) shows:

ኩኒ፡ ዱጋደፍ፡ ዱፈ፡…[kuni ɗuga:ɗ afi ɗufe…] "This (Jesus) came for the truth…"

Since ዱ can be read as [ɗu], with short / u /, or [ɗu:], with long / u /, ዱፈ can mean [ɗufe] "came" or [ɗu:fe] farted.

Unfortunately, literature dealing with vowel length as an issue in using the Ge'ez script for writing Oromo, or indeed for writing Amharic, is not available to the present writer. Also there is no evidence to indicate that Oromo writers in the Ge'ez script have used special symbol(s) to distinguish short and long vowels. However, in the examples given earlier I have noted that Onesimus Nesib (1886) has used specific consonant symbol(s) with short and long vowels. It was stated above that this may simply be a coincidence or a deliberate attempt by the author to distinguish short from long vowels. However, there is no evidence to prove or disprove whether Onesimus Nesib's use of the words given in the following example was part of his attempt to distinguish short / o / from long / o: /.

Example of short and long / o /differentiated by different symbols by Onesimus Nesib (1886:7):

Short / o / used with ሆ (/ h /)	Long / o / used with ሖ (/ h /)
ሆሪ [hori:] "money, wealth"	ሖሪ [ho:ri:] "tartar, unclean teeth"
ሆማ [homa:] "nothing"	ሖማ [ho:ma:] "mass of people, animals

Whilst Onesimus Nesib's strategy is certainly feasible, it does not offer a practical solution. This is because the Ge'ez script has superfluous symbols for only a limited number of phonemes.

There is a marked difference between Onesimus Nesib's and Krapf's use of the Ge'ez script in writing Oromo vowels. Krapf (probably due to his being a foreign speaker of the language) tends to emphasize the vowels by constantly using the long form even when they are short. Thus, whilst Krapf adequately makes a vowel length distinction, he does not demarcate this correctly. These are not the case with Onesimus Nesib's use of the vowel representation in his writing.

Short vowels written as long by Krapf		Vowels intended		Gloss
ኩኒ፡	[kuni:]	ኩን፡	[kuni]	"this"
ኢሳ፡	[i:sa:]	እሳ፡	[isa:]	"he"
ኢፋ፡	[i:fa:]	እፋ፡	[ifa:]	"light"
ኢሲኒ፡	[i:si:ni:]	እስኒ፡	[isini:]	"you" (plural)
ገርቢቼ፡	[garbi:tʃi:]	ገርብች፡	[garbitʃi]	"slave"

It can be summarised from the above that except for the Bible (which was translated by Onesimus Nesib) all the materials written in Oromo language using the Ge'ez script during the *Derg* regime or prior to that had not been widely enough circulated to have had a significant effect or benefit to the Oromo people. It can also be claimed that the Oromo writers who used the Ge'ez script during and prior to the *Derg* regime in Ethiopia had no alternative but use the Ge'ez script to avoid political repercussions.

It can also be stated that Onesimus Nesib made a remarkable contribution to early Oromo writing despite the challenges he faced with regard to the use of the Ge'ez script for Oromo writing, which emanated from the fact that that script does not have provisions for the representation of some features of the language, such as gemination and long vowels. While the lack of representation of gemination and long vowels is an obvious limitation of the Ge'ez script, Onesimus was creative in using the script creatively, for example

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by employing the vowel / a / (ዐ or ዓ) to represent the Oromo glottal stop and

by selectively using the superfluous Ge'ez characters to represent short and

long vowels as given discussed above..

Chapter V

5. The language policy of Ethiopia and its implications on the development of the Oromo language and its writing system

5.1. The pre-1974 language policy

Like many developing countries in Africa, and indeed, like any multi-lingual country, Ethiopia is faced with language planning and policy issues. According to Tareke (1991), Ethiopia is a multilingual society of at least seventy nationalities with as many languages and dialects. But the aspiration of the Ethiopian government especially that of the Haile Sellassie regime, was to create a new national identity through the promotion of one unifying language (Perham, 1969; Cooper, 1978). Haile Sellassie's policy was based on the belief that the presence of many languages was as a major hindrance to both the unity of the country and the development of one national unifying language. For example, the war in Eritrea, which was led and fought by the Eritrean people's liberation front (EPLF) and lasted three decades before culminating in a successful secession of Eritrea from Ethiopia in 1992, was caused mainly because of the Ethiopian government's language policy. It was after the replacement of Tigrigna and Arabic with Amharic as a medium of instruction in Eritrea (McNab, 1989) that forces opposed to the Haile Sellassie regime were established in that region. Haile Sellassie's action of replacing

Tigrigna and Arabic with Amharic was a vain attempt to achieve unity through the imposition of Amharic as a medium of instruction and an official language. Greenfield (1965) reveals that the Haile Sellassie regime was clear and determined from the outset in its intentions of imposing Amharic on the Eritrean people. Greenfield refers to the event sponsored by the United Nations to discuss the terms of Eritrea's federation with Ethiopia and claims that a disagreement ensued as to whether or not Eritrea's official language after federation with Ethiopia would be Amharic. Greenfield announced that during this discussion, Aklilu Habtewold, who was representing Ethiopia, "demanded that the Emperor be empowered to appoint (for Eritrea) not only a governor general but all executive officials and to approve or reject all legislation; that there be no Eritrean flag and that Amharic be the sole official language …"(Greenfield, 1965: 302).

A person by the name of Matienzo, who was representing the UN at this event, argued in vain against Aklilu Habtewold's proposal of imposing Amharic as a sole official language in Eritrea by stating that "Eritrea should have a separate flag if it wished and should itself decide on its official languages" (Greenfield, ibid).

The debate as to which language to use in schools and for official purposes was at least openly entertained with regard to Eritrea, but the same did not

take place in relation to the other nationalities including Oromia in Ethiopia. However, the language practice was the same in all regions in Ethiopia as that of Eritrea in that Amharic was the official language and medium of instruction throughout the country.

Haile Sellasie's language policy of using Amharic as a sole official language in Ethiopia inevitably became an issue for non-Amharic speakers and various liberation fronts such as the EPLF, OLF and TPLF which were set up with a view to fighting against the central government and "liberating" their people from the Ethiopian empire. For example, one of the objectives of the OLF was to develop the Oromo language which had been degraded by the Ethiopian empire (Mekuria Bulcha, 1993:15). This was paradoxical because the government's policy of imposing Amharic as the only official language throughout the country resulted in many standing up to fight for their language and develop it rather than accepting what was being imposed upon them.

Naturally, people are resistant to imposition of any kind and the policy of using a sole official language, without a provision for the other languages, in a multilingual society can hardly be successful. This has been the case in different multilingual countries where governments have tried to impose one uniform language. Examples of this include the policy of Turkish government

which forbade the use of Kurdish language (until the 1990's); the legislation enacted in Sri Lanka in 1956 which sought to make Sinhalese the only official language and the linguistic Arabization policy of the Algerian government, which provoked strong opposition from the Berbers, who are a minority ethnic group in Kabylia (see: U.S. Library Congress (n.d.) http://countrystudies.us/algeria/53.htm). Yadov (1966:42) describes how the adoption of Hindi as an official language in India after its independence from colonialism was met with resistance from other linguistic groups. This clearly demonstrates that people will not accept imposition regardless of where it comes from.

The background of Haile Sellasie's language policy is best illustrated by looking at a brief history of Ethiopia. In the way that it exists today, Ethiopia emerged only towards the end of the 19th century notably when Tewodros and then Menelik II conquered the kings and warlords of various local populations who until then lived independently. During the era of Tewodros, Amharic replaced Ge'ez as the language in which the Royal Chronicles were written and were promoted as part of the campaign to unify the country (Cooper, 1976).

Parallel to the promotion of Amharic as a literary language from the outset of the formation of the present Ethiopia, the other languages, including Oromo,

in the country were systematically discouraged by the governments from being used for official, religious or educational purposes. In this regard it is relevant to examine why Krapf, a person considered to be the first to write in Oromo (see Chapter III), was expelled from Ethiopia. It has been noted that Krapf's interest in Ethiopia was to teach and translate the gospel mainly into the Oromo language. However, in the preface to his book, Krapf (1850:A2) stated: "…when the author (Krapf) after involuntary relinquishment of the Abyssinian Mission commenced his studies of the Swahili language on the Island of Mombassa for the purpose of opening Missionary operations…." Krapf does not specify whether his "(i)nvoluntary relinquishment of (Abyssinia)" was due to his missionary activities or to the use of the Oromo language or, indeed, due to any unexplained reasons in carrying out his duties in Ethiopia. It is obvious, however, that his expulsion from Ethiopia deprived the Oromo people of a very capable person who had the potential to make a great contribution to the development of their language.

Other important evidence which suggests that Oromo and the other languages in Ethiopia have been suppressed starting from the time of the peoples' conquests by the Abyssinian rulers is available from Ullendorff (1960:155) who states: "… it was, however, King Theodore, who gave the greatest impulse and encouragement to Amharic as a plank in his general programme of imperial unification, and this has remained an aim of

Ethiopian policy (with the short interval only of the Tigrean Emperor John IV) to this day". As an ardent supporter of the Ethiopian government and as a person[16] who had little respect for other people in Ethiopia, except the Abyssinians, Ullendorff probably did not mean to criticize the Ethiopian government's agenda of using Amharic as a means of "imperial unification" rather that of communication.

Further evidence for the suppression of the Oromo language by Ethiopian governments from the time of the inception of the country is found in Mekuria Bulcha's works. Referring to the subjugation of Oromo by Menelik II, Mekuria Bulcha (1993) asserts that Onesimus Nesib was prohibited from carrying out his missionary tasks as well as teaching literacy in *afaan* Oromo as these would have been to be contrary to the linguistic homogenization of the Empire through the spread of Amharic.

Successive pre-1974 Ethiopian governments followed a similar approach of promoting only Amharic and, as Cooper (1978:466) states, paradoxically, "only under the Italians was an attempt made to use local vernacular in education". Even though Italy's encouragement of the use of various local languages in education is often construed as being a political tactic of

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[16] For example, Ullendorff (1965:76) refers to Oromo as people who "possessed no material or intellectual culture, and their social organization was at a far lower stage of development than that of the population [Abyssinians] among whom they settled".

dividing and ruling the country (McNab, ibid) there is no doubt that for the speakers of the other languages it was a rare accomplishment and a step forward in the development of their languages.

A policy that encouraged the use of Amharic in education and in business but discouraged the other languages from being developed and used for schooling, religious or business purposes in Ethiopia was advocated (Ginzeberg and Smith, 1967:11) on the premise that it would help "weld the country into a more unified whole". The first official and open influence of languages in Ethiopia was a speech made by Haile Sellassie in which he said: "…there was a great profit in being taught in Ge'ez and Amharic, the learning of our own country, it will be necessary for all governors to provide this education by setting up in their respective provinces schools for reading and writing" (Tesfaye Shewaye and Taylor, 1976:372). What was interesting in Haile Sellassie's speech was not only that he declared the policy that Ge'ez and Amharic were the official languages but he also boldly asserted that there was a great profit in being taught in these languages. As it happened, people who did not learn these languages were to be automatically excluded from taking an active role in the economic, social and official roles in the country.

It was soon after the liberation of the country from Italy in 1941, however, that Haile Sellassie passed a directive which declared that a) Amharic was the

formal and official medium of instruction and b) the activities of foreign

missionaries were to be controlled. The directive read as follows: "The general

language of instruction throughout Ethiopia shall be the Amharic language,

which all Missionaries will be expected to learn". Thus the country's

education system became a tool primarily for expanding the use of the

Amharic language amongst the non-Amharic speaking population. The

government also insisted on Missionaries working in "open" areas, that is,

areas where the people were outside the influence of the Orthodox Church

which traditionally used Ge'ez or Amharic in its teachings (Article 14, *Negarit*

Gazeta, 1944). The government was aware that Amharic was not spoken in

these "open" areas, and by making it a requirement for the Missionaries to

learn and teach Amharic the government made the Missionaries the agents of

Amharization. For the government, the main objective of these schools was to

teach the Amharic and the Amhara culture so as to assimilate the learners.

The proclamation given by the Ministry of Education (MOE) in the National

Literacy Campaign of 1956 is a clear example of the intention of the Ethiopian

government to use education as a means of teaching Amharic to non-Amhara

people. The proclamation read: "We charge every illiterate Ethiopian between

the ages of 18 and 50 to learn the fundamental education as this will enable

him to know Amharic reading and writing". Perham (1969:380) noted the

official reason for the government to expand Amharic through education was

to "reinforce the process of assimilation amongst the *Gallas* (Oromo) and the other people".

The status given to Amharic as a medium of instruction in 1944 was further consolidated through the revised constitution of 1955, which stated that "the official language of the Empire is Amharic" (cited in Cooper, 1976:188). This was to create an attitude in the minds of non-Amharic speakers that Amharic was an important and "superior" language which was spoken by everyone in the country. In addition to the 1955 decree the government took steps to facilitate the development of Amharic as a literary language. For example, the Amharic Language Academy was established in 1972 and the Haile Sellassie I Prize was introduced for Amharic literature in the 1960's. All these played a role in cementing the status of Amharic as the official language of the country which people should accept, respect and aspire to learn. Bokamba (1995:19) rightly points out that "the official language(s) determine(s) the language policy in the public as well as private sector…." Bokamba (ibid) further elaborates on this point by claiming that the policy of having official language(s) helps elevate the status of the preferred language(s) and diminishes that of the other languages. In Ethiopia, the ability to speak (not even to write) in Amharic thus became the sign of civilisation, modern life and education. Amharic almost became the

"preferred" language of communication for people who had even a little

knowledge of it to be able to fluently or sufficiently express their ideas in it.

On the other hand, speaking in other languages was taken as a sign of

"backwardness, illiteracy" and a source of "embarrassment" to many non-

Amharic speakers. This led to some people changing their names, as

explained by Lemma Arity and cited in McNab (ibid:59): "Children from the

non-Amharic groups were not only ashamed to speak their languages in

public, but also changed their given names into Christian/Amhara names".

The effects of the Ethiopian government's language policy during the Haile

Sellassie regime on languages in Ethiopia in general and on the Oromo in

particular is summarised by Mekuria Bulcha (1993:9) who states that "The

Oromo language and culture were reduced to marks of illiteracy, shame and

backwardness as the school pressed Oromo children to conform to Amhara

culture".

For the Ethiopian government the policy appeared to have partly achieved its

principal objective as some "educated" non-Amharic speakers considered

their language a sign of illiteracy and accepted Amharic as the language of

schooling, the office and of modern life. To be able to read and write Amharic

became an essential requirement in Ethiopia in order to apply for

employment, even those jobs that were lowly paid. Knowledge of Amharic also became a prerequisite for educational or political advancement as a pass mark in Amharic in a school-leaving certificate (national examination) became a compulsory requirement for entrance to the university or higher educational institutions in the country and as Amharic was the official language in which office and Parliament businesses were conducted during the Haile Sellassie regime.

Whilst the government aimed at making Amharic the sole language of the country, it did not endeavour to make special material or pedagogical provisions in schools where it was taught to non-native speakers. The same national curriculum was used throughout the country, and children for whom Amharic was not a native language had to be taught from the same materials as those for whom Amharic was their mother tongue. The contents and methodology of teaching used in the schools were generally irrelevant and not aimed at motivating children for whom Amharic was a second language. The consequence of this was usually producing a "semi-literate" individual, where the child was competent neither in the first nor in the second language. The experiences of the author and of his peers from the Oromo people who had to go through education in Ethiopia with Amharic as a medium of instruction at the primary schools and a subject at secondary levels are not different from this. They neither mastered the Amharic language nor did they

have the opportunity to learn and become fully literate in their first language.

For example, despite their strong nationalist sentiments and motivation to

develop their language, the Oromo Diaspora hardly use the language to

communicate with each other on cyberspace discussion forums or internet

based social media such as the *Oromo-Net* (O-Net). The reason for this is

probably due to their lack of confidence or for their feeling of being less able

to use it, rather than their passion (or preference) for using other languages in

postings of their correspondence online.

In conclusion, the pre-1974 Ethiopian language policy was oppressive and

divisive and was based on the idea of creating a unified country through the

imposition of one language, Amharic, on all the people throughout the

country. The policy was flawed because it disregarded the interests and rights

of non-Amharic speakers in Ethiopia to freely use and practise their

languages and cultures. The end result, as seen in 1974, was the uprisings and

struggle of those people who felt oppressed and the downfall of the

dictatorial monarchy through this.

5.2. The language policy during the Marxist Derg regime

In 1974 a military government, popularly known as the *Derg*, assumed power

in Ethiopia and adopted Marxism-Leninism as its guiding ideology and

socialism as its political goal. One of the situations that allowed the *Derg* to

overthrow the previous regime of Haile Sellassie was the popular unrest that

followed the "inequality that was enhanced by the exclusive promotion of

Amharic during Haile Sellassie's regime" (Cooper, 1989:23). Even though

economic dissatisfaction appears to have been the major reason for popular

uprisings in the 1970's, there is little doubt that there was resentment against

the central government by those who felt that their language had been

marginalised. As Ross (1977:10) observes, "(language) is a symbol that is very

effective in fostering mass mobilisation on ethnic lines".

In a similar vein, Mohammed Hassen argues that it was the language policy

of Ethiopia that led the people to reject the Ethiopian government and

demand self-determination. Mohammed Hassen (1996:77) thus writes:

> …within seven years by 1974 its (Ethiopian
> government's) policy unwittingly
> transformed Oromo politics beyond
> recognition. The Association (Maccha-

Tulama)[17] demand for equality within
Ethiopia was transformed into the OLF's
commitment to self-determination in
Oromia. The Association's efforts to spread
literacy in the Amharic language and
Sabean script were transformed into
literacy in *Afaan Oromoo* using the Latin
alphabet: what was unthinkable in 1967
became feasible by 1974. In short,
Ethiopian government's unwarranted
cruelty and brutality produced the Oromo
elite's rejection of Ethiopian identity itself.

With the adoption of a Marxist-Leninist ideology, the *Derg* also tried to follow

the language policies of multi-national socialist countries such as The Union

of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) that advocated that all nationalities in the

Soviet Union had the right to education in their own language (Lewis, 1971).

Quite contrary to the policy of the Haile Sellassie regime, the *Derg* passed a

decree that recognised the equality of the cultures and languages of every

nationality in the country:

> The right to self-determination of all
> nationalities will be recognised and fully
> respected. No nationality will dominate
> another since the history, culture,
> language, and religion of each nationality
> will have equal recognition in accordance
> with the spirit of socialism" (Ethiopian
> Government, 1977).

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[17]"The People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia shall ensure the equality,
development and respectability of nationalities" (Article 2 Sub-article 5,
Constitution of Ethiopia 1987).

The *Derg* went a step further by launching a National Literacy Campaign in July 1979 and stated that it would allow fourteen languages other than Amharic to be used as vehicles for the campaign. These languages (alphabetically listed) included Afar, Gedeo, Hadiya, Kaffa Mocha, Kambata, Oromo, Saho, Sidma, Silti Gurage, Somali, Tigre, Tigrigna, and Walaita. For the first time in Ethiopian history, the government had made (at least theoretically if not in practice) a commitment to respect and develop the languages of other nationalities (McNab, 1989). The *Derg* also allowed a one hour daily radio broadcasting in *Afaan* Oromo, in addition to the already existing radio programmes in Afar, Somali, Tigre, and Tigrigna. The first Oromo newspaper, *Bärisa* (Dawn), which had been launched in 1975, was nationalised in 1976 by the Ministry of Information and National Guidance.

Nevertheless, despite the *Derg*'s policy of recognizing the equality of cultures and languages of every nationality, in reality this was practically limited to the National Literacy Campaign, with the formal education language policy remaining generally unchanged from the pre-*Derg* era of Amharic as a medium of instruction at primary education level and an official language of the country. All primary school children received instruction in Amharic regardless of their mother tongue, and Amharic was taught as an examinable subject in junior and secondary schools. Amharic's status as an official language was also reaffirmed: "Without prejudice to Article 2 Sub-Article 5 of

this Constitution, in the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia states

activities shall be conducted in the Amharic language". Under the *Derg*, the

spread of Amharic in the country gained momentum due to the policy of rural

development, and resettlement programmes from the north to the south, both

of which resulted in more primary schools in remote areas, which in turn

brought more people in contact with Amharic (McNab, 1989).

It was often suspected and debated by many people that the *Derg*'s motive for

allowing the radios, newspapers and mass literacy in some local languages

was driven by its goal to counter-attack its opposition rather than by a desire

to promote the cultures and languages of nations other than that of the

Amhara. It was also aimed at the propagation of its Marxist-Leninist ideology

rather than from a genuine interest to promote languages other than Amharic.

It is argued, for example, by Bender (1985) that in substance the *Derg'*s

language policy was not much different to that of the old regime. Bender (ibid)

further notes that the contents of the media were mere translations of the

socialist propaganda of the government and literacy classes were often taught

in Amharic, contrary to the *Derg*'s propaganda of using local languages. The

Derg was very careful in its control of the contents and styles of the materials

produced and distributed to the people (Teferi Degeneh, 1989). Eide Øyvind

(2000:173) observes that the *Derg* "allowed publication and distribution in

(languages other than Amharic) as long as the material passed the censors and conformed to the Ge'ez syllabic script".

In general, non-Amharic speakers gained little from the *Derg*'s language policy because Amharic remained the official language of the country and the ability to speak and write in it was a requirement in government offices. The present writer recalls that it was a common occurrence for people to be labeled as narrow nationalists if they spoke in their own language, rather than in Amharic, at public places during the *Derg* regime. The consequence of being labeled a narrow nationalist for an individual was in the least a possible exclusion from gaining key roles in the political, social and economic activities of the country and, at worst, a possible imprisonment for several years without trial.

5.3. The post-Derg language policy of Ethiopia

As stated earlier in this chapter that the imposition of Amharic as a sole official language in Ethiopia led to the establishment of liberation fronts such as the EPLF, OLF and TPLF. It was noted that the degradation of their languages was one of the main reasons for these groups to establishing their organisations and fighting against the central government. After several years

of war, the liberation fighters finally became victorious. In May 1991 the *Derg* regime was overthrown and the liberation fighters seized power in Ethiopia while the president, Mengistu Haile Mariam, fled the country. The main partner among these fighters was the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) which later formed and became the principal component of the subsequent ruling party (the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) that formed a government (Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE)) with alliance with political movements and liberation fronts such as the Oromo Liberation Front and the Sidama Liberation Front.

With Eritrea, led by EPLF, being effectively separated from Ethiopia, Ethiopia's geo-political map started to change. In October 1991 an agreement was signed by representatives of the different nations in the Parliament to accept a newly designed map of the regions. The map divided the country into fourteen regions based on the distribution of the main language groups spoken in each area. Later, five smaller regions in the south west joined together to make a larger administrative area which have became known collectively as the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNRP). The coming together of the smaller regions in the south west reduced the number of the regions and they soon formed administrative regions.The new admintrative arrangement culminated in the formation in 1995 of a federal structure which comprised nine states - namely, Tigray, Afar,

Amhara, Oromo, Somali, Beni-Shangul, Gambela, the SNNRP, (Appendix II)

and the city of Harar. Addis Ababa (Finfinneee) was also granted

administrative rights as well as recognition as the capital city of the federal

state. The country had already adopted a new constititution in 1994, and this

constitition dealt with a number of issues and rights of nations and

nationalities. Under Article 39 Section 3, the Constitution provided:

> Every Nation, Nationality and People in Ethiopia has the right to a full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to an equitable representation in the state assembly.

In Article 39 Section 5, the Constitution provided a definition for Nations,

Nationalities and Peoples:

> A Nation, Nationality and People for the purpose of this Constitution, is a group of people who have or share large measure of common culture or customs, mutual intelligibility of language, belief in a common or related identities, a common psychological make-up, and who inhabit an identifiable, predominantly contiguous territory.

Article 39 Section 2 of the Constitution underlined the linguistic rights of the

Nations, Nationalities and Peoples:

> Every Nation, Nationality and
> People in Ethiopia has the right to
> speak, to write, and develop its own
> language; to express, to develop and
> to promote its culture; and to
> preserve its history.

The 1994 Constitution, Article 39. 4 (a), (b), (c), (d) and (e) gives the Nations,

Nationalities and Peoples a fundamental democratic right of cessesion, under

certain conditions, if they so wished:

> The right to self determination up to secession of
> nation, nationality and peoples may be exercised:-
> (a) where the demand for secession is approved by
> a two thirds (2/3rds) majority of the legislature of
> the nation, nationality or people concerned.
> (b) where the Federal Government within three
> years upon receipt of the decision of the legislature
> of the nation, nationality or people demanding
> secession, organises a referendum for the nation,
> nationality or people demanding secession.
> (c) where the demand for secession is supported by
> a simple majority vote in the referendum.
> (d) where the Federal Government transfers power
> to the parliament of the nation, nationality or
> people which has opted for secession.
> (e) where property is partitioned in accordance
> with the law.

All these indicate that the collapse in 1991 of the *Derg* regime was the

beginning of the end of the century-old Amhara monoply of political power

in Ethiopia. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the downfall of the

Derg itself was a result of opposition and sacrifices made by various individuals, groups from different nationalities and nations in the country against the political and economic oppression in general as well as the suppression in particular of the cultures and languages of non Amharic speakers in Ethiopia. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front, the Tigrean People's Liberation Front, and the Oromo Liberation Front could be mentioned as being the main political organisations in the country which made it clear that their goals were to enable their people to decide for themselves their political destinies by removing the Amhara culture and language which were imposed upon them by force.

To be true to its original objectives of getting rid of the centrally imposed Amharic for official and education activities, the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (which was established immediately after the downfall of the *Derg*) had drafted an interim education and language policy and it underscored three major themes:

a) Firstly, primary school education, in non-Amharic speaking areas was to commence in local languages. Moreover, most languages were to become working languages in their respective administrative zones.

b) The second was to maintain Amharic as an official language which was also stated in Article 5 of the 1994 Constitution.

c) Finally, English was to continue as the medium of instruction at secondary school level and to be taught as a subject starting from Grade One in all areas in the country (Ministry of Education, 1994).

For the first time in their history many nations and nationalities in Ethiopia had the opportunity to use their language for education at primary school level and for official purposes in their areas under the new government that toppled the Derg regime. This was a great achievement because against all the odds people got organised, struggled and attained their freedom to decide which language to use for education and official purposes.

5.4. The Ethiopian language policies and the Oromo writing system

It can be inferred from the Ethiopian language policies discussed above, that the direct or indirect steps taken by the Ethiopian regimes had negatively affected the development of the Oromo writing system. For example, with its policy of achieving unity of the country through one language policy, the Haile Sellassie regime was against all local languages, except Amharic, being officially used and written in the Ge'ez script. Trimingham (1952:145) explains: "…it is because Amharic is a literary language that it must eventually dominate the Empire. Hence, the government's refusal to allow any language other than Ge'ez and Amharic to be printed in the Ge'ez script.

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The Bible Society's version of the Scriptures in Galla in this script is proscribed". This testifies why Onesimus Nesib, who used the Ge'ez script in his translation of the Bible, was prohibited from teaching in Oromo. The Ethiopian government's policy to suppress and stop other languages from using the Ge'ez script or having a writing system(s) of their own was not surprising, "since common written language is an important factor in integrating a political nation, and since the unity within encourages the speed of any cultural pattern throughout a major political unit" (Gleeson, 1955: 161:427).

Besides the government's goal of achieving unity of the country through the promotion of Amharic, the process also gave the ruling nation a social, cultural and economic advantage over the other nations who had to learn and communicate through Amharic rather than through their first language. Mohammed Hassen (1998:187) highlights this when he discusses how the Ethiopian elites did everything possible to prevent Oromo nationalism by destroying their religious and cultural institutions, "and most of all by undermining the growth of the Oromo language and the flourishing of written literature in that language". The direct and indirect acts of political aggravation against the pioneers of Oromo writing such as Krapf, Onesimus Nesib and Shaykh Bakri Sapalo (all cited earlier), and the language policies

during and before the *Derg* regime, did not help Oromo become a written language in Ethiopia with its own orthography.

Whilst this can be taken as a possible reason for the absence of a fully fledged writing system of Oromo during this and the last centuries, it is suggested here that the people's democratic way of life underpinned by the *Gada* system (see chapter II) and their inclination to be nomadic pastoralists meant that there was no pressing need for the Oromo to have a writing system. This is not to mean that writing is not necessary in a democratic way of life. What is meant here is that it is usually the case that, whether invented or adapted, writing systems tend to be found amongst people with a settled way of life and those who are organised hierarchically thus requiring recording and accounting (Coulmas, 2003).

In summary, the language policies of the Ethiopian regimes until early 1990's have focused on forming a united country through the use of Amharic as an official language. The Haile Sellassie regime, in particular, failed to recognize even theoretically the existence and rights of nations who spoke languages other than Amharic. The *Derg*, which passed various proclamations advocating the rights of nations and nationalities to develop their cultures

and languages, did not go far enough to implement its policies by allowing and supporting the development of other languages including *Afaan* Oromo.

Even though the Haile Sellassie and the *Derg* regimes had different philosophies based on aristocracy and socialism, respectively, their practice in relation to the use of language was basically similar for both of them promoted Amharic at the expense of the other languages; and have considered it to be the language capable of unifying the country. Rather than fostering unity and wielding "the country into a more unified one" as confidently envisaged by Ginzeberg and Smith (1967:11), the promotion of Amharic and the language policy, especially, of the Haile Sellassie regime ironically became one of the causes for the formation of the liberation movements which brought a political turmoil, war and economic devastation in Ethiopia staring the early 1970's.

Post-*Derg* Ethiopia has seen some progress in terms of the recognition and promotion of a number of languages in Ethiopia, *Afaan Oromo* included. In theory, and in practice, people are able to use their languages for official and day-to-day purposes, without the requirement of using only Amharic in their regions, beginning early 1990s. However, despite this progress, the Roman script, in which *Afaan* Oromo is written, has become a subject of debate. This will be further discussed in Chapter VI.

In conclusion, the Ethiopian language policies need to be critically examined from different perspectives. One perspective, for example is to look at the experiences of some multilingual countries that use different scripts. For example, in Asia, India is not only a multilingual country with as many as eight hundred languages but also allows eleven different scripts for writing some of these languages in addition to the Roman alphabet and the Chinese script, which are used to write English and Chinese, two foreign languages also used in the country (Das Gupta, 1969). In Europe, Switzerland (which is a small country with a population of approximately seven million inhabitants (Windisch, 1999)) uses four languages (German, French, Italian, and Romansch) as its national languages and in Africa, for example, the Democratic Republic of the Congo has four national languages. These countries have encouraged diversity rather than trying to achieve "unity" through linguistic coercion.

An examination of the literature of the conversion of scripts (Dringer, 1968; Wellisch, 1978; Coulmas, 2003) also reveals that many countries (including Japan and China) have seriously considered converting their scripts. It is clear from the literature that countries such as Albania, Turkey, Indonesia, and many more have changed their scripts at least once or more times for various reasons (Das Gupta, 1969). In Africa, languages such as Somali, Swahili and

Hausa, which were once written in the Arabic alphabet, have converted their scripts to the Roman alphabet. These examples indicate that script conversion or the adaptation of a script is neither new nor a cause for the disintegration of a country. Contrary to leading to disintegration (a reason often given by the proponents of the development of the Oromo writing system), the recognition and support of peoples' right to choose and develop their language in a way that they think best suits them is often a condition for the realization of reconciliation, trust and harmonization of multilingual societies. The policy to use one language and one script to create a sense of patriotism and unity in a multilingual society is definitely not the best option as this is little more than dictatorship. And a long lasting political solution is rarely attainable through imposition of policies without the consensus agreement of the target population. In conclusion the use of the same script or language in a country is not of importance as long it does not discriminate or impinge on the the will of the people.

Chapter VI

6. The recent history of Oromo writing

6.1. Introduction

The present Oromo writing system, the *Qubee* (see Chapter VII), is a by-product of the recognised and unrecognised efforts of a number of individuals and groups of people who wrote in the language on various subjects for different reasons during a time when the language policies in Ethiopia were not conducive (see Chapter V) to the promotion and development of languages, other than Amharic for official purposes. Even though it had been the official policies of the Ethiopian regimes to promote Amharic by making it a compulsory medium of instruction and an official language in the 1970's and 1980's, there were some individuals who were engaged in writing in Oromo language. Most of the materials written during the two regimes were not widely distributed or read by many people due to the unfavourable political situations that existed under the regimes (Mekuria Bulcha, 1993). Furthermore, the written Oromo materials in 1970's and 1980's were limited in their contents with most of them concentrating on similar themes such traditional Oromo way of life, and therefore, lacking depth and variaety.

These limitations by no means trivialise the efforts of the Oromo writers during these periods, as they raised the aspirations of the Oromo people and made them receptive to the idea of using of a new writing system. In fact, it can be argued that each of the efforts that had been made previously, before the official adoption of the Oromo writing system, had a significant role in the development of the system. It is with in mind that this chapter presents a brief survey of selected materials written in *Afaan* Oromo in Ethiopia in the 1970's and 1980's. Since most of the Oromo materials written in Ethiopia in the 1970's and 1980's were in the Ge'ez script, this chapter attempts to provide an analysis of the materials written in this script. The chapter also analyses three materials written in the Roman alphabet by the OLF, Haile Fida and Tilahun Gamta during both the Haile Sellassie and *Derg* regimes.

6.2. *A general survey of Oromo writing in the 1970's and 1980's*

In spite of the political situation that advocated the unity of the country through the use Amharic, as the official and written language in Ethiopia in the 1970's and 1980's (Chapter V), some Oromo individuals defied the status quo and wrote in Oromo language. This was not a minor achievement for Oromo in general and for the writers in particular because during the Haile Sellassie and *Derg* regimes speaking in Oromo in public, let alone writing in it, would have attracted negative attention with the consequence of the

speaker at least being labeled as a "narrow nationalist". In other words, that was a time when speaking and writing any language other than Amharic was discouraged. Furthermore, the literacy rate, even in this official language was low and most of the people were unable to read or write. Another interesting point in the 1970's and 1980's Oromo writing was that most of the writers were Oromo nationals interested in advancing Oromo culture and language. Unlike the works of early Oromo writers (who by and large focused on the translation and teaching of the Bible (see Chapter III)) Oromo writers of the 1970's and 1980's spent a great deal of time on writing on the Oromo tradition and language.

Even though the bulk of the materials written in Oromo in the 1970's and 1980's were in Ge'ez script, the three other scripts in which Oromo has been known to have been written (see Chapter IV), were also used for writing during this period. Of these three scripts, the Roman alphabet was by far the most important not only because it was chosen as a basis for the Oromo writing system but also due to the fact that the materials written in this script were relatively widely available. The existence of the materials written in the other two scripts - that is, the Shaykh Bakri Sapalo script (Hayward and Mohammed Hassen, 1981) and the Arabic alphabet (Andrejewski 1980) - during the Haile Sellassie and the *Derg* regimes were hardly known to the wider Oromo population. However, despite not being available nor used by

the wider Oromo population, both scripts had a historical significance in that

they were a manifestation of the Oromo people's desire and determination to

have a writing system.

6.3. Some Oromo written materials in Ge'ez script in 1970's and 1980's

The Haile Sellassie regime was a period when the government adopted a

policy of "unifying" Ethiopia through Amharazation of the other nations and

nationalities in the country (see Chapter V). Through its language policy and

practice, the Haile Sellasie regime promoted Amharic while at the same time

discouraging the use and development the other languages in Ethiopia. This

meant that Oromo was not allowed to be written even in Ge'ez, a script in

which the official language, Amharic, was written. It was the removal from

power of the Haile Sellassie regime by the *Derg (*a military, socialist

government) in 1974 that provided Oromo with a limited opportunity of

being written.

Whilst most of the Oromo books during the *Derg* era were written by

individuals, there were some Oromo books commissioned and published by

the government. For instance, in 1971 Ethiopian Calendar (E.C.)[18] as part of its

fifth year commemoration of the foundation of the Ethiopian Revolution, the

Derg prepared some five books in Oromo and distributed them to its cadres

so they could 'teach' the people what Socialism meant and how it could

benefit them. It was obvious from the titles of some of these books (*Seenaa*

Dafqaan Bulaa Itoophiya Kaleeessaa Hanga Har'aatti (The History of Ethiopian

Workers from Yesterday (Past) to Today (Now); *Waaraqsa Itophiyafi Loltoota*

(The Ethiopian Revolution and the Military); *Qabeenya Lafa Baadiyyaa Kaleessaa*

Hanga Har'aatti (The Ownership of Rural Land from Past to Present)) that the

Derg's intention to prepare the books was to disseminate its political ideology

among the people rather than a genuine interest in developing the Oromo

language and making it to a written language.

In 1973 E.C., a book entitled *Biiftuu Diiramaa* was written by Mengesha Rikitu.

Prepared in the Ge'ez script, Mengesha's book dealt with the Oromo

traditional life in relation to health, culture, husbandry, poetry, language and

the like. Having moved to Europe in the late 1980's, Mengesha went on to

write other books in *Afaan* Oromo using the Roman script. Most of

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[18] The Ethiopian calendar (EC) is based on the Julian calendar and lags seven years behind the western calendar between September 11th (12th in leap year) to January 1st; or eight years behind between January 1st to September 11th (12th in leap year) in western calendar. The Ethiopian calendar has 12 months of 30 days and a short month of 5 or 6 days, depending whether it's a leap year.

Mengesha's books written in England discussed Oromo wisdom and culture and are useful for present and future generations who may be interested in having a broader insight into Oromo traditional life. Whilst living in Europe, Mengesha also edited his first book, *Biiftuu Diirmaa*, and had it published in the Roman script in the 1990's.

Another prolific Oromo writer in the 1960's and 1970's (E.C.) was the Reverend Dafaa Jammo, who wrote books in Oromo in the Ge'ez script. His first book, *Huursaa*, was published in 1969 (E.C.). The aim of the book was to increase awareness of, and reject some, unhelpful practices, such as gender inequality and large dowries given to brides during marriage. He also wrote four other books which covered topics such as culture, custom, language and social life amongst others. All of these books were written in the Ge'ez script but nevertheless they were not produced in enough quantities to be distributed and reach the wider literate population of the era. The books were: *Aadaa Oromoo Wallaggaa*, 1974 E.C., *Gumbii Oduu*, 1975 E.C., *Kusaa Sagalee Oromoo*, 1980 E.C., and *Safuu Biyyaa*, 1983 E.C.

6.4. Some Oromo materials written in the Roman alphabet in the 1970's and 1980's

The late 1970's to early 1980's was a crucial period in the history of the development of Oromo writing system. This was because it was during this time that a defined objective highlighting the development of the Oromo language was set out by the Oromo Liberation Front (Mekuria Bulcha, 1993:15). It was also during this period that three main events - namely, the publication of Haile Fida's Oromo grammar book; the Cologne Working Group; and the publication of Tilahun Gamta's Oromo dictionary - took place. Each of these events had an important impact on the development of Oromo writing system, so we will look at this in more detail in the following sections. However, before discussing these events, it is useful to also analyse one of the first Oromo textbooks, which was published and used by the OLF in early 1980's.

6.4.1. The Oromo Liberation Front and the Oromo writing system

Mekuria Bulcha (1993:15) noted that soon after its establishment, the OLF taught reading and writing in *Afaan* Oromo to its cadres, fighters and Oromo refugees in the neighbouring countries such as Somalia and the Sudan.

Mekuria Bulcha (ibid) also explained that the OLF published and distributed other materials to its supporters in the 1980's. This section looks briefly at *Barmoota Afaan Oromoo, Barreeffama Lammaffa*, a textbook the OLF prepared and used for teaching *Afaan* Oromo in the 1980's.

This book was published in 1980, some eleven years before the Roman alphabet was officially adopted in Ethiopia, in 1991, as a script on which the Oromo writing system was to be based. *Bamooota Afaan Oromoo, Barreeffama Lammaffa* contained 104 pages and was aimed at children and beginners who wanted to read and write Oromo words and simple sentences in *Qubee.* The first five pages introduced the reader to the reading and writing of capital and small letters, which were paired and arranged in an alphabetical order with pictures of animals or things that contained a sound in question associated with the letter. For example, the letter 'A' ('a') was written beside a picture of an elephant because the Oromo word for the animal (*Arba)* begins with 'a'. All the other letters, including the digraphs used in the Oromo writing system, were written in the same way with picture illustrations so that the readers could link them to the Oromo sounds. The following example was taken from page 6 of *Barmoota Afaan Oromoo, Barreeffama Lammaffa.*
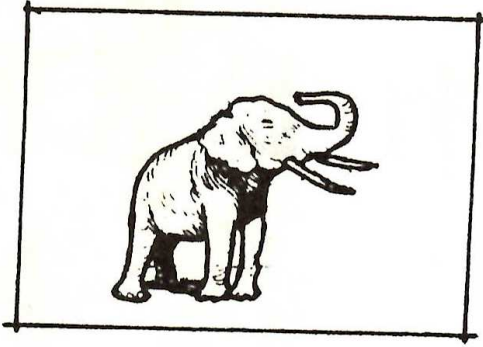
A a
Arba

arguu, asin, ani, ati, afaan, areeda, abbaa,
arraba, adda, ana, aduu, adii, adurree, achi,
aannan, kana, haadha, qaba, keessaa, Abdataa

Abdataan adurree tokko qaba.
Adurreen sunis adiidha.
Abdataan adurree isaa adii san barbaaduutti
jira.
Eessa jirti? Abdataan arguu hindandeenye.
Manaafi eddoo keessa barbaaduutti jira.
Achi hinjirtu. Maal godhuu dandaya?
Abdataan hinbooya. Adurreen isaa eessa jirti?
Abbaan Abdataa eddoo keessa jira.
Inni adurree adii hinarga.
Ilaali! Kuunnooti, mana gubbaa, aduu keessa.
Muka gubbaatti utaalti.
Adurreettiin mukicharraa bu'uu hindandeessu.
"Ati gowwaa, adurree," jedha Abdataan.
Abbaan isaa muka koreetu adurree fuudhaaf.
Akkasitti Abdataan deebi'ee gammade.

Source: *Barmoota Afaan Oromoo, Barreeffama Lammaffa,* **1980:6**.

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A very useful feature of the book was that it gave a graphic demonstration of how the Roman alphabets were written by showing arrow marks where a pen or pencil should start and finish when writing the alphabet on a writing material, as was demonstrated in the example below:

Source: *Barmoota Afaan Oromoo, Barreeffama Lammaffa,* **1980:5.**

This was useful especially for those learners who had been introduced to the Ge'ez script, which would be written differently from the way the Roman alphabet was written. In the Ge'ez script, a writer would usually separate a pen from the paper several times whilst writing a grapheme or letter. A short unpublished study undertaken by the researcher found that most of the subjects in Nekemte Teacher Training Institute, Ethiopia, wrote in English in a similar way to that in Amharic, separating pen from the paper when writing a letter (Teferi Degeneh, 1978 E. C., 13-26). The result of this was that the subjects were slow in writing in English and had a handwriting which was barely legible. The research concluded that it was useful for Ethiopian primary school English language teachers to demonstrate to and help the learner practise aspects of writing such as the appropriate position of the body and grip of the pen when teaching them how to write the Roman alphabets (capital, small and cursive forms).

Barmoota Afaan Oromoo, Barreeffama Lammaffa, was one of the earliest textbooks prepared in the Roman alphabet for the distribution and teaching of *Afaan Oromo* by the OLF. The book could be considered an achievement for the OLF because of the presentation of the contents from relatively simple to difficult stages. For example, learners were introduced to syllables, words, sentences, paragraphs, and so on. Exercise activities were also arranged in such a way

that they progressed from easier to more difficult questions. A final point to mention about this book is that the contents reflected Oromo names, places, culture, language, etc., which enabled learners to understand more about Oromo.

6.4.2. A brief account of Haile Fida's contribution to the Oromo writing system

Oromo students in the Diaspora, particularly those in Europe, started learning how to read and write Oromo in the Roman script in the early 1970s. As part of this initiative of learning how to read and write Oromo a person by name of Haile Fida wrote a grammar book titled *Hirmaata Dubbii Afaan Oromoo* (Oromo grammar book). This book was first published in 1973 and reprinted in Germany in 1979 by *Tokkummaa Ijaarsa Barattoota Oromoo Biyya Awurooppaa* (TIBOBA) or the Union of Oromo Students in Europe (UOSE). Even though the book was written anonymously, I am reliably informed by Professor R. J. Hayward of the School of Oriental and African Studies and (my then supervisor), that the late Haile Fida was the actual author of this book. Professor Hayward told the author that he had met Haile Fida at least once at a conference in Europe and discussed with him various aspects of the Oromo language. A book written by Andargachew Asegid (2000:288) on an Ethiopian political movement (*All Ethiopian Peoples' Socialist Movement* (Meison,

Amharic acronym]) refers to Haile Fida as being the author of 'the first'

Oromo grammar book.

Haile Fida's book, *Hirmaatadubbii Afaan Oromoo,* was different from all the

Oromo books written before the 1970's for at least three main reasons. The

first reason was that it was the first Oromo grammar book written by an

Oromo in the Roman script. Evidence is not available to suggest that a

grammar book had been written by an Oromo in the Roman script before the

early 1970's. Almost all available Oromo grammar books in the Roman script

before the 1970's were written by Europeans. The second reason, which made

Haile Fida's book different from earlier Oromo books written in the Roman

script, was the fact that its objective was to make a contribution to the unity

and consciousness of the Oromo people and the development of their

language as opposed to the books written for the benefit of Missionaries, for

example Krapf (1842), or for the purpose of teaching Europeans (Foot, 1913)

and help them in their dealings with the Oromo people. In the introduction to

his book, (Haile Fida, 1979: iii-iv) writes:

> Yaadnikeeñña akkasi:
> Tokkoffa, Oromooni barumsa qaban, mačaafa kanaan
> Oromoota biraa barsiisu hayaalani. Gaarii yookiis gađee
> ta'uusaa hoojiiđaan ha'agarsiisan. ….
> Lammaffaa, warri barumsa qaban kun sadii-afur ta'aanii
> walqabatani biyya Oromoo hunda keessa naannaanii
> hubatani,   nama   hagaggafatani,   otuu   hinnuffin

habarbaadani. Aadaađaaf hooda Oromoo, barsiisa đaloota darbani walitti haqaban. Waan argatan hunda hačaAfaani. Akkasitti afaankeeñña tokko goccuu, bal'isuu, qulleessuu dandeeñña. Akkasitti nuy warri ija bananne saba Oromoo yaada haaraađaaf jireeñña haaraa barsiisuu dandeeñña.

Yoo mačaafni kun hojiirra oolee Oromoota yartuulle damaqssuu danda'e, yoo Oromoonni barumsa qaban afaankeeñña ittiinčaAfaan, yoo kunis Oromoota walittiđiyeessuuđaaf walittiqabuu jalqabe, yoo inni ija banaccuuđaaf isaan gargaare, gammaccunkeeñña sona hinargatu. Waan barbanne arganne jeccuu đa….

Roughly translates as:

Our objectives (of writing this book) are as follows:

First, educated Oromos should try to teach their fellow Oromos using this book. They should prove in practice whether or not this book is useful….

Second, those educated, without despair, should hold hands in three's or four's and travel around to enquire, study and do research. They should gather information relating to Oromo culture, tradition and history. They should write everything they find. In this way we can unify, develop and purify our language. In this way we, who have opened our eyes, can teach the Oromo people new ideas and new life.

If this book is put to use, and could raise the awareness of even a few Oromos, if educated Oromos could write in our language, if this could take the lead in bringing the Oromo people closer to each other and start to organise them, if it could help them to open their eyes, our delight will be limitless. This means that we have achieved what we have wanted (My translation).

But, most important, *Hirmaataadubbii Afaan Oromoo* is different from the other

Oromo books which preceded it in its analytical depth of the phonology,

morphology and syntax of the language. Haile Fida, in this book, describes

various aspects of the language and painstakingly uses different marks and

notations to represent the systems in writing. Table 11 shows the system used

by the author in the book.

Table 11. Representation of Oromo sounds in Hirmaataadubbii Afaan Oromoo

No	Letters (Hirmaataadubbii)	Phonemes	Examples in Oromo	Gloss
1	ʼ	/ʔ/	taaʼuu	to sit
2	a	/a/	harka	hand
3	b	/b/	eeboo	spear
4	c	/tʃ /	acci	there
5	č	/tʃʼ/	čabbii	snow
6	d	/d/	dargaggoo	youth
7	ɗ	/ɗ/	ɗagaa	stone
8	e	/e/	ergaa	message
9	f	/f/	fayyaa	health
10	g	/g/	guyyaa	day
11	h	/h/	haaraa	new
12	i	/i/	iddoo	place
13	j	/j/	jecca	saying
14	k	/k/	kennaa	gift
15	l	/l/	lama	two
16	m	/m/	mana	house
17	n	/n/	nama	man
18	ñ	/ɲ/	ñaata	food
19	o	/o/	Oromoo	Oromo
20*[19]	p	/p/	poolisii	police
21	p̌	/pʼ/	tap̌a	game
22	q	/kʼ/	marqaa	porridge
23	r	/r/	raafuu	cabbage
24	s	/s/	soquu	to dig
25	š	/ʃ/	išee	she
26*	ş̥	/s̥/	ş̥iigeeradaa	rose
27	t	/t/	hantuuta	mouse
28	t̥	/tʼ/	fit̥uu	to finish
29	u	/u/	urjii	star
30*	v	/v/	revolušinii	revolution
31	w	/w/	waggaa	year
32*	x	/x/	ortodoxii	orthodox
33	y	/y/	wayyaa	cloth
34*	z	/z/	zeeroo	zero
35*	ž	/dʒ/	-	

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[19] Note that in rows 20, 26, 30, 32, 34, and 35, Haile Fida uses letters representing sounds which are foreign to Oromo but are increasingly being used by way of borrowing from Amharic, Arabic, Italian and English.

Besides his indepth analysis of the Oromo phonology, morphology and syntax, Haile Fida coined many new words which helped modernise Oromo language and demonstrated that it could be studied in its own right and could also be used for official purposes. The term '*Hirmaatadubbii*' (parts of speech) was a good example for Haile Fida's many newly coined words. His main contribution to the development of the Oromo writing system was, however, his use and recommendation of the Roman alphabet, rather than the Ge'ez script, for Oromo writing. It can be claimed that the OLF, which is commonly considered by Oromo people as being the organization responsible for the adaptation of the Roman alphabet for Oromo writing, was inspired by Haile Fida's work because *Hirmaataadubbii Afaan Oromoo* had been written prior to the formation of the OLF. According to Taha Abdi (in an interview, 19 February, 2005, London), the founders of the OLF had great respect for Haile Fida so much so that they had invited him to a clandestine meeting in 1975 in Addis Ababa at the residence of one of the OLF founders (Baaroo Tumsa). Taha Abdi stated that Haile Fida was a leader of a political movement and an advisor to Mengistu Hailemariam at that time. Taha Abdi said that Haile Fida's position at the time of the meeting was not to establish a political organization for Oromo but to work within the framework of the political organizations that operated in Ethiopia and to resolve the problems of Oromo. Taha Abdi noted that Haile Fida's viewpoint about not forming

Oromo political organization was politely and respectfully listened to but was not accepted by those present at the meeting.

Another area where the OLF parted course with Haile Fida was on the usage of digraphs to represent some Oromo sounds in the writing system. As a rule, unlike the OLF, Haile Fida had never used a diagraph to represent a sound segment which had no equivalent in European languages such as English or French. It is evident in Table 11 above that the sound segments in rows 4, 7, 18, 21 and 25 have all been represented by a plain character or with additional marks above the character or symbols. For example, according to Haile Fida's *Hirmaataadubbii Afaan Oromoo*, the initial alphabets in the Oromo words for 'snow' and 'stone' would be "č" (/ tʃ' /) and "ɠ (/ ɗ /), and the words would be written as **čabbii** and **ɗagaa.** The same words are written in *Qubee* as **cabbii** and **dhagaa**. It should be noted the use of digraphs in the officially accepted Oromo writing system lacked consistency for some sounds, such as / tʃ'/ and /t'/ ('c ' and 'x '), which were represented by single characters as opposed to organically similar sounds such as /tʃ/ and /p'/, which were represented with digraphs ('ch' and 'ph'). It can be argued that Haile Fida showed more consistency in his choice of the Roman alphabet symbols (letters) to represent the Oromo sounds than the current version or system of Oromo writing. This will be examined further in Chapter VIII. However, for now it can be

concluded that in spite of his way of writing Oromo in the Roman alphabet not being fully adopted or endorsed (see Chapter VIII), Haile Fida's contribution to the development of Oromo writing system is worthy of reference and recognition by anyone interested in this area.

6.4.3. Tilahun Gamta's contributions to the development of Oromo writing

Tilahun Gamta, an Oromo scholar, is most popularly known for writing an Oromo dictionary (1989), *Oromo-English Dictionary*, using the Roman alphabet. He is not explicit in giving a reason for his choice of the Roman alphabet in writing his book in Ethiopia at that time, when writing in Oromo even in the Ge'ez script was not encouraged, except saying that the dictionary was "designed primarily for those persons (with rudimentary knowledge of Latin alphabet) who wish to learn English through Oromo or vice versa" (Tilahun Gamta, 1989:1). This is understandable because it was not politically safe for him when the *Derg* was in power in Ethiopia to recommend or discuss which scripts should be used to write Oromo. Even though he did not suggest a script choice in his dictionary, his personal preference was evident from the fact that he wrote the dictionary in the Roman alphabet. It is also clear from Tilahun Gamta's argument on the *Qubee* (Chapter VII) that his preference was to use the Roman alphabet for Oromo writing.

Tilahun Gamta's *Oromo-English Dictionary* had a great role in raising the Oromo people's consciousness with regard to the choice of script and in preparing them to embrace the Roman alphabet as a script on which the Oromo writing system was later to be based. This is because it was the first time that such a book was written by a native speaker teaching in a university and residing in Ethiopia. Tilahun Gamta's Oromo dictionary was arguably the first Oromo book of its kind to be published in Ethiopia in Roman script and to be made widely available to the people. In addition to raising the awareness of the people about their language, the *Oromo-English Dictionary* was also a useful resource as it contains over 8000 Oromo-word entries and 500 idioms (Tilahun Gamta, 1989:ii).

With regard to Oromo writing and its phoneme representations, Tilahun Gamta's contribution was not as such a significant step forward as most of the Oromo sounds (particularly the affricates) are not represented in the *Qubee* system by the same characters as that of their representation in Tilahun Gamta's version (Figure 42).

**Figure 42 Tilahun Gamta's representation of affricates and glottals (in his
      dictionary) compared against the qubee representation**

No	Phonemes	Tilahun Gamta's	Qubee
1	/ tʃ /	cc	ch
2	/ tʃ'/	C	c
3	/ ɗ /	D	dh
4	/ɲ /	N	ny
5	/ p'/	P	ph
6	/ s'/	ʃ	sh
7	/ t' /	T	x
8	/ k'/	K	q
9	/ ŋ /	ŋ	-
10	/ ʔ /	?	'

As can be seen in Figure 42, Tilahun Gamta's representation of Oromo

affricates and glottals was different from the way the sounds are represented

in the *qubee* system. In many cases, Tilahun Gamta uses the capital forms of

letters to represent the glottalised sounds, for example / tʃ'/ is represented by

C, / t'/ by T, /ɗ/ by D and / k'/ is represented by K. One of the problems of

using a capital form of a letter to represent some glottalised, implosive and

nasal phonemes (/ tʃ'/, /t'/, / k'/, / p'/, /ɗ/, and /ɲ /) is that it makes writing look

awkward with smaller letters mixed capital ones. Using the system also

complicates the use of capital letters at the beginning of a sentence or when

writing names or some proper nouns. The system would be more complicated

or confusing when it is required to write the whole word in capital letters as

in BUPPA ([bup'a]) "egg", MAKAA ([mak'a:]) "name"and HAADA

([ha:ɗa]) "mother".

In conclusion, the 1970's and 1980's were confusing as well as defining

decades in the history of the development of Oromo writing. Confusing,

because these were the decades in which written materials in Oromo were

produced in four scripts; namely, the Shaykh Bakri Sapalo's Orthography,

Arabic alphabet, Ge'ez script and the Roman alphabet. And yet also defining

because it was during this period the Oromo Liberation Front and some

concerned Oromo individuals such as, Haile Fida and Tilahun Gamta,

produced major Oromo linguistic publications in the Roman alphabet.

Chapter VII

7.1. Arguments on the selection of a script for Oromo writing

Until 1991 (when the Roman alphabet was officially adopted as a script for Oromo writing) the question of a script choice for Oromo writing had not been a concern for most Ethiopian scholars. Indeed, the presence of the dictatorial political situation that promoted one language (Amharic) at the expense of the other languages in Ethiopia before the 1990's (Chapter V) meant that writing Ethiopian languages other than Amharic was unimaginable to most people in the country during the Haile Sellassie and *Derg* regimes. Except for a workshop in Cologne (see below, 7.2) there had not been any formal debate on how and in which script Oromo should or should not be written. It was after the adoption of the Roman Alphabet for the Oromo language writing in 1991 that the selection of a script for writing the language became a concern for many people in Ethiopia. This chapter discusses the arguments that followed the official adoption of the Roman Alphabet for Oromo writing. But before this it is useful to look briefly at the Cologne Group, a workshop in which the choice of a script for Oromo writing was discussed.

7.2. The Cologne working group

In 1986, a workshop was convened in Cologne, Germany, to openly discuss for the first time how Oromo should be written. This was a major advance in the history of the development of the Oromo writing system because it broke the "taboo" and debated openly the issue of not whether Oromo should be written at all, but of how and in what script it should be written. Heine (1988) describes this workshop stating that in 1986 nineteen well-known linguists from different parts of the world participated in a working group[20] and made some observations that included:

> 1. The problem of which script or scripts to use for writing Oromo was essentially a political one. The working group was qualified only to look into some socio-linguistic aspects of this problem.
>
> 2. In addition to the writing system used in Ethiopia, which is based on the Ethiopian script, there was a need for another system based on the Latin script to be used for both practical and scientific purposes outside Ethiopia, e.g., for the use of Oromo in education, literature and other public media in Kenya (Heine, 1988:619).

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[20] Included in this working group were: Dr Giorgio Banti, Dr C El-Solami-Mewis, Prof. Harold C Fleming, Mrs Makeda Äster Gäfgen, Prof. Bernd Heine, Prof. Robert Hetzorn, Dr Mekonnen Argaw, Prof. Wilhelm J W Möhlig, Dr Mulugeta Eteffa, Prof. Derek Nurse, Dr Gérard Philippson, Mr Franz Potyka, Dr Harry Stroomer, Dr Mauro Tosco and Prof. Andrzej Zaborski.

Despite its uniqueness in being a high profile working group comprised of international scholars, the workshop was only a symbolic step forward and had little impact on the direction of the development of the Oromo writing system in Ethiopia. Firstly, the decision made by the group was not clear-cut as the working group believed that a consideration of a script for Oromo writing was a "political one" and outside its remit. Also, the report did not offer a detailed explanation of the sociolinguistic aspects, except for briefly mentioning that this was an issue within their remit. Thirdly, despite their possible benefits or otherwise, some of the characters the working group recommended for Oromo writing (Table 12) were not taken into account in the *qubee* system (Chapter VIII). For example, the Cologne Working Group suggested the digraphs **"th" and "kh"** to be used for representing the Oromo phonemes / **t'** / and / **k'** / respectively but the same sounds are represented by the characters **"x"** and **"q"** in the *Qubee* system.

A fourth point to note is the confusing remark made by the Working Group in stating that in addition to writing Oromo based on the Ge'ez script in Ethiopia, there was a need for another system based on the Latin script for writing Oromo in Kenya for the use of Oromo in education, literature and media (Heine, 1988). The Working Group did not elaborate on why or how two scripts should be used to write Oromo in Ethiopia and Kenya. Also the Group did not elaborate on the costs and benefits of using two scripts to write

Oromo in Ethiopia and Kenya. In fact (as discussed earlier in Chapter III) and

elsewhere Oromo has been written by various people in different scripts

including in the Ge'ez and the Roman alphabet. But Oromo writing in

Ethiopia before 1991 was not official in the sense that the people were not

consulted regarding the scripts used, and also the language was neither

official nor a medium of instruction in Oromia, or the Oromo region. The

Cologne Group's suggestion for Oromo to be written simultaneously in two

scripts for different purposes was rather unclear and unhelpful It would

appear that the Working Group (whose members included Ethiopians) did

not want to rock the boat by openly recommending the Roman alphabet for

Oromo writing in Ethiopia, even though that was exactly what came across

through its suggestions on which Roman characters should represent which

Oromo phonemes and whether or not modification of the characters by way

of macrons was appropriate. The reason for the Working Group's unclear

suggestion could be inferred from its report which stated that a script choice

in Ethiopia was a political decision. This meant that the Working Group made

itself free from tampering with a decision that should essentially be made by

the politicians.

Despite its ambiguous and unhelpful recommendation, however, the

Working Group was explicit in its suggestion that diacritic marks should not

be employed if Oromo were to be written in the Roman alphabet. The reason

given for this was that financially it was cheaper and it was also more effective if additional marks were avoided in writing when possible to do so. As it turned out, the official Oromo writing, *Qubee,* did not use any diacritic marks to represent aspects of the sounds in writing except the use of leftwards facing raised commas to denote a glottal stop.

Another useful suggestion made by the Cologne Working Group (but was not fully endorsed by the OLF and in the *Qubee* system) was the representation of a group of sounds that had no equivalent characters in the Roman script. As can be seen in Table 12 below, the group was consistent (except for the use of **"y"** with **"n"** as in **"ny"**) in its representation of the digraphs by always using '**h**' as a second character. In *Qubee,* these are all written differently without consistency.

Table 12. Some letters recommended by the Group

IPA Transcription	Recommended by the Group
tʃ	c
tʃ'	ch
ɗ	dh
k'	kh
P'	ph
t'	th
ɲ	ny

In summary, despite its limited impact, the Cologne Working Group has played a role in the development of Oromo writing by virtue of the fact that it took the issue seriously and discussed how Oromo should be written. The Group's recommendations, particularly those relating to maintaining consistency by adding the letter **"h"** to a character (as outlined in Table 12) are worth examining.

7.3 Common and ongoing arguments on script selection for Oromo writing

It appears that the adoption of the Roman script or *Qubee* (See Chapter VIII) for Oromo writing is a major issue for a great number of non-Oromo people, especially for some Amharic speakers in Ethiopia. Kifle Djote (1993:20) succinctly illustrates this:

"The number of those (Abyssinians) who are still fond of making malicious slanders about the Latinization of Oromo literature is not small. In private discussions and in official circles, the use of the Latin alphabet (Qubee Afaan Oromoo) by the Oromo has become the most intensively discussed theme in Ethiopian society".

The same observation was made by Tilahun Gamta (1993) who stated that people from various walks of life in Ethiopia were engaged in the discussion

of the selection of a script for Oromo writing system. He also claimed that the Oromo people were united in their acceptance of the *Qubee* for writing their language (Tilahun Gamta, 1993). A personal experience of the author gained through conversations with a number of Oromo people of various educational and social backgrounds supports Tilahun Gamta's assertion that the Oromo people are united in accepting the *Qubee*. However, it cannot be concluded from personal experience or from a conference attended by 1000 or so people that all Oromo people support or accept the *Qubee* writing system.

It can be argued that the Ethiopian language policies, especially those of the Haile Sellasie regime, not only degraded and hindered the development of Oromo language but were key factors in creating a common denominator or a common feeling of suppression, which fostered unity among the Oromo people on the issue of the writing system for their language. Mohammed Hassen (1996) was right in asserting that the Ethiopian language policies, which emphasized the teaching of Amharic through the Ge'ez script, led the Oromo to reject the "Sabean" script (Ge'ez script) and adopt the Latin alphabet to write their language. It is likely that the association of the Ge'ez script with a centrally imposed language (Amharic) only reinforced opposition to it among the Oromo people. As stated elsewhere, Oromo had been unofficially written in four different scripts (Arabic, Shaykh Bakri Sapalo script, Ge'ez and the Roman alphabet) for different purposes at different

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times but the people were united in their acceptance of a writing system based on the Roman alphabet.

Tilahun Gamta (1993:17) notes that the Oromo people were "unanimous" in their decision to adapt the Roman alphabet as a script for writing. Indeed, this author has not come across any Oromo opposed to the use of the Roman script for writing Oromo. However, this has not stopped many non-Oromo people from arguing against the Oromo writing system based on the Roman alphabet. The interesting thing about the argument or debate on the Oromo language by non-Oromos in Ethiopia at this time is not the question of whether or not it should be written but what script it should be written in. This is one step forward in itself by Ethiopia's standard since the issue of Oromo writing had not been a concern or an area of interest to non-Oromo scholars prior to the 1990s. Now it is evident that people who had never bothered themselves with the development of Oromo language before have at least accepted the need for it to be written. While this could be considered a welcome improvement given the historical background of the Ethiopian language policies, it would appear to be a late, subjective, undemocratic and desperate reaction. The arguments of some of these people are analysed below. But before that, it is useful to note the reasons given from the Oromo perspective. In this regard Tilahun Gamta (1991), who made a significant contribution to the development of Oromo writing (discussed in Chapter VI)

preferred the use of the Roman alphabet to the Ge'ez script for Oromo writing for linguistic, pedagogic, and practical reasons, which he listed as follows:

- The Roman alphabet has 26 letters whereas the Ge'ez script has 231 characters.

- The Ge'ez script does not make provisions for gemination or for certain long vowels.

- It is easier to use keyboards designed for the Roman alphabet than that of the Ge'ez syllabary.

- Oromo in the Roman alphabet is more commonly and widely used than the Ge'ez script.

- The Roman script is more commonly and widely used globally which means that the use of it brought the Oromo closer to the world community.

- Learning reading and writing in the Roman alphabet could offer an advantage for Oromo children who later chose to study in other foreign languages (such as English and French) which were also written in the Roman alphabet.

During the course of this research, the author has not come across any Oromo that advocated for the use of the Ge'ez script for Oromo writing or those opposed against the adaptation of the Roman alphabet. The argument

against, and the objection to, Oromo writing based on the Roman script

(*Qubee)* came invariably from Amharic speakers who had different social or

academic backgrounds and who put forward different reasons for their

dislike of the use of the Roman script for Oromo writing. The Ethiopian

Orthodox clergy were among those who were known for their objection to the

use of *Qubee.* For them, Q*ubee* was tantamount to the "Devil's script" and

there was a situation in Ethiopia when "an individual was excommunicated

and refused burial on Orthodox Church grounds for teaching the Oromo

language" (Mekuria Bulcha, (1993:111)). This is paradox for the Ethiopian

Orthodox church because associating a language with Christianity restricts

(rather than helps) the spread of the teachings of Christ among people who do

not speak Amharic. In fact the Bible, the *Holy Book* on which Christianity is

based, is translated into several languages and written in different scripts to

help spread the "Word of God". Contrary to categorizing a system of writing

as the "devil's script", the Bible[21] encourages and allows us to use various

scripts and languages.

For some politicians, the use of the *qubee* was seen as unnecessary endeavour

because it would lead Oromia to secede from Ethiopia. Moreover, these

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[21] For example, in the Bible (Esther, 1:22) it is stated: "King Xerxes sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in their own language…" This shows that, far from demonising, the Bible recognises and accepts the use of various languages and scripts by different people.

people believed that there was no need to adopt a foreign, western script, when there was already 'an indigenous' script in Ethiopia. Professor Asrat Woldeys, a prominent Amhara political leader, is quoted (Mekuria Bulcha, 1994) as referring to the Oromo as *agul ferenji* (pretentious white person) only because of the Oromo's decision to adopt the Roman script for writing their language. Still, for some writers, Q*ubee* was part of a conspiracy by the enemy which ought to be resisted at any cost. The following statement is interesting in this regard:

…በጦር፡ ያላሸነፉን፡ ጠላቶቻችን፡ ዛሬ፡ በደካማ፡
ጎናችን፡ በኩል፡ ገብተዉ፡ የፊደላት፡ እናት፡
የሆነዉን፡ የግዕዝ፡ ፊደላችንን፡ ወደ፡ ላትን፡
ለመቀየር፡ ሲፈገመግሙ፡ እንመለከታለን፡፡

…our enemies, who failed to defeat
us at war, are taking advantage of
our weakness and are doing their
best to change our Ge'ez script, the
mother of scripts, to Latin script
(Laykun Birhanu, 2001:2). (My
translation)

Laykun Birhanu (2001) was rather at best naïve or an opportunist, and at worst chauvinist for, amongst other things, making a generalized and unproven claim that "Ge'ez is the mother of scripts". But (as we will see below) he was not alone in Ethiopia in making this unsubstantiated claim that the Ge'ez script originated in Ethiopia and therefore it should be adapted to write Oromo and the other languages in the country. What is implicitly "positive" and progressive in Laykun Birhanu's (2001) assertion is that he

accepts the right of non-Amhara people to write their language but he denies them their right to select a script for their writing system. Mekuria Bulcha (1994) exposes the fact that a large number of non-Oromo people in Ethiopia were opposed not to Oromo writing per se but to the newly adapted Oromo writing system. Just like Laykun Birhanu (2001), these people tended to believe that the Ge'ez script was not only superior to the Roman alphabet but that it was also one that should be used to write all the languages in the Ethiopian empire. They believed that all Ethiopians, regardless of nationality or linguistic background, should be proud of the "indigenous" Ge'ez script.

Laykun Birhanu's reference to Oromo as enemies embarked on changing the Ge'ez script is not a helpful comment. It is not clear how Oromo could be blamed for changing the Ge'ez script when they had not been using it officially to write their language in any form under the Haile Sellassie or Derg regimes. If what was being referred to by Laykun Birhanu was that the Ge'ez script was replaced by the Roman alphabet for Oromo writing, one would need to look back and consider that Oromo had never been allowed to develop or to be written and used for education or official purposes by governments in Ethiopia prior to 1990's. Additionally, one would need to look into the issue of which script to use from the point of view of the Oromo people, who would be most affected by any decision regarding how Oromo should be written. There is also the fundamental question of who should have

the right to decide how the language should be written. This legitimate question is expected to be considered by people who are conscious of (or concerned about) human rights and who believe in a democratic way of life.

Apart from this, it could be argued that Laykun Birhanu's reference to Oromo and the other populations in Ethiopia who preferred the Roman alphabet to the Ge'ez script for writing their languages as enemies was misguided. This is because the use of one script to write different languages in a country does not necessarily make the speakers feel as though they belong to a unified country. In other words, a script cannot be a primary pre-requisite for the unity of a country. In fact, as seen by the example of Somalia, speaking one language, let alone using one script, has not guaranteed unity, respect and affection between its people. It is difficult to understand how people can be called "enemies" for choosing a different script, which they believe would be more suitable for them than the one imposed on them by the ruling class.

Qubee supporters contest that the opposition to the use of the Roman alphabet for writing Oromo is unfounded and was based on an emotional attachment of some people to the Ge'ez script. They claim that the people who oppose the newly adapted Oromo writing are those who, deep in their hearts, were dreaming of continued Amhara and Amharic domination (Cohen, 1998) through the use of the Ge'ez script and Amharic language. What should have

been made clear was the fact that borrowing a script was not unique to Oromo and, indeed, most of the world's languages were, and continue to be, written in scripts that had not been originally designed for them (see Diringer, 1962; Bender, et al, 1976; Daniels, 1996). The Ge'ez script, which some people, including Laykun Birhanu (2001), claim to be an indigenous script to Ethiopia, is yet to be conclusively proved, as some (for example, Diringer, 1947; Mercer, 1920; and Bender 1976) attest to the contrary.

The worries of the opponents of *Qubee* for Oromo writing also emanated from the rejection of some nationalities of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) of the Ge'ez script in favour of the Roman alphabet for writing their languages. It is believed that out of a total of twenty-two[22] languages taught in schools in Ethiopia in the year 2000, eleven were being written in the Roman alphabet whilst the rest were in the Ge'ez script. It was the fact that the other languages have become media of instruction and have gained recognition to be used in the offices that would seem to worry those opposed to the use of the Roman alphabet to write Oromo or the other languages in Ethiopia. The main change, as far as the other languages in Ethiopia were concerned, was arguably their status of being used for official

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[22] The number of languages used as a medium of instruction could increase over time. Currently, the languages in Ethiopia whose writing systems are based on the Roman alphabet include Oromo, Somali, Hadiyya, Kambata, Gedeo, Sidama, Afar, Walaitta, Keficho, Dawro and Nuer. Eleven other languages are written in the Ge'ez script.

and academic purposes rather than the kind of script in which they were written. This was in contradiction with the Ethiopian language policies and practices of the Haile Sellassie and *Derg* regimes (see Chapter V), which used the Amharic language as a tool for fostering unity and national identity among the peoples. But as we have seen in Chapter V, the policies and practices became a recipe for the demise of both regimes.

For some people in Ethiopia their opposition to *Qubee* was based on their querulous concern for educational and economic opportunities for Oromo children. These people would argue that the *Qubee* could negatively affect Oromo children when they are introduced to Amharic which is written in the Ge'ez script and which is still an important language in the education system, as well as being widely used for many purposes in Ethiopian society (Cohen, 1998:104). This 'concern' continues to occur even after *Qubee* had been officially accepted and used as an Oromo writing system for over a decade. For example, an interviewer for the *Walta Information Centre* (an Ethiopian government owned media organization) asked the following question on the organisation's website [23] on 10th January 2002:

> Question: One area, where there has been a problem in
> the past, is in the area of education, where reportedly
> non-Oromo inhabitants have had no access to

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[23] This was posted on http://www.waltainfo.com/

education in Amharic while many Oromo parents also are said to have been forced to pursue education in Oromifa against their desire to learn Amharic. This denial is usually linked to a denial of better opportunities in terms of employment and further education elsewhere in the country, later in life. Has your state government considered this issue as a problem and the need for some sort of liberalization?

An Oromo interviewee responded to this question by stating that it was the Oromo's birthright to be able to learn and to teach in their language. He went on to explain that as far as the Amharic speaking people in Oromia were concerned, they could have their community school and teach their children in their mother tongue. The interviewee also alluded to the economic issue by saying that the Oromo people would like not only to learn and write in their language, but also to work in it too. The interviewee did not comment on the allegation that Oromo parents force their children against their will to learn in Oromo.

However, contrary to this, a study by Boothe and Walker (1997:13) has revealed that people were enthusiastic about being able to learn in their first language. The study reveals:

Across the board, parent, student, and teacher attitudes about using the nationality languages were positive. Children were excited that for the first time they could *legally* use their mother tongue in schools. Parents were pleased that they could talk to school officials in the mother

> tongue rather than through an interpreter. Teachers were encouraged by the students' willingness to engage in class discussions now that they could express themselves in the language in which they were most confident. (Boothe, K and R. Walker, 1997:13)

Mohammed Hassen (1994) asserts that the Ethiopian scholars deliberately neglected the Oromo issue during the Haile Sellassie and *Derg* regimes but have recently begun to concern themselves with the issue of the Oromo script. Mohammed Hassen is correct in his assertion that the Oromo script was not of interest to Ethiopian scholars because there is no evidence to show that Ethiopian scholars and intelligentsia have argued for Oromo to be a written language, let alone concern themselves with the issue of the choice of script. In recent times, however, with the adoption of the Roman alphabet for Oromo writing, a great many non-Oromo Scholars in Ethiopia have started to develop an interest in discussing the merits and demerits of writing Oromo in a script other than the Ge'ez.

Teshome Wagaw (1979), who has written extensively on the Ethiopian education system, in his book *Education in Ethiopia*, did not seem to have any interest in the pedagogical issues of teaching school subjects in Amharic to the Oromo and non-Amharic speaking children without either adequate resources or methods under the Haile Sellassie or *Derg* regimes. It was only after *Afaan*

Oromo became a written language in *Qubee* and a medium of instruction in

Oromia that he concerned himself with the 'harm that may be caused to the

Oromo children' in the absence of necessary resource to facilitate teaching and

learning. He wrote:

> (…) the use of Oromogna language is being implemented in the schools, courts, and other institutions. Neither the necessary teaching skills nor materials have been developed for this *de facto* movement, and I fear that if they insist on implementation before the necessary foundations are properly laid down, more harm than good will ensue, especially for the children and youth in schools.

Teshome Wagaw did not elaborate how "more harm than good will ensue" if

the Oromo people used their mother tongue in Roman script except by

underlining a warning against the implementation of the use of Oromo in

schools. If the Oromo people did not use their language in schools, and for the

conduct of business, judicial, office, etc. and only out of fear of "more harm",

they would be left with no option but to use the Amharic language and the

Ge'ez script for all their public communication requirements. Even though

Teshome Wagaw does not spell this out explicitly, his argument is that the

Oromo should learn in Amharic while they wait for materials and trained

teachers to become available to teach them in the Oromo language. What

Teshome Wagaw was clearly not concerned with was the extent to which the

Oromo children and other non-Amharic speakers were provided and

supported with the necessary conditions to learn in Amharic. His assertion

echoes an argument put forward by a Soviet Turcologist, Professor Baskakov,

who stated that the "adoption of the Russian script by most of the languages

has not only contributed to their development but has been of notable

assistance to the various nationalities of the Soviet Union in their successful

mastery of the Russian language and in the assimilation of Russian culture"

(Henze, 1977:381).

Others, who do not directly oppose the development of Oromo and Oromo

writing system on pedagogical or economic grounds, claim that the language

should be written in Ge'ez script which, they believe, is more suitable both

phonetically and phonologically to writing it. One such person, Ayele Bekerie

(1997:94-85), argues that

> the Oromo language could find a sounder
> script in the Ge'ez system, for the system
> has already addressed the question of
> explosive sounds that are found in most
> Ethiopian languages, including *Orominya*
> and *Amarinya.* The Latin script currently
> used among some Oromo circles, in my
> opinion, limits or compromises the rich and
> varied polyrhythmic sounds of the *Oromo*
> language.

Ayele Bekerie goes much further and suggests a modified version of the Ge'ez

script for Oromo writing (see Table 13). Ayele Bekerie proposes markings that

could be used to reflect the tonality of the Oromo language but he does not seem to suggest how gemination and the other Oromo vowels which are not provided for in the Ge'ez system (Gragg, 1982) would be represented. In Table 13 it can be observed that there are no fundamental changes or improvements in Ayele Bekerie's suggested Ge'ez script for Oromo writing as compared to the versions used by earlier Oromo writers who had used the same script. The main noticeable change or difference in Ayele Bekerie's new proposition in Table 13 is the ordering of the characters. However, he has not clarified the logic behind the changes in his ordering of the characters in the table or in the book.

Ayele Bekerie's thesis is not different in its underlying intentions from others (such as Teshome Wagaw (ibid) or Laykun Birhanu (ibid)) who would appear to detest the use of Roman alphabet for writing Oromo. Their intentions are a question of power, privilege, prestige, etc., all benefits that can be associated with using one's language. These intentions are not dissimilar from the case of the Cyrillazation of the Soviet minority languages under Stalin. In this regard Baskakov (quoted in Henze, 1977:377) stated that the Soviet Union required Turkic languages to change their writing systems from Latin to Cyrillic. Baskakov goes on to explain the reasons behind this by saying that the Soviet Union's explicit intention was to make it easier for the minorities to learn Russian, and read the original writings of Stalin and Lenin. Henze

elaborates that cyrillicization was also intended to make it easier for the non-Russian languages to assimilate Russian words. Ayele Bekerie's preference of the Ge'ez script to be the basis for the Oromo writing system does not seem to follow from empirical study for it does not compare and contrast the advantages and suitability or otherwise of using the Ge'ez script, not other alternative scripts, for Oromo writing. His reason for the preference of the Ge'ez script for Oromo writing, stated implicitly in his book, emanates from his belief that the Ge'ez script originated in Ethiopia and, therefore, should be used for writing any language in the country that needs to be written. It seems unwise for him to make such a generalized recommendation in his book without exploring whether or not the Ge'ez script is really the most suitable script for Oromo or, indeed, for Amharic writing.

Table 13. Ayele Bekerie's (1997:96) "Suggested Syllographs for the Oromo Language"

a	u	ï	é	o	ä	i	
ሃ	ሁ	ሂ	ሄ	ሆ	ሀ	ህ	h
ላ	ሉ	ሊ	ሌ	ሎ	ለ	ል	l
ማ	ሙ	ሚ	ሜ	ሞ	መ	ም	m
ራ	ሩ	ሪ	ሬ	ሮ	ረ	ር	r
ሳ	ሱ	ሲ	ሴ	ሶ	ሰ	ስ	s
ሻ	ሹ	ሺ	ሼ	ሾ	ሸ	ሽ	sh
ቃ	ቁ	ቂ	ቄ	ቆ	ቀ	ቅ	q
ባ	ቡ	ቢ	ቤ	ቦ	በ	ብ	b
ቫ	ቩ	ቪ	ቬ	ቮ	ቨ	ቭ	v
ታ	ቱ	ቲ	ቴ	ቶ	ተ	ት	t
ቻ	ቹ	ቺ	ቼ	ቾ	ቸ	ች	ch
ና	ኑ	ኒ	ኔ	ኖ	ነ	ን	n
ኛ	ኙ	ኚ	ኜ	ኞ	ኘ	ኝ	ny
ኣ	ኡ	ኢ	ኤ	አ	አ	እ	a
ካ	ኩ	ኪ	ኬ	ኮ	ከ	ክ	k
ዋ	ዉ	ዊ	ዌ	ዎ	ወ	ው	w
ዛ	ዙ	ዚ	ዜ	ዞ	ዘ	ዝ	z
ያ	ዩ	ዪ	ዬ	ዮ	የ	ይ	y
ዳ	ዱ	ዲ	ዴ	ዶ	ደ	ድ	d
ጃ	ጁ	ጂ	ጄ	ጆ	ጀ	ጅ	j
ጋ	ጉ	ጊ	ጌ	ጎ	ገ	ግ	g
ጣ	ጡ	ጢ	ጤ	ጦ	ጠ	ጥ	x
ጫ	ጩ	ጪ	ጬ	ጮ	ጨ	ጭ	c
ጳ	ጱ	ጲ	ጴ	ጶ	ጰ	ጵ	ph
ዻ	ዺ	ዼ	ዾ	ዸ	ዹ	ዽ	dh
ፃ	ፁ	ፂ	ፄ	ፆ	ፀ	ፅ	ts
ፋ	ፉ	ፊ	ፌ	ፎ	ፈ	ፍ	f
ፓ	ፑ	ፒ	ፔ	ፖ	ፐ	ፕ	p

Source: Ayele Bekerie,1997:96

Another intellectual, Baye Yimam, (1992), who strongly prefers the Ge'ez as a script for writing Oromo and other Ethiopian languages, declares that the Ge'ez script, like the Latin script, cannot always exactly represent a word as pronounced by the speaker and should therefore be used for Oromo writing.

He argues that, in his opinion, it is far more advantageous for Oromos to use the former (the Ge'ez) rather than the latter script. Baye Yimam devoted an entire article to responding to a television interview given by Tilahun Gamta on an Oromo programme aired on the Ethiopian television on 7th November 1991, a few days after the official adoption of the Roman alphabet for Oromo writing.

Baye Yimam (1992:37).declared that he would anticipate some problems would result if the Roman alphabet were used for writing Oromo and other nationality languages in Ethiopia. He went on to elaborate "these problems", as follows[24]:

> - Anyone who is trained only in the Latin script needs to learn how to read in the Ge'ez script if he/she is to go and work in the other parts of the country where the Ge'ez script is used. As a result such a person needs to become literate twice. In terms of time and money, this will cause a tremendous amount of difficulty and inconvenience.
> - Such a measure will also transform the country from a multi-lingual one to a multi-script one.
> Any communication in correspondence with the central government will no longer be carried out in one writing system but, possibly, in three.

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[24] My translation from Amharic (Baye Yimam (1992:37).

It was evident from Baye Yimam's arguments that his opinion was based on the perception that Ethiopia was a country where the people ought to have only one official language, that being Amharic, and one script, the Ge'ez script. It would appear he did not take into account the prevailing socio-linguistic and political realities in the country. Baye Yimam's analysis implied that the political, social and economic disparities in the country could be resolved only if Amharic language and the Ge'ez script were used by all the citizens of the country, the futile policies of the Haile Sellassie and *Derg* regimes. Baye Yimam's implied assertion that the Oromo were effectively becoming literate twice and were therefore wasting their time cannot hold water for the Oromo had to learn the Roman alphabet regardless of whether or not it was the basis for their writing system.

Baye Yimam asserts with conviction that he could, in the near future, prove that the Ge'ez script was an indigenous one and that Ethiopians ought to be proud of it and therefore adopt it for writing. It seems unreasonable to concur with this proposition for many reasons. Firstly, it is more useful to consider whether or not a script is suitable and effective for writing a language than sticking to it only because it is indigenous to the country. Another reason is that imposing a script on every nationality is tantamount to denying the people the right to develop their language and culture in a way they choose.

It is debatable whether Baye Yimam forgot, or rather deliberately omitted to make clear his stand on the right of the peoples in Ethiopia to make a decision on matters affecting their lives including the choice and use of a writing system. No mention was made in his article on whether or not the Oromo people had a right to make an informed decision with regard to the adoption of a script for writing their language. Apart from stating that the Ge'ez was a "home-grown" script, Baye Yimam did not discuss how suitable and effective the script was for Oromo, or even for Amharic writing. What was also lacking in the debate was any mention of the extent to which Oromo could benefit from using their language for education, office, etc. through writing in the Roman alphabet. It has been cited earlier that the existing literature shows a dearth in Ethiopian research[25] on the issue of people's rights to use their mother tongue and the co-relation of this to economic and professional achievement.

Another Ethiopian academic, Getachew Haile (1996), makes an observation that contradicts Baye Yimam by asserting that the Ge'ez script is an adoption of the Sabean script. In fact Getachew Haile and a number of other scholars

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[25] This subject has, however, been of considerable debate in reference to other countries. See for example, the UNESCO report (2011). Enhancing Learning of Children From Diverse Language Backgrounds : Mother Tongue Based On Bilingual Or Multilingual Education In Early Years.

argue that the Ge'ez script is ill-suited for representing Amharic (see Chapter

IV). From Getachew Haile's claim it can be understood that the Ge'ez script is

not without problems in being used for Amharic writing and by the same

token it can't be implied that it can be the most suitable script for writing

Oromo, a language which is phonologically, morphologically and

syntactically different from Amharic.

The following assertion by Getachew Haile (1996:574) is interesting:

> For example, the system (Ge'ez writing
> system) does not distinguish between
> (səbħa) 'to be fat' and (səbbƏħa) 'to praise';
> both are written ሰባ. To make this
> distinction and to determine the presence
> or absence of the vowel Ə, we must rely
> primarily on oral transmission of the
> language(s).

In conclusion it can be highlighted that the choice of script for Oromo writing

has become a matter of concern not only for Oromo but also for many other

peoples in Ethiopia. The reasons proposed for or against the use of *Qubee* (a

Roman alphabet based Oromo writing system) were predominantly

subjective and emotional rather than scientific. Reasons such as "there are not

suitable recourses" or "learning in Oromo (written in Roman alphabet) will

do more harm than good to Oromo people" are spurious rather than serious

ones because the people who come up with these had not been known to have

concerns for the welfare of Oromo children, for example, by investigating the

impact on their academic, social and economic success of being forced to use Amharic. The claim that the Ge'ez script is an indigenous script that should be used for writing all Ethiopian languages does not seem to hold water for the very fact that it is the suitability of a script to writing a language that matters rather than its origin. Even if we assume the origin of a script matters in the process of selection, it is yet to be verified that the Ge'ez script really originated in Ethiopia.

It would appear that the opponents of the new Oromo writing system were concerned not for the Oromo people but primarily for themselves. According to Coulmas (2003), this is because a writing system is a weapon which can liberate individuals - and therefore a society - from oppression by the ruling section whose language and culture are imposed by force. Coulmas (ibid) also asserts that a writing system has not only the possibility of unifying its people and creating national identity it also represents a source of political and military power, which the opponents do not wish the ruled people to have. Having a writing system and being able to read and write in one's own language may enable people to think more about their rights and challenge the status quo. It was because of this very fact that, as far back as 1807, the president of the Royal Society in Britain argued against general literacy which, he said, would "teach (the poor) to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good servants in agriculture, and other laborious employment to which

their rank in society had destined them.…". (quoted in Oxenham, 1980:68). He also went on to argue that "(literacy) would enable them to read seditious pamphlets, vicious books, and publications against Christianity; it would render them insolvent" (quoted in Oxenham, 1980:68). In general, by denying the under privileged the opportunity to become literate (in their language or any other language) they would continue to remain servants and disadvantaged throughout their lives. Also it meant that those people who were privileged by way of being able to read and write were reassured of not being challenged because people without the skill of reading and writing would be less likely to do so.

The president of the Royal Society's assertion (as quoted in Oxenham, 1980) is extreme and unacceptable in most of societies in the world today. However, from our discussion above about the arguments of the *Qubee* and the Ethiopian language policies, it is evident that the previous governments and some scholars favoured the imposition of Amharic on everyone in the country. The imposition of a language or a script on a multilingual and multicultural society has the effect of giving the ruling elite a political, social, economic and cultural advantage while at the same time keeping the under privileged masses illiterate (similar (the president of the Royal Society in Britain's assertion, quoted in Oxenham, ibid) or at best semi-literate. Gelb cites

examples of situations where books were burnt in an attempt to deny citizens

their own writing system and thereby keeping them illiterate:

> We thus understand why Cortez, having conquered Mexico in 1520, ordered the burning of all Aztec books which might remind the native population of their glorious past; why the Spanish Inquisition sending the Jews to the Pyre, burned with them their Talmud; why the modern Nazis, anxious to destroy ideologies adverse to their own, burned the books of their opponents, and why the victorious allies after the second World War ordered the destruction of all Nazi tainted literature. (Gelb, I. J, 1963: 235).

It would appear that the opponents of the *Qubee* were also concerned with the

'imaginary' consequences of the using of different scripts for writing various

languages in the country. This is not surprising because it has not been the

practice to write Ethiopian languages in a script other than Ge'ez and use

them for official purposes until early 1990s. People would think that the use

of different scripts would mean that the country would eventually break up

to form different countries based on languages and scripts. However, as seen

in the example of India where some eleven scripts are used scripts (Das

Gupta, 1969), having different scripts to write languages in a country does not

necessarily lead to secession. Similarly, using one script to write different

languages in a country is not the main reason for keeping that country united,

and if this were not the case Eritrea (which uses the Ge'ez script) would not have seceded from Ethiopia and declared its independence.

However, the oponents of *Qubee* are right to question whether the Roman alphabet is the most suitable in representing Oromo sounds and in being the "perfect" writing system. Indeed, it cannot be claimed that a script fully represents the sound system of a language and there is no perfect system of writing. This means that theoretically and practically, the Ge'ez script can be used for Oromo writing and indeed there are some possible merits which would support to continued use of the script for Oromo writing. These would include:

a) Using the Ge'ez script would enable people to have access to the materials already written in the script. For example, The Oromo translation of The Bible was first written in the Ge'ez script and there are also many other Oromo books written in the Geez script.

b) The use of the Ge'ez script for Oromo writing would provide Oromo people with the opportunity to learn it from early on in schools. This would be useful especially when people learn Amharic, which is written in the Ge'ez script and which people are required to learn because of its status of currently being an official language of the country.

c) Lastly, the use of the Ge'ez script to write Oromo and all the other Ethiopian languages would create a feeling of unified identity among the people.

Admittedly, it is yet to be proven how effective *Qubee* can be for Oromo writing. But regardless of the effectiveness or otherwise of the chosen script it makes sense to accept and respect the choice of the speakers of the language. What seems to have been omitted by the opponents of *Qubee* is the fact that "writing systems generally grow out of the needs of native speakers, not foreigners" (Bender, et al., 1976: 125:126). It is only a democratic principle and legitimate that people who are most affected by any decision have the final word.

Here, it is not to trivialise "effectiveness" as a criterion (presented by the opponents of the *Qubee*) for the selection of a script as a basis for the *Qubee* system. Indeed, this has been a fundamental issue for some Oromo writers (for example, Tutschek, 1945:1; Cerulli, 1922:15) and for the OLF (see Chapter VIII) who preferred the Latin to the Ge'ez script as a basis for the Oromo writing system. It was also stated in Chapter III that a good writing system is one which is essentially phonemic and at least able to include the basic repertoire of phonemes. It is clear that the Latin alphabet is able to include all

the phonemes of Oromo including gemination and vowel length, aspects

which have inadequate provision in the Ge'ez writing system. *Qubee's*

effectiveness as an Oromo writing system should also be measured by how

easy it is to learn to write and read in it. This is an area that certainly warrants

further study.

Chapter VIII

8. The adoption and development of the qubee alphabet as Oromo writing system

8.1. What is Qubee?

Qubee as a term referring to an Oromo alphabet has been in use clandestinely in Oromia and openly in the Diaspora at least since the 1970s. The exact date and how it was coined, or the identity of the person or persons responsible for coining the term, however, are not clear since relevant information is not readily available. Popular Oromo dictionaries such as that of Gragg (1982) and Tilahun Gamta (1989) define *Qubee* as *ring* and not as an alphabet of the Oromo language. It was a dictionary called *Jechoota Afaan Oromoo* (1996) which first entered *Qubee* as having two meanings of which the second is stated as the alphabet of Oromo.

While the date and the year of the coinage and the person or group responsible for coining the term *Qubee* remain unknown, the author assumes that the term probably originated from two related Oromo words: [k'uba] (finger) and [k'abu:] (to catch). This assumption is based on the Oromo tradition that literally compares writing with "a foolish person who never lets go of whatever he has got to grips with", as writing indeed is often

considered *verba volant, scripta manant* ("the spoken word passes, the written one remains"). Similarly, the Oromo in general, and the Macha Oromo in particular, use references[26] to [k'uba] (finger) when counting numbers or teaching their offspring about different aspects of day-to-day life.

8.2. The Qubee – historical background

Until 1991, *Qubee*, a name which has become very popular and controversial as an Oromo writing system in contemporary Oromia and Ethiopia, was never previously an issue with politicians or intellectuals or the general public. Except for a few brief remarks (Cerulli, 1922; Hodson and Walker, 1922; Gragg, 1982; Haile Fida, 1973), there is hardly any evidence to suggest that the choice of a script had been an issue for Oromo writing in Oromia and Ethiopia before the 1990s. As discussed in Chapter V, writing in *Afaan* Oromo in any script in Ethiopia was prohibited or at least seriously discouraged until the downfall of the *Derg* in 1991, and the use or choice of the Roman script for writing in *Afaan* Oromo was not a concern for scholars or the public at large.

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[26] For example, there is a traditional game practised in Macha Oromo (which involves the term *qubee* and is used for testing people's memories). Here, a player is expected to associate items to numbers starting from one and counting progressively upwards. So, the game usually begins: "*qubeen* tokko; lamaan mucha reettii, *qubeen* tokko; sadan gemjii abidda, lamaan mucha reettii, *qubeen* tokko; …." (*qubee* is one; a goat has two teats, *qubee* is one; there are three *fire stones*; a goat has two teats; *qubee* is one…).

In 1973, when the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), an underground Oromo liberation organisation was formed, it began to raise the rights of the Oromo people as a political issue and to create an awareness of interests of the people in the Oromo language in general and the Oromo writing in particular. The OLF was very clear from the outset of its formation that the Oromo language had been suppressed and that it was the responsibility of the Oromo people to develop their language. The OLF stated one of its objectives as, 'To develop Oromo language and bring it out of neglect that colonisation has imposed upon it' (cited in Bulcha, 1993:15). In doing so, the OLF started using *Afaan* Oromo for all its business and embarked on the task of developing a writing system. It immediately adopted the Roman script and made it mandatory for its officials, cadres, and fighters to learn and use it in all day-to-day business.

In an interview with the author at his home in London on 19 February, 2005, Taha Abdi explained that the Front's decision to choose the Roman script for Oromo writing was reached after series of consultations with Oromo and non-Oromo scholars both in Ethiopia and outside Ethiopia, and after due consideration of its advantages and disadvantages. Taha Abdi informed the author that a taskforce was established by the OLF with the mandate to gauge views from various angles and compile a report for the Central Committee of the Front.

Among the people consulted was an Oromo person by the name Sheekh M. Rashaad Kabir who, according to Taha Abdi, lived in Somalia and wrote in *Afaan* Oromo in three different scripts: Arabic, the Shaykh Bakri Sapalo orthography (as discussed in Chapter IV) and the Roman script. On further enquiry, the author was able to obtain a copy of a report prepared by Rashaad Kabir on Oromo writing. After highlighting the need for the Oromo people to have a writing system, the report provided recommendations to the taskforce strongly advocating that the Roman alphabet was the most suitable script for writing in *Afaan* Oromo because of its practicality.

Taha Abdi claimed that in addition to considering Rashaad Kabir's report, the OLF also drew lessons and experiences from other African languages such as Somali, Hausa and Swahili which had already been written in the Roman script. He also noted that the taskforce's decision to adopt the Roman alphabet was based on its conviction that the script met the purpose of the language better than the Ge'ez or other scripts in which the language had been written.

After making its decision, the OLF prepared teaching materials and pamphlets in the Roman script and distributed them to Oromos in the areas it controlled and to Oromo refugees who lived in neighbouring countries such as the Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, and Kenya. The following sections look at

how *Qubee* was officially adopted and how certain systems such

representation of vowel length, geminates and word divisions were managed

and incorporated into the convention of the system.

8.3. The adoption of Qubee

Qubee became the official writing system for the Oromo language in 1991.

Tilahun Gamta (1993), who was at the conference convened to adopt the

Roman Alphabet or suggest an alternative script for Oromo writing system,

said that the speakers of *Afaan* Oromo met officially for the first time in the

heart of Oromia to discuss and decide the destiny of their language. He stated

that this historic meeting was convened on November 3, 1991 by the OLF, and

comprised of Oromo scholars. As Tilahun Gamta (1993:17) explains,"The

purpose of the meeting was to adopt the Latin script the OLF had been using

or suggest an alternative". He further notes that after hours of discussions

and deliberations, over 1000 men and women who attended the meeting

unanimously decided for the Latin alphabet to be the script on which Oromo

writing system should be based.

Since then, *Qubee* became an official Oromo writing system adopted from the

Roman alphabet using the principle of writing through a one-to-one

correspondence between sound segments and graphemes or symbols of the

alphabet. Twenty-five letters of the Roman alphabet and the apostrophe mark

(') were adopted without making changes to their shapes or sizes (for

example, by way of diacritic marks) to represent Oromo sounds (see Table

14). The letter "v" is the only symbol from the Roman alphabet that is not

used in the *Qubee* system. Most of the Oromo phonemes, except the ejectives

such as /tʃ'/, /t'/, and /k'/, have a corresponding symbol in the Roman alphabet

and matching them has not proved to be difficult. However, the matching of

the ejectives, and the representation of other aspects, for example, gemination

and vowel length, have proved to be a challenging task especially in terms of

consistency and simplicity of the writing system. This will be explored below

by examining how gemination and vowel length are represented in the Qubee

system and what possible alternative ways are available in representing

Oromo ejectives, geminates and vowel length.

Table 14. The Qubee, Roman characters adopted for Oromo sound representation

No	Phonemes	Qubee	Examples in Oromo	Gloss
1	/ a /	A	harka	hand
2	/ b /	B	eeboo	spear
3	/ tʃ/	Ch	achi	there
4	/tʃʼ/	C	cabbii	snow
5	/ d /	D	dargaggoo	youth
6	/ɗ/	Dh	dhagaa	stone
7	/e/	E	ergaa	message
8	/f/	F	fayyaa	health
9	/g/	G	guyyaa	day
10	/h/	H	haaraa	new
11	/i/	I	Iddoo	place
12	/dʒ/	J	jecca	saying
13	/k/	K	kennaa	gift
14	/l/	L	lama	two
15	/m/	M	mana	house
16	/n/	N	nama	man
17	/ɲ /	Ny	nyaata	food
18	/o/	O	oromoo	Oromo
19	/p/	P	poolisii	police
20	/pʼ/	P	tapha	game
21	/kʼ/	Q	marqaa	porridge
22	/r/	R	raafuu	cabbage
23	/s/	S	soquu	to dig
24	/ʃ/	Sh	ishee	she
25	/t/	T	hantuuta	mouse
26	/tʼ/	X	fixuu	to finish
27	/u/	U	urjii	star
28	/w/	W	waggaa	year
29	/ j /	Y	wayyaa	cloth
30	/z/	Z	zeeroo	zero
31	/ʔ/	ʼ	taaʼuu	to sit

8.4. Represetation of some phonemes

Information about the procedures or criteria used for the selection and matching of graphemes to represent each of the Oromo phonemes is lacking. However, Mr Taha Abdi's interview with the author provided an understanding of the process used to represent the Oromo phonemes with the Roman alphabet. In the interview, Mr Taha Abdi said that matching letters or graphemes to represent the sounds was not I not as difficult as modernising the vocabulary. He said that the taskforce benefitted from the series of consultations it had carried out with informed Oromo people and from its awareness of some already existing Oromo materials written in the Roman alphabet.

A look at Table 14 shows that the representation of some sounds in the *Qubee* version varies from the versions used in *Hirmaatadubbii Afaan Oromoo* (by Haile Fida) (Table 11) or one which was proposed by the Cologne Working Group (Table 12). It appears that in the *Qubee* version whilst most of the Oromo consonants are represented by corresponding Roman letters, some sounds with no equivalent letters have been represented 'arbitrarily' and without consistency through symbols chosen without obvious reasoning. For example, the reason behind using the digraph **"ph"** to represent **/ p' /** is

unclear when seen alongside the other ejectives which are represented by a single symbol rather than a digraph. It would make more economic sense if the Oromo sound **/ p′ /** was represented by **"p"** since the plosive bilabial / p / is a borrowed sound with very limited word entries.

On the other hand, it is unclear why the dento-alveolar ejective / t′/ and the palatal ejective / tʃ′/ and the velar ejective / k′/ are assigned the letters "x", "c", and "q" respectively when they could be represented by digraphs such as "th", "ch", and "kh". From the point of view of simplicity and economy one would understand the reason for the preference of single symbols to digraphs wherever possible. However, this preference needs to be balanced against consistency and logic, which would potentially make the system easier to learn or use. Among the ejectives written in single symbols, / t′ / is unique in that the symbol that represents it ("x") has no apparent or otherwise relevance to it. One would expect / t′ / to be represented not by "x" but by the digraph "th", which is not used in the system, in line with organically similar consonants such as /p′/ (**ph**), / ɗ / (**dh**), /ʃ/ (**sh**), and / ɲ / (**ny**). A further inconsistency is the representation of the plosive / tʃ / with the digraph "**ch"**. Even though the plosive / tʃ / is articulated in more or less the same way as in other languages such as English, for example, as in **"church"**, in Oromo / tʃ / is also always realised as a geminate consonant. Moreover, / tʃ / has an

ejective (/ tʃ' /) counterpart in Oromo and this makes it more challenging as to which grapheme to choose to represent the consonant.

In this case it would be necessary to consider whether or not it would be useful to use the digraph 'ch' for representing the Oromo plosive geminate consonant or the corresponding ejective consonant. However, the advantage of using the digraph "ch" to represent the plosive and geminate Oromo phoneme (/ tʃ /) is clear at least for one reason. This is because of the fact that a similar phoneme (/ tʃ / as in other languages; for example, in English [tʃɜː tʃ] **"church"** is represented by the same digraph "**ch**". This would mean that Oromo people who would wish to learn English would not find reading or writing words containing the phoneme unfamiliar. But care must be taken here as the digraph "**ch**" may also represent totally a different phoneme in other languages, for example, / k /, as in the English word "character". Similarly, the phoneme / tʃ / is not always expected to be represented by the digraph "**ch**" in English, a language that Oromo students are most likely to learn at schools. For example, the phoneme / tʃ / is sometimes represented by a trigraph ("tch") in English, such as in "batch". Despite these issues of inconsistency in English spelling, it is still helpful for an Oromo English learner to transfer their knowledge of representing the Oromo / tʃ / by **"ch"**.

The Cologne Working Group (Chapter VII) had proposed "c" and "ch" to be used to represent the Oromo / tʃ / and / tʃ'/ (plosive and ejective) respectively (Hein, 1986). Even though the Group did not specify a reason for their proposal, it may be assumed that they were aiming to be consistent in assigning the ejectives with a digraph with a symbol (letter) **"h"** as a second component. If this proposal had been endorsed by the OLF language taskforce, we would be writing:

	Cologne	*qubee*	*gloss*
/ tʃ /	Acci	achi	there
/ tʃ'/	Chabbii	cabbii	snow

Another peculiar but simple representation of an ejective sound in the *Qubee* system is the case of / k'/. Following the above discussions, the expectation and logic of writing /k'/ would be to use a digraph **"kh"**. However, the *Qubee* system curiously uses "q", a single letter which, together with "c", is often used to represent the sound / k /, as in "queen" in English. The use of "q" to represent / k'/ in Oromo writing is not surprising because it has also been utilized to represent an equivalent sound in the Somali system (a system that was studied by the Oromo writing task force (Taha Aabdi, 19 February 2005, London)). Haile Fida (1973) also used **"q"** to write / k'/ while the Cologne Working Group (See Chapter VII) recommended **"kh"**. Although the digraph **"kh"** appears to be generally logical for representing **/ k' /,** especially from the

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point of view of keeping consistency with the representation of other phonetically similar phonemes (example, as in "dh", "ph", and "sh"), it seems rather better to use **"q"** in this case because, otherwise, the symbol would be superfluous in Oromo writing system and because it is simpler to use one letter than a digraph to represent a sound in writing wherever it is possible.

A further irregularity in the Oromo representation of the sounds is the case of / ɲ / (the palatal nasal) which is assigned the digraph "**ny**". For consistency purposes, one would expect this consonant to be represented by "**nh**" following the example of the representation of / ʧ/, / p'/, / ʃ/, and / ɗ/ with a letter followed by an **"h".** The use of **"ny"** may have been taken from the traditional transcription in Ethiopia of /ɲ / as **"ny"** or **"gn"** or the representation of a Somali equivalent sound with **/ ny /.** The same sound is represented with "ñ" as in *mañana* (tomorrow) in Spanish and " **nh** " *amanhã* (tomorrow) in Portuguese. For Oromo, the Cologne Working Group (Heine, 1988) believe that the use of diacritic marks as in Spanish is probably not recommendable for a reason of difficulty in writing, or due to the need to make writing as simple as possible. The Portuguese way of representation of /ɲ / with the digraph "nh" seems preferable simply because of the fact that there are four other sounds (/ ʧ/, / **p'**/, /ɗ/, and /ʃ/) which are represented by digraphs whose second component is **"h".** The other advantage of

representing /ɲ/ with **"nh"** increases consistency in the system as all the digraphs will have **'h'** as their second component (**"ch", "ph", "dh"**, and "**sh")**, and could also make learning writing easier.

8.5. Representation of gemination, vowel length and assimilation

In Chapter II it was stated that phonemically Oromo has five short and five long vowels, which can occur word-initially, medially or finally. It was also proposed that all Oromo consonants except / h / and / ʔ / have geminate forms. We have seen in Chapter II that gemination in Oromo is not only common but also has a phonemic value. This means that geminate sounds need to be distinctively represented in writing so that they are not misrepresented or confused with their plain counterparts. For example, the words [samu:] (rot) (**samuu)** 'rot' and [sam:u:] (**sammuu)** "brain" (in Table 15) are different because / m / is single in the first and geminate in the second set. Similarly, each pair of the other words in Table 15 has different meanings because / d /, / b /, / t / and / d / appear as single in the first column and as geminate in the second.

Table 15. Examples of germination and phonemic value

single phoneme	vs	geminate
[**samu**:] (samuu) to rot	vs	[**sam:u**:] (sammuu) brain
[**soda**:] (soda) fright	vs	[**sod:a:**] (soddaa) in-law
[**ro:bi:**] (roobii) Wednesday	vs	[**ro:b:i:**] (roobbii) skin fungus
[**hatu:**] (hatuu) to steal	vs	[**hat:u:**] (hattuu) thief
[**bada:**] (badaa) run away	vs	[**bad:a:**] (baddaa) Highland

The graphemes or the symbols in the Roman alphabet are doubled to represent geminate consonants and long vowels in the Oromo writing system (see Table 16 and 17). While this method is a way of differentiating geminate sounds from plain consonants, and long vowels from short vowels, it would appear that such a method would make writing more tedious. Also the use of the system can be more complex especially when the geminate sound is one which is represented by a digraph.

Table 16. Examples of the doubling of letters to represent germination

Phoneme	*Qubee*	IPA representation	Qubee	Gloss
/b/	**b**	[tʃʼab:i:]	**cabbii**	snow
/d/	**d**	[sod:a]	**soddaa**	in-law (brother/sister
/m/	**m**	[dam:a]	**damma**	honey
/w/	**n**	[gow:a]	**gowwaa**	fool

Table 17. Examples of the doubling of letters to represent vowel length

Phoneme	*Qubee*	IPA representation	*Qubee* **representation**	Gloss
/a/	**a**	[a:da:]	**aadaa**	culture
/e/	**e**	[e:bo:]	**eeboo**	spear
/o/	**o**	[oromo:]	**Oromoo**	Oromo
/ī /	**i**	[ni:ti:]	**niitii**	wife
/ū/	**u**	[gu:tu:]	**guutuu**	full

The representation of gemination and vowel length by doubling the letters or symbols of the alphabet is a major undertaking for the *Qubee* since both gemination and vowel length are phonemic in the Oromo language. This feature of representing gemination and long vowels is an important aspect that differentiates the *Qubee* from the Ge'ez script. It has been argued by the proponents of the *Qubee* (for example, Tilahun Gamta) that the Oromo phonology cannot be adequately represented by the Ge'ez script, which has no facility to represent gemination or Oromo long vowels. Indeed, the absence or lack of provision in the Ge'ez script to represent gemination and vowel length (in particular, long / e /, / u / and / o /) has been discussed by many writers including Ullendorff (1960) and Haddis Alamayyahu (1990) who view it as a major shortcoming of the Ge'ez system in writing Amharic. These problems have been discussed briefly earlier in sections 5.4.2 and 5.4.5.

With regard to the representation of assimilation, an important step has

already been taken in that rules have already been set out Griefenow-Mewis

(2001:16). The following are a few of the rules and examples of their

realizations:

				IPAtranscriptions
l + n	→	ll	hin galle (hin gal+ne)	[hin gal:e] [hin gal+ne]
r + n	→	rr	jirra	[dʒir:a]
l + s	→	lch	galche	[galtʃe]
g + t	→	gd	dhugdi	[ɗugdi]
b + t	→	bd	dadhabde	[daɗabde]
q + t	→	qx	dhaqxe	[ɗak'tʼe]
dh + t tt →		sodaatti		[soda:t:i]
dh + n nn →		ni taphanna		[ni tap'n:a]
t + n	→	nn	binne	[bin:e]
d + t	→	dd	didde	[did:e]
x + t	→	xx	xuuxxe	[tʼt:tʼ:e]

Source: IPAtranscriptions added by the author.(Griefenow-Mewis, 2001:16).

8.6. The digraphs

In the preceding sections was discussed how digraphs have been used to represent some Oromo phonemes in writing. This section now develops this by examining the use of digraphs in the Oromo writing system.

There are five phonemes (see Table 17) which are represented by digraphs in the *Qubee* system. Three of these phonemes (/ ɗ/, / p'/, and / ɲ /) have no equivalent symbols in the Roman alphabet and the remaining two are affricates (/ tʃ / (**ch**) and / ʃ / (**sh**) as in [ra:cha] **raacha** (frog) and [bisħa:n] **bishaan** (water)), which are also represented by digraphs in other languages such as English.

Table 18. Examples of the use of the digraphs in the representation of some Oromo segments

Phoneme	*Qubee*	IPA representation	*Qubee* representation	Gloss
/ tʃ /	**ch**	[ra:cha:]	**raachaa**	frog
/ɗ/	**dh**	[d'ad'a:]	**dhadhaa**	butter
/p'/	**ph**	[p'a:p'aɾi:]	**phaapharii**	kidney bean
/ ɲ /	**ny**	[ɲ a:ɾa]	**nyaara**	eyebrow
/ʃ/	**sh**	[biʃa:n]	**bishaan**	water

It has been highlighted above that there has been inconsistency in the use of digraphs in the Oromo writing system. For example, it is not clear why the

Qubee system did not employ digraphs to represent the ejective sounds such as / k'/ and / tʃ'/, which have no equivalent symbols in the Roman alphabet. It has also been pointed out earlier that for consistency it is logical to expect the phoneme /ɲ / to be represented by "nh" rather than "ny". Having a consistency in the representation of organically similar phonemes with similar symbols, for example representing all ejectives with digraphs has an advantage in making learning reading and writing easier because it is usually easier to learn things when they are organised and less complex.

However, there are two issues that need to be discussed further in connection with the use of digraphs in the *Qubee* system. The first issue is the problem of using a digraph when a segment occurs in a geminate form, for example, is it appropriate, efficient or economic to double both of the letters that constitute the digraph or only one of the letters in the digraph to indicate it is a geminate segment? Presently, there is a lack of standardisation especially in the use of digraphs in representing geminate phonemes. Some Oromo writers, for example Tilahun Gamta (1995), do not make a distinction between single and geminate consonants when using digraphs. Tilahun Gamta (ibid, pp39-40), writes **buphaa** ([bup'ːaː]) "egg" and **tapha** ([tap'a]) "game" without making a distinction even though / p'/ is geminate and single, respectively, in these words. Other Oromo writers, for example, Abbiyu Galata (1996) and

Mangasha Riqituu (1993), double the first letter of the components of the

digraph to mark gemination. Thus, the word ([bup':a:]) "egg" is written by

these writers as **bupphaa** ([bup':a:]), doubling only the first component of the

digraph. If the custom of doubling both components of a digraph were to be

accepted as a standard and to be used to represent gemination, the same word

would be written as **buphphaa** ([bup':a:]). This would obviously make the

system unnecessarily inefficient and uneconomical from the point of view of

using comparatively more time and space to write the additional letters. Since

the issue of the representation of gemination has been one of the factors for

the decision to adopt the Roman alphabet for Oromo writing system, it is vital

that careful attention is given to it with a view to making it simpler and more

economic to use. The author suggests the following in relation to gemination

and the five digraphs used in the *Qubee* system:

- "ch" (/ tʃ /) Since / tʃ / is always realised in geminate form (see

  Chapter II), there is no need to distinguish the "single" from the

  geminate form. Hence, the digraph "ch" represents the phoneme / tʃ /

  regardless of where in the word it occurs or how it is articulated.

- For the remaining four phonemes (/ɗ/, / p' /, / ɲ /, /ʃ /) that are represented with a digraph, the author proposes that the first component is of the digraph is repeated to indicate gemination as given below:

Phonemes with digraphs	Wrong	Recommended		
"dh" (/ ɗ /)	ha**dhdh**aa	ha**ddh**aa	[haɗ:a:]	**poison**
"ph" (/ p' /)	quru**phph**ee	quruu**pph**ee	[k'urup'e:]	**antelope**
"ny" (/ ɲ /)	fu**nyny**oo	fu**nny**oo	[fuɲo:],	**rope**
"sh" (/ ʃ* /)	a**shsh**amaa	a**ssh**ama	[aʃama]	**greetings**

* / ʃ / rarely occurs in geminate form. Therefore, using "sh" (without repeating the first component) is recommended as an exception to the above.

The second issue relating to the use of a digraph is capitalization. A digraph is a sequence of two symbols representing a phoneme. So, in this case does it mean that both components need to be capitalized or only one of them, when a phoneme represented by a digraph occurs at the beginning of a sentence or at the beginning of a proper noun? This author prefers to capitalize only the first component of a digraph when capitalization is required such as in the following examples:

Dhadhaa nu biti (Buy us butter), and not **DHadhaa nu bit**i

Shaashamanneeni magaala gaarii dha (Shaashamannee is a good town), and

not **SHaamanneeni magaalaa garii dha**.

8.7. Punctuation marks

The apostrophe mark (') in the *Qubee* is not used as a punctuation mark

denoting possessive, contraction or plural form of a word as it does in

English. It rather represents a glottal stop in the *Qubee* system as in ***bu'aa***

("profit"). All the other punctuation marks (including capitalization) are used

in a similar way as they are employed in writing English. The full stop,

exclamation mark and the question marks are used to end sentences or

questions. The coma, semicolon and colon are used between letters, words or

phrases as necessary, exactly in the same way as they are used in English.

Quotation marks are used when reporting what has been said or written by

someone else. Other differentiation devices such as italics, letter spacing and

boldface types are used for the purpose of emphasizing in the same way as

they are used, for example, in written English.

Capitalisation of letters is used to show the start of a sentence and common

names. Names or words which start with a capital letter in English, for

example, "Waaqaa" (God), and "Inni" (He) (when referring to God) are also

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capitalised. The system allows the first component of a digraph to be capitalised when a word with a digraph occurs at the beginning of a sentence or when the word refers to common names. For example, in the following sentence, the first letter of the digraph (sh) is capitalised:

Shaggar bareedaa dha (Shaggar (Finfinneee) or (Addis Ababa) is beautiful).

8.8. Abbreviations and acronyms

A number of abbreviations and acronyms are currently being used in the *Qubee* writing system (see Appendix V). These abbreviations or acronyms are used arbitrarily, with no defined rules or guidelines as to whether or not (for example) a dot should be used between the letters or at the end of the abbreviations.

8.9. Tone and Qubee

The issue of whether or not to identify tone in writing has been a subject of much debate amongst scholars. For example, Baker, et al, (1982), Koffi (1994) and Wiesmann (1989) submit that tone *should* be marked in writing, while Bird (1998) discusses an experimental work on Dschang [a Bantu language of Cameroon] which found that marking tone reduced fluency in reading.

Quoting (Kashoki (1981:169), Bird (ibid) also presents a case against marking

tone in seven officially recognised indiginous languages of Zambia:

> Tone, like vowel length, was accepted in all
> the seven languages as an important
> linguistic marker for signaling differences
> in meaning between two otherwise
> identical words. However, despite its
> functional importance, all the seven
> committees decided not to symbolize tone
> in the autography. The basic argument
> advanced against symbolisation was that
> experience had shown that the diacritic
> marks, where employed, generally
> hindered rather than facilitated fluent
> reading. It was further argued that
> ordinarily, even without visual
> representation, tone would be adequately
> signaled by context.

Despite its phonemic significance (Chapter II), tone in Oromo has not been

analysed by scholars in detail. The author has not found information from

Taha Abdii (interview, 19 February, 2005, London) or from literature on

Oromo writing to suggest that tone has been considered in the adoption of

the *Qubee.* Hence, the words such as "gogaa" and "maqaa" (which have two

meanings each depending on the position of tone) are written without

differentiation as follows:

gógáa (dry)   g ògáa (skin)

mák'áa (name)   màk'áa (change route)

While marking tone has an obvious advantage of reducing ambiguity in reading, not representing it also has not been problematic in the *Qubee.* In fact, the author purports that adding tonal representation would significantly impede the fluency of reading and, therefore, should not be marked. Just like stress in English, the reader can rely on the text to arrive at the correct tone in Oromo.

8.10. Word division

It is often difficult in writing any language to decide whether some words and sentences should be written connected or separated. Historically, according to Gaur, "The majority of ancient scripts – Egyptian, the cuneiform script of Mesopotamia, the syllabic script of the Aegean, at times also some Indian scripts (especially the two classical of the sub-continent, Sanskrit and Tamil) – did not divide words and/or sentences" (Gaur,1987:56). Accordingly, care must be taken when a decision is being made as to how to divide words so that they do not become confusingly long or they are not unnecessarily broken up and become tedious for reading and writing. There is no easy rule that can be employed to aid this concept; however, it makes sense to follow the basic guideline that words which organically belong together are not separated and those which are organically different are not joined when

writing. It is a question of deciding which words should stand by themselves, or should be pre- or suffixed, or hyphenated with others.

In the absence of formal and authoritative organizations or projects to provide guidance in respect of division of words in writing, and in a situation where most writers have been self taught, it is almost inevitable to have inconsistencies in the way certain words in the *Qubee* are written. For example, conjunctions such as *"fi"* (and) and pronouns *"ko"* or *"to"* (my) are often written independently, hyphenated or connected to other words. Conjunctions such as *"fi"*(and), and pronouns such as *"ko"* or *"to"* (my), and affirmative or negative markers such as *"ni"* and *"hin"* (as in *"ni demna"* and *"hin demnu"* (we will go, and we won't go)) have no meaning if they come on their own in the Oromo language. Hence, it is appropriate to question if these and similar morphemes should be written attached as a prefix or suffix or separated from the base forms.

Another example of uncertainty concerning word division is how to write in words (not in figures) cardinal numerals which represent two or more digits such as eleven, twelve, and so on. For example, should the Oromo words representing the numbers eleven and twelve, respectively, be written joined "**kudhatokk**o" (eleven), "**kudhalama**" (twelve), hyphenated (**kudha-tokko** , **kudha-lama**), or should they be written separated (**kudha tokko**, and **kudha**

lama)? Even though the prefix (**kudha**) is not a meaningful word by itself, it is proposed here that (as a matter of consistency) it is always written independently (**kudha tokko**) without being hyphenated or attached to the second part of the numeral. This is also recommended because etymologically the morpheme **"kudha"** ([kuɗa] or **"kudhan"** [kuɗan] means "ten" (10) and **kudha tokko, kudha lama**, etc. refers to **"ten plus one"** (eleven), **"ten plus two"** (twelve), etc.

How to write the present tense form of the verb to be '*dha'* (am, is or are) is another problem in the *Qubee system.* Should it be written connected to or separated from a preceding word as in *Ani fayyaadha* or *Ani fayyaa dha* (I am well)? For practicality, I propose that '*dha'* is written separated from the main verb or the subject:

Ani fayyaa dha (I am well).

Iddoon suni Haroojii dha (That place is Haroojii).

Similarly, I propose as a matter of consistency that the affirmative and negative markers, and conjunctions such as "fi" (and) are written independently, separated from the verb they modify. Thus, they can be written as:

*'**Ni demna'** (We will go) and not *Nidemna*
*'**Hin demnu'** (We won't go), and not *Hindemnu*

'Tolaa fi Gammaddaa' (Tolaa and Gammadda) and not Tolaafi Gammaddaa

Word division is an important aspect of writing, and it continues to be a challenge to Oromo writers using the Roman script or the *Qubee* system. Cerulli's statement quoted in Chapter III above is a good example of recognizing and attempting to deal with word division as a challenge from the early days of writing Oromo. The statement reads: **"Háarkā͡bba tokkótti ibíddā qabú͡nsodātánu [harka abba tok:ot:i ibida k'abu: insoda:tanu]"** (One does not get frightened to touch a fire as long as it is with someone else's hand" my translation). Here Cerulli used the macron (͡) to join words, which could be written separated as **'Harka abbaa tokkotti….'**

This example from Cerulli's is important because it deals with the issue of graphic representation of two consecutive vowels, that is, a word final and word initial vowel. Since some sounds may be assimilated and consequently may not be pronounced in speech due to their phonetic environment, it is appropriate to write some words separately even if they are not a true representation of their actual pronunciation. However, it remains the case that the quality of Oromo vowels at word final position (short, medium and long) needs to be further investigated in order to help us develop a good understanding of their effect on pronunciation and writing.

In summary, there are many branches of these linguistic considerations (such as bound morphemes, conjunctions, pronouns, vowel quality and tone) that are crucial for the usage and implementation of word division in writing and justify further detailed study.

8.11. *The present state of the Qubee and the Oromo language*

Within a relatively short period of time, the *Qubee* and the Oromo language have undergone an unprecedented transformation. The Oromo language is now taught as an examinable subject in schools and employed as a medium of instruction in both primary and junior secondary schools in Oromia. It is also offered at Addis Ababa (Finfinnee) University and at some other universities in Ethiopia as a Minor and Major subject of study at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.

Moreover, Oromo is an official language in Oromia and the Oromo people take pride in being able to utilize it in the conduct of their business and professional activities as well as in their personal lives. In the streets of Addis Ababa (Finfinnee) it has become common to hear Oromo people speaking their language without any fear or shame. This was not the case for many "educated" (those who attended formal education) or "non-educated" people

who did not attend formal education) Oromos during the Haile Sellassie and the *Derg* regimes. As discussed earlier (Chapter V), speaking in Oromo, let alone writing in it, in public during the Haile Sellassie and *Derg* regimes was often a source of embarrassment and a cause of being labeled as a narrow nationalist.

The physical presence and reality of the *Qubee* has also recently become more apparent as road markings, billboard advertisements, names of hotels and offices and menus in restaurants in Oromia are now being written in the *Qubee*. Oromo language is also broadcast on television from Adaama, a city situated about 100 kilometres south of Addis Ababa (Finfinnee). This is in addition to the already existing daily radio programmes transmitted from Finfinnee and Harar cities.

The number and variety of books published in Oromo using the *Qubee* in the last two decades are estimated to be greater than those published during the preceding century. Besides school textbooks, a number of grammar books, dictionaries, novels, short stories, poetry and plays have been written in Oromo during the last decades. A popular play, *Dukkanaan Duuba*, written and directed in Oromo by Dhaabaa Woyyessaa in the early 1990's was a good example for the development of Oromo as a literary language. Gaaddisaa Birru's novel, *Kuusaa Gaddoo*, is another example of an Oromo novel written in

Qubee in early 1990's. All these literary works indicate how Oromo language has flourished within a short time of the adaptation of the *Qubee*. Popular pre-existing Oromo newspapers such as *Urjii* and *Bariisa* changed the script they used from the Ge'ez to the *Qubee*. Monthly magazines such as *Madda Walaabuu, Odaa,* and *Urjii* all started writing in *Qubee* in the early 1990's and stayed in circulation almost until the end of the last decade. Except for *Bariisa*, a government sponsored newspaper, all the other Oromo newspapers and magazines are currently out of circulation with the journalists being either imprisoned or forced to emigrate to foreign countries. This was usually based on the accusations by the Ethiopian government that the contents of these papers were "incompatible" with the prevailing political climate and priorities of the country. However, the *Urjii* newspaper has recently re-commenced its publication in Canada and is available to readers all over the world by subscription.

Some groups in the United States (with access to modern information technology) have also developed an *Oromo Software* that is compatible with a Personal Computer (PC) as well as with Macintosh *Word* versions. This effort has had a tremendous potential in the development and standardisation of the *Qubee.* It is obvious from observations and personal correspondence with a number of fellow Oromos in the Diaspora that the *Oromo Software* is effectively and beneficially used. A range of Oromo websites have also

mushroomed over the past few years and these have provided greater

opportunities for Oromo people to speak, read and write in their language.

No doubt, similar sorts of endeavours are likely to occur as more use is made

of information technology (IT) to play a significant role in the development of

the Oromo language and the *Qubee.*

With the status of Oromo as an official language in the Oromo region, Oromo

music has also started to flourish. Before the early 1990's Oromo culture and

music were banned and it was rare to find cassettes of Oromo music within

Ethiopia. The situation is currently very different and now a variety of Oromo

music is available in audio or video formats through various media including

the *internet*. Many Oromo youngsters and artists have presented songs

dealing with a wide variety of themes such as tradition, patriotism, social life,

culture, religion, love, and politics. Cassettes, compact disks (CD's) and

digital versatile discs (DVD's) of Oromo music are available in abundance for

sale in Ethiopia and also widely distributed among the Oromo Diaspora. In

recent times, shops and bars owned, not exclusively but mostly, by the Oromo

people in Ethiopia have begun to play Oromo music without fear of political

retribution. The use in public of the Oromo language is now a symbol of

Oromo identity and pride rather than a source of shame and sign of illiteracy.

As was observed by Lemma Arity (see McNab, 1989), it was different prior to

the 1990's. Well-known Oromo musicians such as Ali Birra, Zerihun Wadajo,

and many other popular artists have even composed poems and songs praising the Oromo language and the *Qubee*.

To summarize, *Qubee* has become a name universally recognised in Ethiopia as *the* Oromo writing system based on the Roman alphabet. This chapter has pointed out that the OLF has played a significant role in developing and promoting *Qubee* as an officially recognized system for Oromo writing in Ethiopia. It has been discussed that there are some inconsistencies in the representation of some phonemes and the use of digraphs. But despite this, *Qubee* has still been incorporated extensively in contemporary everyday life and has become the accepted standard writing system.

Chapter IX

9. Qubee and the modernisation of Oromo vocabulary

The change in the status of Oromo from oral to written language brought with it a new challenge: the need to modernise the vocabulary. It is generally the case that the vocabulary used in writing is more formal and differs from the form used for oral and informal communication as the former is consciously selected to convey the idea in well constructed sentences. Also the elevation from its status from oral to written language meant that Oromo would be used more extensively and formally for business, education, judiciary, politics, technology, etc, tasks which came with new concepts that required new Oromo terminology. Language being dynamic, the expansion of words (which is usually necessitated by the need to represent new ideas, concepts or innovations) is a common phenomenon in all languages at all times regardless of their status of being written or unwritten. In most cases, this happens through language contact and borrowing, and indeed most languages have borrowed their words from others. English, for example, one of the world's major languages, has borrowed a substantial number of its words from other languages. It can also be claimed that it would be difficult – if not impossible - to find a "pure" language with no borrowed vocabulary in it. As long as there is a contact between societies, it is inevitable that words

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will be borrowed. It is paradoxical to assert this because vocabulary is the main phenomenon which differentiates one language from the other, and it is yet vocabulary that draws languages together.

It is when a language is written and used for different functions such as office work and education that we often find a dramatic and deliberate vocabulary expansion. Caney (1984) discusses five methods through which vocabulary expansion can be attained. These methods, which appear to be self-explanatory, are listed as follows (Caney, 1984):

1. Semantic shift
2. Borrowing
3. Derivation
4. Compounding
5. Phrase grouping

Caney believes that methods 1, 3, 4, and 5 are the most important in deliberate vocabulary expansion, as they involve internal enrichment of the language through native invention and adaptation. Method 2 is thought to be relatively the least important and is usually looked upon as a last resort. The use of loanwords, however, is inevitable (for example, in science and technology) where concepts may be difficult to translate adequately or find an alternative

term in the target language. For example, "**komputara**" (computer) has been borrowed from the English and is now part of the Oromo vocabulary.

In addition to borrowing, methods 1, 3, and 4 have been commonly used in the Oromo vocabulary expansion. The word **"jaalle"** (friend, lover), which means "comrade", is an example of a semantic shift. An example of derivation is **"yaadanno"** (remembrance), which is formed by adding the suffix **"-anno"** to the stem **"yaad-"** (think). Similarly, the words **"mana"** (house) and "**seeraa"** (law) are compounded to form **"mana seeraa"** (court).

The growth in vocabulary of the Oromo language (as mentioned above) is evident from books, day-to-day conversations and the media. The Oromo Diaspora would most certainly be puzzled by the amount of new Oromo words and phrases if returning to Oromia after a long period of absence. It was mentioned earlier in Chapter II that the word entries in Oromo dictionaries for some loan segments such as / p / and / z / have expanded over time. Indeed, the expansion of the vocabulary of Oromo since the adoption of the *Qubee* in the early 1990's is staggering. In their conversations as well as in their writings, the people have become more conscious of their actions to use (as far as possible) only Oromo words without "mixing" them with foreign words. This is presumably not because of unwillingness or resistance to borrowing but only a demonstration that Oromo can be used for all

communication purposes in its own right. However, from personal

experience, using the Oromo language without "mixing" it with English or

Amharic has not been possible for many Oromo people in the Diaspora and

from the urban areas in Oromia. This is because these groups of people have

not had the opportunity to learn their language in schools or to use it in

conducting of their business. Having stated this, it is not a major problem to

interchangeably use words from other languages as this does not

substantially dilute the meaning and hinder communication.

A written document that describes the strategies used or, indeed, if there has

ever been a conscious strategy designed to aid the expansion of the Oromo

vocabulary to meet the new demands necessitated by its new status as a

written and official language in Oromia, is not available. Taha Abdi, however,

shared with the author his knowledge and experience with regard to the

process of the expansion of the Oromo vocabulary and the development of

the language. He stated that the process of modernization of Oromo

vocabulary had started well before the *Qubee* was officially adopted as a

writing system in 1991. He explained the process used by the OLF to

modernize the Oromo vocabulary as follows:

> We had to argue for hours, days and nights
> among ourselves (OLF members and
> cadres) to find and use new words for
> concepts needed in the structures we were

formulating. We were determined to be
creative and use the limited resources at
our disposal since one of our objectives was
to develop our language (Interview, 19
February, 2005, London).

He recalled how he and his friends were in a hot deliberation when searching

to find an equivalent Oromo word for the word "editor". He said that Oromo

did not have a concept for "editor" as it is conventionally used in countries

where there is a system and culture of writing. He said he and his friends

discussed the job of an editor, as a starting point, and then one person among

them came up with "**gulaala**" (sieve) as an appropriate and equivalent word

for "editor" since the Oromo concept of sieving is to sort out the weeds from

the seeds and since the job of an editor is to review ideas. Hence, he said, the

word "gulaala" or (sieve) was taken as the Oromo word for "editor". This is

an example of semantic shift, where a word ("gulaala") is assigned a new

meaning ("editor").

Despite a lack of a written evidence of the strategies adopted or a lack of a

study which would provide details of the basic methods employed for Oromo

vocabulary expansion, it may generally be asserted that the Oromo people

have become "experts" in giving new meanings to old words. By way of

semantic shift (as in the above example), by borrowing (see Figure 43), by

making compound words and in grouping phrases together (see Figure 44) to

give them new meanings, Oromo vocabulary has expanded exponentially.

Grienefenow-Mews' (1994: 237-248) article, "The Rise of New Terms in

Oromo: Means and Problems", is a useful contribution that indentifies three

main means of word formation in Oromo used in the creation of new

terminology. In her article, Grienefenow-Mews observes a problem that can

occur in word formation in Oromo because of the diversity of the means of

word formation and the use of different terms in different dialects. She rightly

suggests the need for standardisation in this area.

Here it is worth noting how the presence of dialects in *Afaan* Oromo, which is

often wrongly taken as a negative aspect or a hindrance to communication

(see Chapter II), has helped the expansion of the vocabulary. Dialects or the

use of different accents and different words in a language can often be

positive attributes even though they may also pose communication (verbal or

written) difficulties between people. In the modernization of the vocabulary

of Oromo language, the availability in some dialects of some words, phrases

or concepts, which are not used in the other Oromo dialects, have been

beneficial as they have been used constructively to modernise or expand the

vocabulary of the language. An example here is the word "**ciree**"[27] [tʃʼire:]

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[27] In an interview with the author in London on 19 February, 2005, Mr Taha Abdi
stated that "ciree" ([tʃʼire:]) was coined by one of his comrades in 1980's.to represent
"breakfast" He said "ciree" (cutting or breaking) was basically a loose translation

(breakfast) which has only been part of the eastern Oromo dialect but has recently become part of the vocabulary of *afaan* Oromo throughout Oromia. On his first visit in ten years to Oromia, in 1995, the author was surprised to read the name "Mana Ciree" which literally means "house breakfast" or "breakfast house" in front of some coffee shops in western Oromia. The word "ciree" had never been part of the vocabulary of western Oromia and was only introduced after 1991.

The degree and speed of the expansion of the Oromo vocabulary is expected to continue unabated due to its status as an official language and a medium of instruction in schools, teacher training institutes and universities. Moreover, albeit some current restrictions, outlets such as the radios, television programmes, courts, music and religion, all of which are expected to use Oromo in the Oromia region, will continue to play a great role in the expansion and modernization of the Oromo vocabulary. This is in addition to natural factors such as the introduction of new technologies or occurrence of new concepts as a result of innovations or needs that drive the expansion of a vocabulary. Figures 43, 44 and 45 provide examples of new Oromo words, which have been introduced to the language or which have acquired new meanings as a result of the modernization of the vocabulary.

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from breakfast. "ciree" had been widely used in eastern Oromia before the adoption of the *Qubee* in 1991.

Figure 43 New (Borrowed) Oromo words

Oromo	English
baabura	train, rail
biiroo	office, bureau
doktoora	doctor
draamaa	drama
hakiima	physician
ispoortii	sport
kolleejii	college
kompuutarii	computer
ripoorterii	reporter
sharafuu	To change (money)
iskoolaarshiippii	scholarship
telefoona	telephone
traakterii	tractor
warshaa	factory

Figure 44 New (Compound) words

Oromo	English
abbaa seeraa	judge
abbaa barcumaa	chairman
angafoota oduu	news headlines
baabuura lafaa	railway
bu'aa calla	net profit
caal-baasii	auction
daandii dhugaa	right way
damee basaasaa	espionage branch
dirree lolaa	war zone, fighting field
dura-taa'aa	chairman or president
fedhii ilma namaa	human need
kana malees	in addition to this
kubbaa miillaa	football
kubbaa saaphanaa	volleyball
kutaa tokko	first class (one section or part one)
lammeentaa tokko	one-half
mana maree	assembly hall

Almost all of the newly borrowed words from languages such as English and Italian seem to have been subjected to Oromo phonological and morphological patterns. For example, in Figures 45 and 46, the newly borrowed words end in vowel sounds rather than in consonants as in their original language.

Figure 45 New words borrowed from the English language

Oromo	English
baankii	bank
kolleejii	college
taaypistii	typist
kompuutarii	Computer
repoorterii	Reporter
iskoolaarshiippii	Scholarship
telefoona	Telephone

Where the newly borrowed words already end in a vowel in their original language, a phonological adjustment is made to the final vowel by making it longer in the Oromo (Figure 46):

Figure 46 Examples of phonological adjustment

Oromo	Amharic/Italian	Gloss
shittoo	shitto (Amharic)	perfume
kitfoo	kitfo (Amharic)	minced meat
caammaa	Chamma (Amharic)	shoe
gaazexaa	Gazzetta (Italian)	newspaper
kaabboo	capo (Italian)	foreman
makiinaa	macchina (Italian)	car, machine

While some urban Oromo people or those who have been through schools under the Haile Sellasie or *Derg* regimes struggle to use Oromo without "mixing" with words from other languages, there seems to be a tendency amongst the educated Oromo people to resist borrowing words from other languages despite the fact that the borrowed words are often subjected to the phonological and morphological patterns of the language. For example, the words **caammaa** (shoe) and **makiinaa** (car), borrowed from Amharic and Italian respectively, are also formally and popularly known as **kophee** and **konkolaataa**. Even though the borrowed words, **caammaa** and **makiinaa,** have been known and used to represent the respective objects, the educated Oromo people seem to prefer to use the relatively new Oromo words; that is **konkolaataa** and **kophee,** in this case. Other similar examples, which have "old version" of words, include **telefoona** (telephone) which is also represented by **bilbila**; and **rophlaana** (airplane), represented by **xiyyaara.** And there are many other similar words where newly borrowed foreign words are used along with internally "invented" words. A possible reason that may be given here is that those people who resist the use of borrowed words equate "pure" language with emancipation from the linguistic suppression that existed in Ethiopia under the Haile Sellassie and *Derg* regimes, and it is for ideology or prestige reasons that people would like reject existing foreign words and coin new terms for concepts and objects. As

the experience from English, a well developed language, would suggest, there is no harm in borrowing words from other languages. It remains to be seen whether this will be the case for Oromo.

In conclusion, with the adoption and development of the new Oromo writing system, and with the use of the language for official, academic, religious, business, etc. purposes, the Oromo vocabulary has seen an unprecedented expansion over the past few years especially in relation to new scientific terminology. This has already begun to significantly impact the structure of the language and the ways in which terminology is incorporated in everyday language and societal infrastructures.

Chapter X

10. Conclusion

The issue of the Oromo writing system has recently seen two major qualitative developments: firstly, the issue of whether or not it should be written or used for official purposes (such as education, commerce, etc.) has given way to a debate about the choice of script; and secondly, a new challenge, which relates to standardisation, has emerged. The question relating to the choice of script for writing Oromo, and a resistance to the new writing system based on the Roman alphabet by a sector of the Ethiopian population, is not a new phenomenon. This has also been observed elsewhere (for example, in Turkey and Somalia) where the Roman script was resisted (albeit unsuccessfully) due to religious objections by sections of the populations in their respective countries. What has been new in the case of Oromo, has been that the new script has been opposed exclusively by certain sectors of non-Oromo speakers based on arguments either that the Roman Alphabet was a "foreign" script or that its adoption would lead Oromia to secede from Ethiopia.

This thesis has argued that the Roman Alphabet is the best option for Oromo writing even though it is not a perfect one. It is the best option to date because it is relatively easy to adapt for representing the phonological aspects of

Oromo. It is also a script used for writing more languages than the Ge'ez

script, and this can have potential advantages for the Oromo learners who

wish to learn those languages. Although the Ge'ez script can also be used for

Oromo writing, notwithstanding its acknowledged limitations in Amharic

writing, it would not be appropriate to adopt it fully on the proposition that,

unlike the Roman Alphabet, it is an indigenous script which would not lead

Oromia to secede from Ethiopia. The author has argued that the reasons

presented by the opponents of the Roman Alphabet for Oromo writing were

not convincing, as for Oromo both the Ge'ez syllabary and the Roman

Alphabet are foreign and indeed there has not been conclusive evidence

(contrary to certain scholars' claim in Ethiopia) to confirm that the Ge'ez

script is indigenous to the country. Secondly, the notion that the use of the

Roman Alphabet for writing Oromo in Ethiopia, where the Ge'ez script is

used to write other languages, could lead to the secession of Oromia is

baseless as the experiences of India and China (where more than one script is

used to write languages) demonstrate that this has not resulted in a national

breakup (Das Gupta, 1969). Similarly, as the example of Eritrea (which

seceded from Ethiopia, despite using the Ge'ez script), clearly shows using

one script is not a main requirement for people to live together in a country.

The author has argued that the choice of a script for Oromo writing should be

made by the speakers of the language, i.e. by those most likely to be more

affected by its usage. It cannot be denied that the promotion of *Afaan* Oromo

from a vernacular to an official language in Oromia, and the adoption of the Roman Alphabet for its writing system, have implications for the economic, political and social aspects of Ethiopia, and it is recommended these should be a subject of future study.

While the Roman Alphabet is the preferred script for Oromo writing, there still remain formidable challenges to be faced in making it a viable system. One of these challenges is the issue of the standardization of the language. A standardisation of the Oromo language is needed for political as much as for linguistic reasons. A standardised Oromo that incorporates all the dialects can help build the people's feelings of national integrity and unity. It can also help effective communication and provide equal opportunities in economic, social and cultural development. Writing can be effective as a communication tool only if there is a standard form with which people are familiar. If individuals "spell" words following their own pronunciations, it would be impossible to achieve an effective communication in writing because languages that do not have a standardised spelling can: (a) be difficult to read (in reading we learn to recognise words rather than sounds, which is why learning to read the IPA, for example, is very slow); and (b) it would not be taken seriously. However, the process of achieving standardization in the case of Oromo may be both complex and challenging, and would therefore,

require much further study. The present writer proposes that the following points would need to be considered in the process:

- The approach should be an inclusive one. As no Oromo variety can be shown to be more prestigious than any other, it is recommended that the standardized form includes all *Afaan* Oromo varieties. An obvious advantage of this is that no Oromo group would feel particularly alienated or discriminated against through the standardization of the language.

- There should be an establishment of an Oromo Language Academy that would have a mandate to review and give directives regarding the standard writing system. The membership of this group would need to include linguists, anthropologists, politicians, lawyers and other Oromo scholars with an adequate knowledge of the dialects of Oromo. A familiarity with the experiences of the Accademia della Crusca of 1582, Italy (which became the model for Cardinal Richelieu's Académie française of 1635 in France (Haugen, 1966)), and a knowledge of the Inter-Territorial (Kiswahili) Language Committee of East Africa (. Mhina, George A (1976)), could be useful.

- There should be the development of information technology to produce both software and hardware incorporating the phonetics, phonology,

morphology and syntax of the language. An organisation with a mandate to coordinate and develop information technology systems would need to be established to work in close conjunction with the Oromo Language Academy.

- The Oromo Diaspora played a pivotal role in the development of Oromo in the 70s and 80s. While it is believed that they can continue to play a great role in the development of the Oromo language and its writing system, a niche needs to be found in order for them to make a positive contribution. The demography of the Oromo Diaspora has greatly changed in the last two decades, in terms of the countries they live in, their numbers, and their social and academic backgrounds. Today, there are very many Oromos living in different parts of the world, including the USA, Australia, UK, Norway, Germany, Sweden, Ireland, Italy, Holland, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kenya, South Africa, etc. The Oromo Diaspora come from all parts of Oromia and therefore may speak different Oromo dialects. Moreover, the Diaspora are likely to be affected in terms of pronunciation, by the language of their host countries. It is imperative, therefore, that a system is put in place with a view to the Diaspora having access to and being able to use the standard form of Oromo being developed in Oromia. In addition, the Oromo Diaspora should have a wide opportunity to play a significant role in the development and standardisation of the Oromo writing system. The Oromo Diaspora are arguably the most educated of the Oromo people as well as being more

affluent financially than their peers at home. They are thus better able to make

a tangible contribution towards the development of their language. They

could do this through any of the following avenues:

•   by actively using the language amongst themselves in their

communications both in writing and orally;

•   by translating major world books written in various languages into

Oromo;

•   by writing new books in Oromo;

•   by raising funds for building public libraries and buying books.

Finally, the Ethiopian government needs to revise the country's linguistic

policy. Being a multilingual and multicultural country engulfed for decades

by conflicts underpinned by linguistic and culture issues, Ethiopia cannot

afford not to review its language policy, which allows Amharic the sole

official federal language. This would require a political decision by the federal

government and further research by academicians in the relevant fields. The

present writer favours models based on those employed by certain

multilingual European countries such as Malta, Cyprus, Finland, Ireland,

Belarus and Luxembourg, where two languages are used as official languages

or others such as Switzerland, Belgium and Bosnia–Herzegovina, where,

through the principle of linguistic territoriality, several languages enjoy an

official status in their territorial regions. In adopting the first model, *Afaan*

Oromo could be used as an official language in the Oromia region and, along

with Amharic, at a federal level. The second model would be that other major

languages could also enjoy official status in their respective regions. The

political, economic, social and cultural implications of such language policies

have not fallen within the scope of this study but would be an interesting and

pertinent area for future study.

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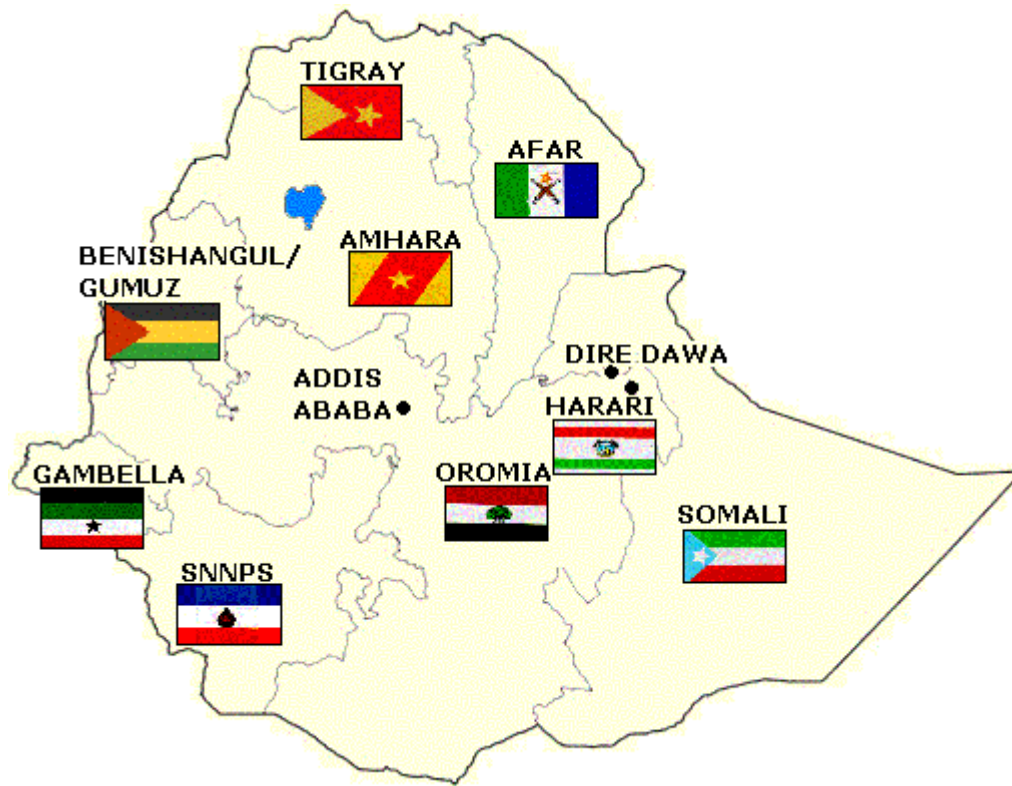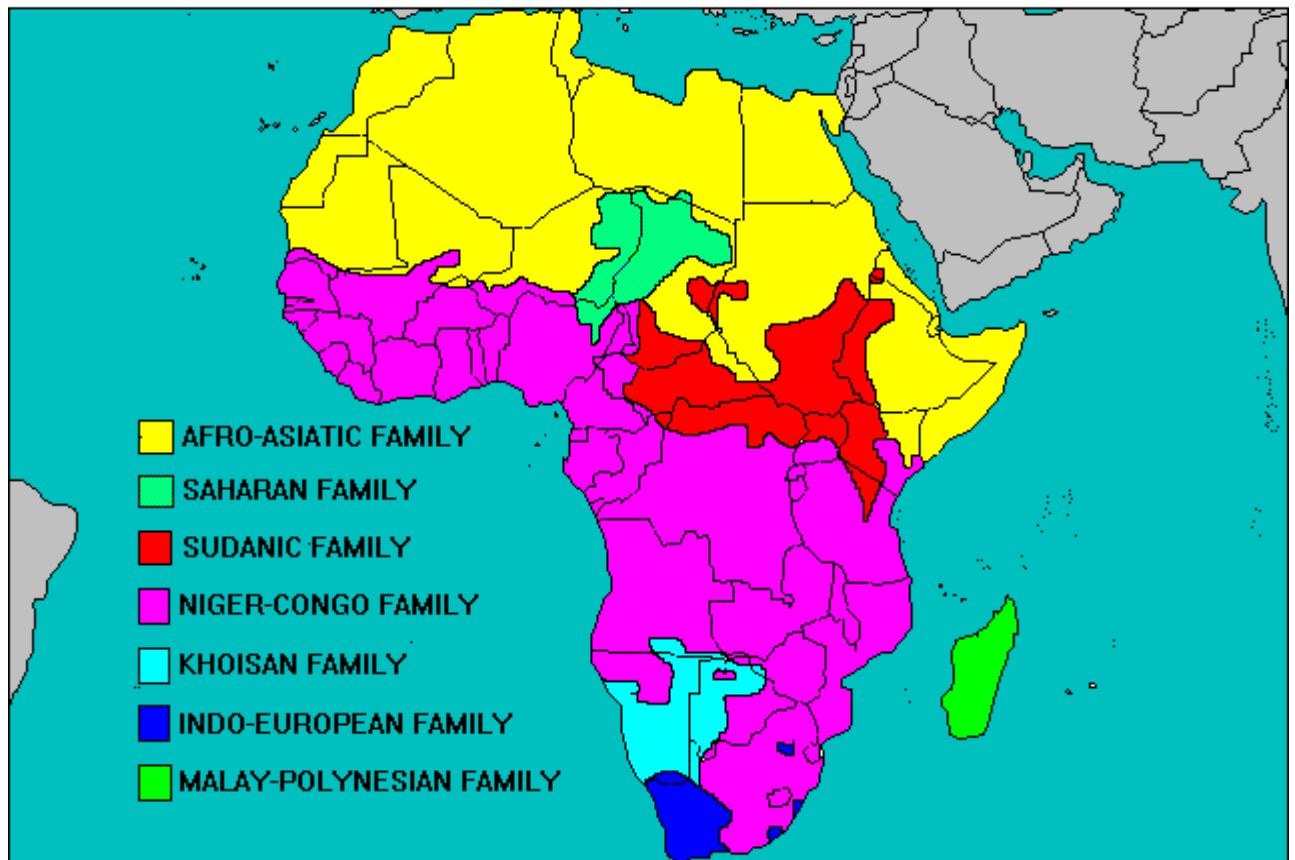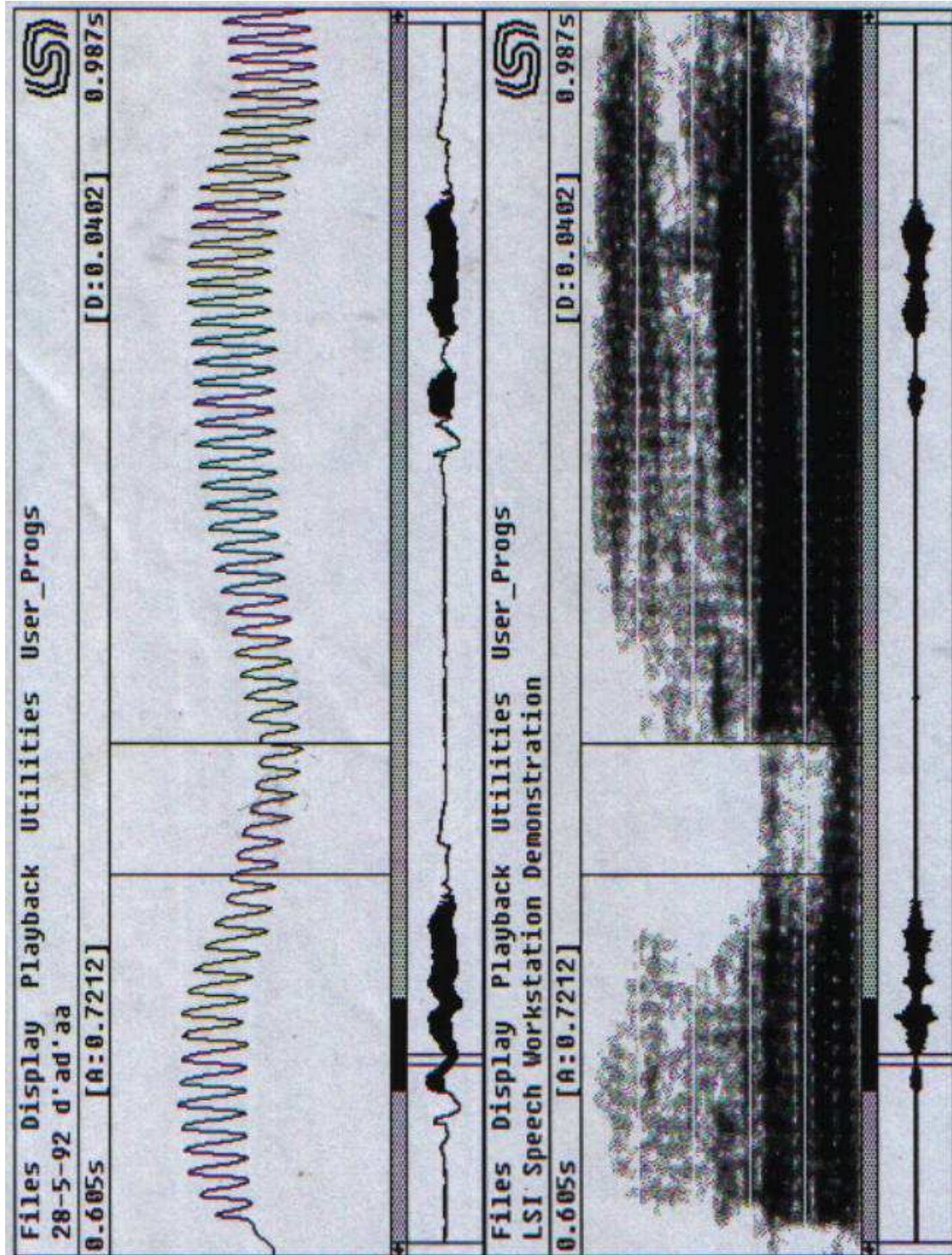Accessed 7 June 2015

Appendices

I. Map of Oromia

Source: Gadaa Melbaa (1988). Oromia: an Introduction.
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II. Ethiopia – regional states

III. Map of Africa

LANGUAGES OF AFRICA

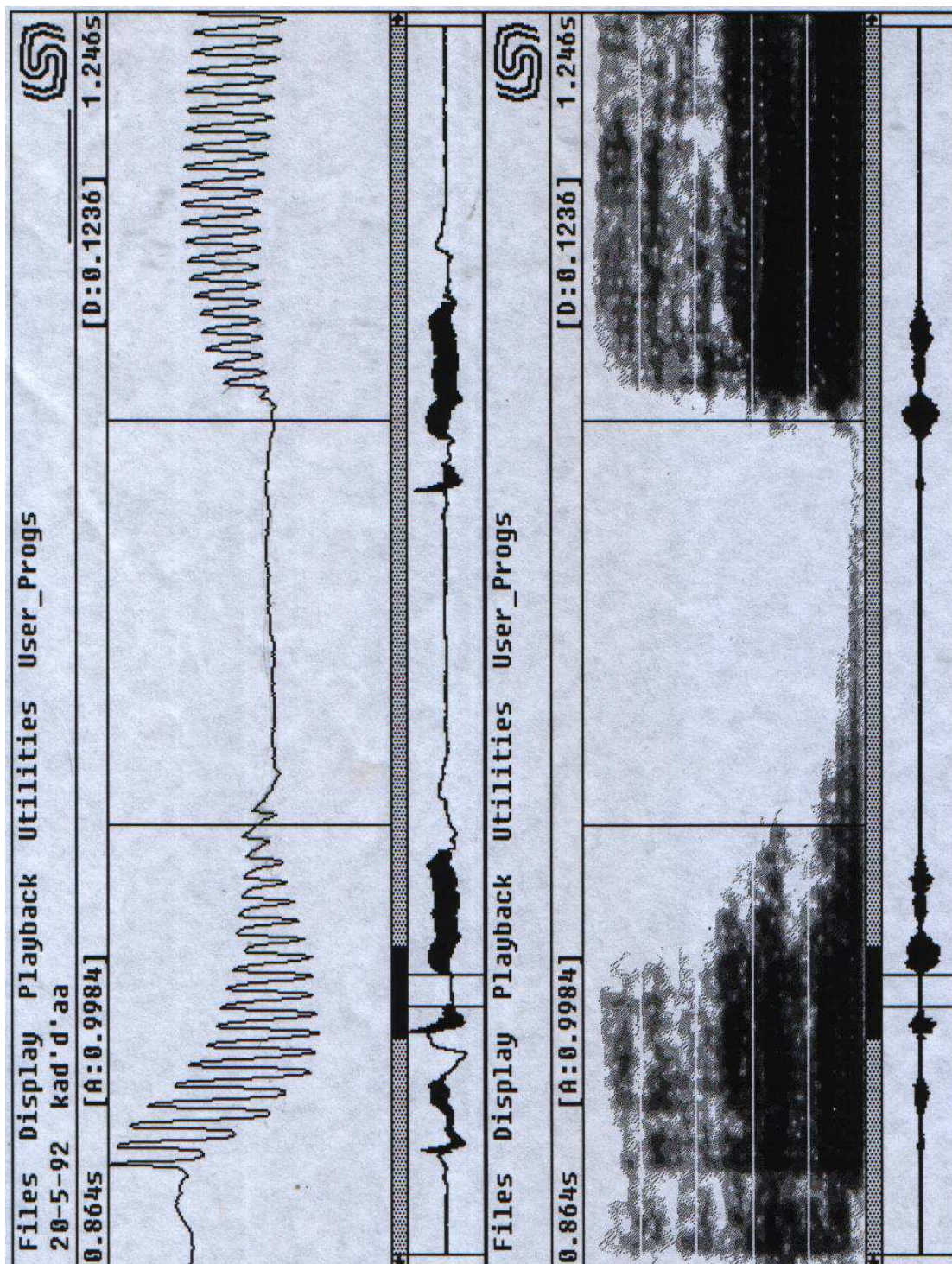**Source:** http://www.harpercollege.edu/mhealy/g101ilec/intro/reg/regfr.htm
Accessed 18/05/2015

IV. Laryngography of Oromo single and geminate /d/

Laryngography of Oromo single /ɗ/ **'d'** or **'dh'** as in [kaɗ a:] produced by the researcher at SOAS phonetics laboratory.

Laryngography of Oromo geminate /ɗ/ **'d'** or **'dh'** as in [kaɗːaː] produced by the researcher at SOAS phonetics laboratory.

V. Examples of common Oromo abbreviations and acronyms.

Abbreviation/Acronym	Oromo word(s)	Gloss
A.B.O.	Adda Bilisummaa Oromoo	Oromo Liberation Front
A.L.A.	Akka Lakkofsa Awurophaa	European calendar (Gregorian calendar)
A.L.I. (also ALH)	Akka Lakkofsa Itophiya (Habashaa)	Ethiopian calendar
ABO	Adda Billisumma Oromoo	Oromo Liberation Front
Dh.K.B.	Dhaloota Kirstoos Booda	A.D. (anno Domini; in the year of our Lord).
Dh.K.D.	Dhaloota Kirstoos Dura	B.C.
Dr.	Doktora	Doctor
FK.	fakeenyaafi	For example
Kkf	Kan kana fakkaatu	This and the like [and so on]
L.Bil.	Lakkoofsa bilbilaa	Telephone number
WB	Waaree booda	After noon (pm)
WD	Waaree dura	Morning (am)