

## Revisiting the Oromo Peoples and the Cultural Genocide of the Gafat

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### Introduction

The destruction of the Gafat, once a prominent Ethiopian culture, raises an urgent question: How could a people who existed for millennia be so completely erased?<sup>1</sup> The Gafat, largely Semitic-language Christians, were destroyed through a rapid and violent process of conquest, displacement, and forced assimilation that reshaped all of Ethiopian society. At one point, they inhabited extensive areas of Bizamo, Damot and Šäwa provinces (see Map 1), but their cultural destruction began during the late 16<sup>th</sup> century with the spread of nomadic Oromo herders. In 1593, royal chronicler *Abba* Bahrey described Damot and Šäwa as devastated and their inhabitants scattered, with some fleeing to Gojjam and others pushed into remote mountain enclaves. By 1700, the formerly widespread Gafat had dwindled to small, dispersed communities. After that, it took less than a century for their identity and culture to be absorbed into Oromo society (Bahrey 1954: 121–4; Bouanga 2013: 352–62; Beckingham and Huntingford 1954: 56).

This study argues that the Oromo takeover of Gafat homelands and the rapid decline of their inhabitants should be understood as genocidal events. Drawing on ethno-historical evidence, I examine Gafat displacement, coerced accommodation, resistance, and how their

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<sup>1</sup> When researching Gafat history, it quickly becomes clear that the disappearance of their culture is a far more serious problem than previously understood; the roots of the subject are virtually unexplored.

encounters with the Oromo resulted in cultural destruction, along with a revised interpretation of how and why they lost their homelands in Bizamo, Damot and Šäwa provinces. While the disappearance of Gafat culture is common historical knowledge, reasons for it are rarely investigated. The Gafat did not simply “vanish,” despite a prevailing assumption that their disappearance resulted from natural historical evolution, making their erasure both expected and inevitable. I argue, however, that the Gafat disappeared as a *direct result* of Oromo conquest and that historians have given too little acknowledgment of intentional cultural genocide practiced by the Oromo. Their destruction of the Gafat closely parallels the fate of indigenous peoples in other colonial settings. By framing the destruction of Gafat society within the literature of cultural genocide and colonialism, I present an alternative to the accepted but insufficient narrative that attributes Oromo expansion merely to a quest for new pasturelands,<sup>2</sup> while ignoring their genocidal motives. Like so many victims of deliberate assimilation elsewhere in the world, the Gafat have been largely erased from public memory. My goal is to recover their unique agency in Ethiopian history.

As well as having uniquely Ethiopian aspects, the history of Gafat cultural disappearance also illustrates global patterns of language and identity loss whose genocidal origins remain an ongoing reality today. It is now widely recognized that linguistic diversity is in crisis worldwide, with nearly half the languages currently spoken identified as being seriously endangered or doomed to extinction within a generation. Although around 700 languages are known to have gone extinct throughout human history, about 216 of them—about one-third—have disappeared since 1960. By some estimates, one language dies every three months.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For an important early contribution, see Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia*, xii—xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Belew and Simpson, “The Status of the World’s Endangered Languages,” 21 and 43; and Belew and Simpson, “Language Extinction Then and Now,” 54.

On the African continent, where about one-third of the world’s current languages are spoken, many cultures have depended almost solely on oral transmission to maintain and preserve their history; those histories themselves are now at risk. Of Africa’s estimated 2,139 languages, nearly three in ten (28.3%) face some level of endangerment, with ongoing language loss being most acute in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Ethiopia and Sudan, where chronic civil unrest and poverty have hastened their decline. In the current era, Ethiopia alone has seen around 20 languages disappear, or decrease to near-extinction. Scholars emphasize that the greatest pressure on language survival in recent decades has not been internal semantic change, but political, socioeconomic and cultural forces.<sup>4</sup> Applied to the Gafat, that insight reveals broader patterns of power and identity transformation that were already shaping linguistic change during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Examining past processes of linguistic decline helps to explain the vulnerability of minority languages today.

Previous appraisals have naturalized and normalized the decline and destruction of cultures such as the Gafat as being a natural outcome of evolution and progress; that is, their fate was supposedly a static “given,” rather than a process shaped by deliberate human action. Taddesse Tamrat, for example, attributed the demise of several language groups such as the Gafat, to the assumption that they were “primitive” peoples whose disappearance was an inevitable outcome of broader evolutionary forces. “And because of the essentially progressive nature of human history,” he writes, “those language groups who had attained higher levels of economic, cultural and political development always tended to dominate the others. It is a common phenomenon of world history that . . . many ancient speech communities gradually lost

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<sup>4</sup> Batibo, *Language Decline and Death in Africa*, 67, 75 and 93-94; Belew and Simpson, “The Status of the World’s Endangered Languages,” 27.

their identities by being absorbed into stronger and bigger populations.”<sup>5</sup> Expanding on that premise, Tadesse views contact between societies at different social and cultural levels to be a main driver of language extinction, implying that the Gafat were a weaker people who gave way to stronger, more advanced groups.



Figure 1: Map of Migration of the Gafat from their Original Homeland after the Oromo Conquest During the 16th and 17th Centuries

But Tadesse interprets the destruction of Gafat culture through the lens of 19<sup>th</sup>-century evolutionary theory, which viewed societies as inevitably progressing along a linear path from “primitive” to increasingly complex and sophisticated civilizations. Primitive cultures were seen as less evolved, thus doomed to destruction because they were unable to become more civilized.

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<sup>5</sup> Tamrat, “Processes of Ethnic Interaction and Integration,” 122.

Yet cultural destruction has its own history—one that results from intentional human actions and choices, not simply the outcome of evolution. Elazar Barkan notes that although the idea of progressive evolution has declined since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, it still shapes “our understanding of the relationship between progress and the old.”<sup>6</sup> Barkan adds that “from animals to peoples and from plants to cultures, our evolutionary world view is built upon change. Yet, while evolution may have no direction as a principle, culturally we view it as progress.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the historical and anthropological literature on indigenous minority cultures is filled with rhetorical tropes about primitive peoples vanishing because they did not “evolve.” As Barkan comments, the primitive vanishing trope is therefore “usually a passive discourse”<sup>8</sup> in which destruction is explained away by citing generalized forces of “progress, or civilization and evolution.”

Taddesse and others attribute the disappearance of entire societies to these vaguely defined forces, which are grossly insufficient for explaining specific cultural erasures such as what happened to the Gafat. Understanding the fate of the Gafat requires a different framework that includes the direct impact of Oromo colonization, expulsion of non-Oromo peoples, and cultural suppression during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Situating the Gafat within these dynamics provides a new and more accurate explanation for their destruction, which reflects how patterns of conquest, dispossession and the resulting cultural genocide in early modern Ethiopia resonates with experiences of minority groups around the world. A brief survey of genocide scholarship makes clear the core concepts illuminating the destruction of Gafat culture.

## **Cultural Genocide and Settler Colonialism**

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<sup>6</sup> Barkan, “Genocides of Indigenous Peoples,” 119.

<sup>7</sup> Barkan, “Genocides of Indigenous Peoples,” 119.

<sup>8</sup> Barkan, “Genocides of Indigenous Peoples,” 120. See also, Davidson, *Cultural Genocide*, 33-36.

Although “genocide” is often associated with modern industrialized violence, the systematic destruction of cultural identities has much deeper historical roots, highlighting the need to examine how cultures are intentionally dismantled—not only through direct physical attack, but through forced assimilation, displacement, and sustained suppression. The concept of genocide was first developed by Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin (1900 – 1959) as a framework for understanding the Nazi destruction of Jewish and other non-Aryan peoples, such as the Roma. Lemkin defined genocide as a process of systemic attacks on a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. Such attacks would be carried out not only through mass violence, but through the planned destruction of political, socioeconomic, cultural and biological foundations that sustain the “essential foundations of life” of an entire group of people. He saw the crime of genocide as an interrelated process, not primarily or necessarily the immediate physical extermination of all group members. Mass killings are only one form of genocide, not its defining feature.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, the cultural aspects of genocide are at the core of Lemkin’s argument. For him, culture was (and is) not a peripheral dimension, but the essential element underlying a group’s very existence. As Anthony Dirk Moses emphasizes, Lemkin understood national, ethnic and religious groups as custodians of culture. Lemkin rightly considers culture as the historical medium through which entire groups sustain themselves. Consequently, attacks on language, religion, economic life, social traditions and political leadership are not secondary to genocide but constitutive of it. Destroying an ethnic group’s culture becomes integral to the genocidal process rather than a mere byproduct of it. Genocide therefore occurs even when large numbers of individuals survive (as in the case of many North American indigenous peoples), so long as a

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<sup>9</sup> Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, 79-90.

group's capacity to sustain itself as a distinct sociocultural and political entity can be permanently destroyed. For this reason, Lemkin consistently framed genocide in terms of “destruction” and “crippling,” rather than simple physical extermination.<sup>10</sup>

Regrettably, Lemkin's concept has been widely misunderstood and its parameters narrowed, particularly by modern studies of genocide and international law. This has led to the widespread confusion of genocide with physical extermination. Moses notes that this narrowing of scope occurred during the drafting of the 1948 United Nations Genocide Convention, which excluded explicit reference to cultural genocide because of political resistance from UN settler states and colonial powers.<sup>11</sup> Since then, many scholars have uncritically accepted the United Nations criteria defining genocide, which stipulates that victims must fall within a specified “national, ethnical, racial, or religious group,”<sup>12</sup> or belong to other groups targeted for destruction, and that perpetrators must deliberately carry out genocidal acts. This 20<sup>th</sup>-century definition limits itself to “existing idioms of genocide emphasizing images of killing fields, concentration camps, and mass death.”<sup>13</sup> Consequently, international law privileges physical and biological destruction while downplaying multiple forms of cultural destruction, reducing them legally and morally to secondary importance. This narrowed definition historically excludes events with genocidal consequences. However, 21<sup>st</sup>-century genocide studies have critically broadened the field. Both the legal definition of genocide and its scholarly interpretations have

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<sup>10</sup> Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, 82-90; Moses, “Raphael Lemkin, Culture, and the Concept of Genocide,” 25-38.

<sup>11</sup> Moses, “Raphael Lemkin, Culture, and the Concept of Genocide,” 36-38. See also, Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*, 5-8.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations, “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide” (1948)

<sup>13</sup> Hinton, La Pointe, and Irvin-Erickson, “Introduction to Hidden Genocides,” 4.

undergone significant realignment and revision, incorporating a wider and more nuanced range of group persecution patterns involving both intentional and unintentional destruction.<sup>14</sup>

By restoring the central position of culture to Lemkin’s concept of genocide, scholars have challenged the hierarchical prioritization of dramatic cases (such as rapid mass murder) over attenuated and less visible forms of group destruction, such as the forcible removal of children, suppression of language, and eradication of cultural and political leaders. Current definitions of genocide now emphasize the “destruction of the socio-cultural fabric . . . beyond the death of the group members,”<sup>15</sup> stressing the eventual effects of genocidal actions and policies, rather than the original eradication intentions of those responsible. It is now recognized that genocide may be physical, cultural, hidden (or all three); that it may occur under other circumstances; and “also be the unintended consequence of a policy or a set of actions whose initial goal was different.”<sup>16</sup> The term genocide, therefore, cannot be narrowly defined as intentional mass killing meant to destroy a specific group. “Consequences, not intentionality, are the determining factor,”<sup>17</sup> as genocide can result “from the pursuit of some other goal”<sup>18</sup> such as economic, religious, or political gain. Thus the appropriate definition of cultural genocide for this study of the Gafat is “the effective destruction of a people by systematically or systemically (intentionally or unintentionally in order to achieve other goals) destroying, eroding, or undermining the integrity of the culture and system of values that defines a people and gives

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<sup>14</sup> Moses, “Raphael Lemkin, Culture, and the Concept of Genocide,” 30-38; idem, “Toward a Theory of Critical Genocide Studies”; Gellately and Kiernan, “Study of Mass Murder,” 1–8 and 14–15; Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*, 5-8.

<sup>15</sup> Novic, *Concept of Cultural Genocide*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Bartov, “Seeking the Roots of Modern Genocide,” 75.

<sup>17</sup> Barkan, “Genocides of Indigenous Peoples,” 210.

<sup>18</sup> Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*, 4.

them life.”<sup>19</sup> This more inclusive understanding has resulted in genocide being increasingly acknowledged as historically prevalent from antiquity to the present day.

Thus Lemkin’s work remains crucial for analyzing genocide, even where international law and 20<sup>th</sup>-century scholarship have overlooked the full scope of his original insight, which identified genocide as a classic and recurring theme in world history rather than a crime unique to Nazism.<sup>20</sup> His paradigm of cultural genocide is now used in a wide range of contexts, illuminating the process by which indigenous and aboriginal cultures dramatically declined or disappeared in the Americas, Australia and elsewhere. George Tinker argues, for example, that even well-intentioned Christian missionaries were subservient to colonial policies of control over native peoples and participated in their cultural destruction by adopting forms of evangelism that forbade or suppressed indigenous religions, languages and social traditions. Recent scholarship has classified policies of forced denationalization and assimilation as cultural genocide, describing the indigenous residential schools formerly sanctioned by church and government interests in Canada and the USA, as facilitators of cultural genocide.<sup>21</sup>

Scholars have also employed “structural genocide”<sup>22</sup> as a nuanced conceptual framework for better understanding how foreign conquest and settler colonialism generated distinct processes leading to the destruction of indigenous peoples. Patrick Wolfe expands the concept by insisting on an inherent relationship between settler colonialism and cultural genocide. As land is the most-sought after resource by settlers, colonists worldwide have contributed directly and indirectly to the decimation of indigenous peoples. In essence, Wolfe states, settler colonialism

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<sup>19</sup> Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Moses, “Raphael Lemkin, Culture, and the Concept of Genocide,” 26-29.

<sup>21</sup> Hutchings, “Cultural Genocide and the First Nations of Upper Canada,” 301–8; and Tinker, *Missionary Conquest*, 4-6; Davidson, *Cultural Genocide*, 39-41.

<sup>22</sup> Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” 403.

subsumes “a logic of elimination” and the core rationale of “elimination is not [about] race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory.”<sup>23</sup> For centuries, indigenous populations were arbitrarily displaced in order for settlers to build their own communities. He identifies two inherently contradictory dimensions of settler colonialism: “Negatively, it strives for the dissolution of native societies. Positively, it erects a new colonial society on the expropriated land base.”<sup>24</sup> Despite differences in detail, most scholars agree that settler colonialism is a form of genocide based on fundamental violations of indigenous human rights. Lorenzo Veracini emphasizes that “settler colonial projects are specifically interested in turning indigenous peoples into refugees,”<sup>25</sup> stressing the intersection of settler colonialism and the resulting global genocides it has engendered.

Although Veracini and Wolfe comment specifically about European colonies in the Americas and Australia, Veracini also reminds us that settler colonialism is best defined as “a ‘situation’,” one “not necessarily restricted to a specific group, location or period.”<sup>26</sup> As history repeatedly shows, both Europeans and non-Europeans have played the roles of settler or colonizer. In the context of the Gafat people, my research highlights the need to view settler colonialism and cultural genocide not as geographically bounded, but as phenomena embedded in global history. This is particularly significant for Ethiopian history, where genocide often took the form of population replacement, forced assimilation, or cultural eradication, rather than outright mass killings. As with many other indigenous populations, the Gafat were replaced by and displaced from their ancestral homeland by an “exogenous collective,”<sup>27</sup> in this case the

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<sup>23</sup> Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” 388.

<sup>24</sup> Wolfe, “Structure and Event,” 103.

<sup>25</sup> Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 35.

<sup>26</sup> Veracini, *Settler Colonialism*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> Veracini, “Introduction: Settler Colonialism as a Distinct Mode of Domination,” 4.

Oromo. Framing the demise of the Gafat away from a one-time mass casualty of Oromo conquest and settler colonialism also shifts the Eurocentric focus to expose more prolonged struggles and violence that simultaneously ignited the destruction and creation of Ethiopian cultural identities.

The recent emergence of historiography privileging indigenous rights and recognizing the collective trauma resulting from dispossession and cultural erasure has also led to reframing settler colonialism as an instrument of human rights violations and genocide. Consequently, we can now classify the 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Ethiopian oppression of indigenous groups as “structural genocide.” Despite some differences, the Oromo conquest and settlement bore many attributes of typical colonialism which led to outcomes similar to those experienced by indigenous populations on other continents. The dominant Oromo sustained their culture through the displacement of indigenous cultures, such as the Gafat. While they practiced no overt policies of mass killing, the erasure of Gafat culture was a direct consequence of their territorial expansion.

Throughout the continuum of Oromo incursion, cultural genocide against indigenous societies was made inevitable through a systematic practice of cultural erasure known as *mogasa* (collective adoption) and a governing structure called *gäda* which sought to remake non-Oromo subjects in the image of their Oromo conquerors.<sup>28</sup> Over time, these enforced practices relentlessly eroded the linguistic, cultural and political distinctiveness of conquered peoples. While the cultural erasure effected through *mogasa* is well established in Oromo scholarship, its association with genocide has received far less attention. I address that significant gap by analyzing contemporary sources on both the Gafat and the Oromo peoples and situating *mogasa*

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<sup>28</sup> Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia*, 20-21.

and *gäda* within more accurate historical contexts. Consequently, my research disrupts both Ethiopian historiography and broader scholarship by revealing how “collective adoption” was directly linked to colonial occupation, domination, and cultural genocide.

While genocide could happen in peacetime, scholars have often emphasized that it occurs most frequently under conditions of war, conquest, violence, civil disruption and historical trauma<sup>29</sup>—a fitting observation for the period of 1529 through 1636, when Ethiopia underwent more than a century of extreme civil unrest, including enslavement, jihadism, dispossession, displacement, territorial loss, depopulation and spiritual crisis. Into this chaotic environment came the Oromo, a loose collective of stateless pastoral people from the southern lowlands. With the kingdom in disarray and government power weakened, they faced few barriers. By 1630, the once-powerful medieval state of Ethiopia had shrunk to a very small area.<sup>30</sup> Amid the same disruption and confusion, the Gafat found themselves under enormous pressure. The Oromo incursion demonstrated how a stateless yet highly organized society could wage war on a numerically larger group by exploiting its internal weaknesses.

The Gafat, however, were not passive victims of historical change. In this study I foreground their agency and experience in response to Oromo pressure, highlight moments of adaptation and resistance, and show how cultural genocide was entangled with mutual exchange, accommodation, and the reconfiguration of identities.

### **Jihad, Oromo military culture and the Gafat**

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<sup>29</sup> McCormack, “Reflections on Modern Japanese History in the Context of the Concept of Genocide,” 282.

<sup>30</sup> The most reliable survey of the period can be found in Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea*, xix-xx.

Long before the advent of the Oromo during the 1550s, forces that would lead to the decline of the Gafat were already in motion. One example was the jihadist war of Ahmād Ibrahim (1529 – 1543), popularly known as Graññ, “the left-handed.” His military exploits were documented by Yemeni follower and admirer, Šihāb ad-Dīn Aḥmad bin Abd al-Qāder bin Sālem bin Uṭmān (henceforth referred to as Bin Uṭmān), who described in gory detail the devastation Graññ inflicted on Ethiopian Christians and their churches. Ahmād/Graññ ruled the eastern Adal province and set out to conquer all of Ethiopia under the banner of jihad. The campaign peaked in 1529 when Ahmād’s forces inflicted a shattering defeat on King Lebnā Dengel (r. 1508–40) at the battle of Šembra Kuré,<sup>31</sup> and occupied Ethiopia for more than a decade, during which Ahmād’s jihadists implemented a centralized campaign of cultural annihilation, subjugation and plunder. The Islamic ideology of jihad motivated all of his decisions in war, occupation, and peace. Ahmād Ibrahim and his forces believed they were doing God / Allah’s will in a campaign marked by violence and the destruction of churches and monasteries.<sup>32</sup>

Ahmād’s jihad divided Ethiopians, with an estimated nine out of ten Christians forced to convert to Islam.<sup>33</sup> The Gafat, who fought mainly on the Christian side, were no exception. In 1533, Ahmād instructed his subordinate Yaqim to attack the predominantly Gafat region of Warab “until God conquers it by your hand.”<sup>34</sup> Bin Uṭmān writes that the Gafat initially resisted, but were defeated by Ahmād’s Muslim forces and agreed to pay a poll-tax in return for being allowed to remain Christian. Some smaller Gafat groups, however, did convert to Islam and even collaborated with their Muslim conquerors. One example were those living in Damot province. According to Bin Uṭmān, they aligned themselves with the jihadists in order to retain more

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<sup>31</sup> Uṭmān, *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša*, 71-86 and 100.

<sup>32</sup> Uṭmān, *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša*, 11, 28, 30, 41, 86, and 53–4.

<sup>33</sup> Conzelman, ed. *Chronique de Galāwdēwos*, 5 and 123.

<sup>34</sup> Uṭmān, *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša*, 328.

autonomy under the central state.<sup>35</sup> J.A. Davis summarizes the profound demographic upheaval caused by Ahmād’s jihad, during which mass flight, famine and social collapse reshaped entire regions:

While some inhabitants fled to escape the sword, others fled famine and misery which had ruined much of the country in which lived the ‘elected people of God.’ In addition, aside from war itself, mass movements, famine and epidemics played havoc in many sections of the country as well. Whole villages were abandoned, the land left uncultivated, and the survivors migrated to other areas in the hope of finding some means of subsistence.<sup>36</sup>

The mass Gafat exodus to Gojjam province likely began during the 1530s, although there had always been migrations between the provinces of Šäwa, Damot and Gojjam across the Abay River. Ayda Bouanga notes that during that unstable time, many Gafat Christians dispersed to relatively safer places such as Gojjam.<sup>37</sup>

The brutal jihadist occupation finally ended with the defeat and death of Ahmād Ibrahim in 1543 and central rule was reinstated over much of the former kingdom. But years of conflict had taken their toll. Ethiopia was weakened by great loss of life, economic disruption, the destruction of much of its cultural and historical heritage and its military defense system, leaving it at a disadvantage when the invading Oromo arrived during the next century. Between 1559 and 1632 the Muslim occupation contributed to multiple failed royal governments, recurring internal civil wars and religious conflict. The upheaval of 1529 – 1543 proved advantageous to the land-hungry Oromo, as it marked a low point in Ethiopian resistance, particularly among the indigenous Amhara and Gafat peoples.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Utmān, *Futūḥ al-Ḥabaša*, 184–85, 328–330, and 334-337.

<sup>36</sup> Davis, “The sixteenth century jihad in Ethiopia and the impact on its culture,” 113.

<sup>37</sup> Bouanga, “Le Damot,” 287–91.

<sup>38</sup> Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea*, 133-137.

The exact location of the original Oromo homeland is uncertain. Nor do we know when they first arrived in Ethiopia's southern region. They were primarily nomadic herders, or pastoralists, rather than a sedentary society like the Gafat. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, they gradually began moving *en masse* to the north, east and west. Their territorial expansion brought profound changes to the social, ethnic, linguistic, political and religious character of Ethiopia. Just like the Islamic jihadists before them, the Oromo spread aggressively.<sup>39</sup> But unlike the jihadists, they did not attack the Gafat or others for religious reasons.

It is important at this point to present a brief cultural context for Oromo militarism to better assess how and why the Gafat disappearance occurred. Being neither Christian nor Muslim, the Oromo lived within a military culture that condoned violence against enemies; the objective was to eliminate any non-Oromo populations in their way. Warfare served both practical and symbolic purposes in Oromo society; plunder was profitable, especially the taking of cattle. Humans were also captured to become slaves. As Paul Baxter observes, “[t]o be a successful [Oromo] raider is not only patriotic, prestige-endowing, and status-giving, it is the surest way of obtaining a large herd and thereby consolidating social status.”<sup>40</sup> The fertile Ethiopian highlands were desirable conquests, affording Oromo invaders access to new grazing pastures, plentiful water and livestock, as well as arable land.<sup>41</sup>

The Oromo approached warfare as an integral component of their social organization, or *gäda* system—a tradition that organized men and boys into distinct age-sets and embedded military practice into their upbringing. All males were identified as belonging to one of 10 categories, or *gäda*, based on when they were born during an eight-year cycle. According to

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<sup>39</sup> Abir, *Ethiopia and the Red Sea*, 133-137.

<sup>40</sup> Baxter, “Repetition in Certain Boran Ceremonies,” 65.

<sup>41</sup> Hassen, *Oromo of Ethiopia*, 12-13.

Hassen, “[a]n individual entered the first grade at birth and left the last grade at the *gäda* age of eighty.”<sup>42</sup> Bahrey notes that “they have neither king nor master like other peoples, but they obey the *luba* during a period of eight years; at the end of eight years another *luba* is made, and the first gives up his office. They do this at fixed times; *luba* means those who are circumcised at the same time.”<sup>43</sup>

Asmarom Legesse, a leading authority on this practice, elaborates: “*Luba* is a group of people and *gäda* is the term of office of the leader of that group and by extension it is the name of that era during which that leader and his *luba* were in power.”<sup>44</sup> *Gäda* custom required each age-group to perform military service during its period of leadership, an expectation that normalized violence and made all outsiders potential targets. When a new *luba* assumed power, its members underwent collective circumcision; the group then inaugurated its eight-year rule by waging war, or *butta*, against a community that no preceding *luba* had attacked. Oromo scholar Mohammad Hassen defines *butta* as “national war.”<sup>45</sup> *Butta* wars were preceded by violent rituals “accompanied by boastful war songs that intoxicated the participants.”<sup>46</sup>

Masculinity and full adulthood were culturally defined through killing. In fact, marriage and adult status required demonstrable violence which had the effect of institutionalizing killing as a means of social obligation rather than as deviant behavior. Thus Oromo warriors maintained manhood status through lethal military prowess, or killing for as long as they were physically able to do so. Killing in war—or through hunting and other sanctioned forms of violence—functioned as a rite of passage, a visible marker of maturity. Huntingford notes that “a man was

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<sup>42</sup> Hassen, *Oromo of Ethiopia*, 10.

<sup>43</sup> Bahrey, “History of the Galla,” 115.

<sup>44</sup> Legesse, *Oromo Democracy*, 116.

<sup>45</sup> Hassen, *Oromo of Ethiopia*, 12.

<sup>46</sup> Hassen, *Oromo of Ethiopia*, 12.

not considered a full man until he had killed a human being—every Galla claimed ‘the right to kill.’<sup>47</sup> And Bahrey observes, “If they have killed men or large animals, they shave the whole head, leaving a little hair in the middle of the skull. Those who have not killed men or large animals do not shave themselves, and in consequence they are tormented with lice. That is why they are so eager to kill us.”<sup>48</sup> The Oromo warrior hairstyle was not merely symbolic; it signified courage, adulthood and readiness to lead—in other words, a visible marker of recognized masculine accomplishment.

One of the most striking and grisly practices in Oromo warfare was the ritual mutilation of deceased enemies’ bodies. When an Oromo warrior returned home victorious, he would bring the severed genitalia (and breasts, in some cases) of slain enemies to prove their deaths. George Lipsky reports that “[t]raditionally, and still among the more isolated and warlike Galla groups, the bridegroom was required to present the sexual organs of someone he had slain to his bride before the marriage could be carried out.”<sup>49</sup> Genital trophies were a ritual symbol that mediated between war, manhood, and societal recognition. By acquiring this marker of manhood, the victorious Oromo warrior symbolically and literally eliminated an enemy’s reproductive power.

Conversely, a warrior’s reputation, honor and sense of manhood could collapse with failure to kill, whether in formal combat or in culturally recognized acts of violence. He would lose the right to shave his head in the style reserved for victors. Men who lacked recognition for killing were also excluded from desirable marriage partners, were subjected to public humiliation, were forehead-stamped, and even required to churn a small jar of milk (women’s work) to signify the failure of their manhood. Nor could they hold a position of *gäda* authority.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Huntingford, *The Galla of Ethiopia*, 64.

<sup>48</sup> Bahrey, “History of the Galla,” 122.

<sup>49</sup> Lipsky, *Ethiopia*, 84.

<sup>50</sup> Huntingford, *The Galla of Ethiopia*, 64.

A man’s paternal rights were also tied to successful performance as a warrior. In a society that denigrated cowards, young Oromo males were constantly pressured to prove their bravery and be seen as masculine enough to attract a suitable mate. As Baxter notes, “To kill an enemy, lion, or elephant is the aim of every young man and was formerly an essential, and still is a frequent preliminary to a respectable marriage, which is the first step toward formal recognition as a social adult.”<sup>51</sup> Masculinity was not an abstraction; it was a status to be earned.

Together, the male-centered *gäda* system and the violence built into *butta* wars ignited and motivated Oromo genocidal tendencies. Huntingford observes that the Oromo pattern of killing as a socially required proof of masculinity “horrified even the Abyssinians,” describing such murders as “cowardly” because they often involved ambushing “unsuspecting wayfarers.”<sup>52</sup> Killing men of other cultures was not simply the collateral damage of warfare—it was the exclusive goal. In this way *gäda* perpetuated a culture of death and violence.

### **Conquest, Settlement, Migration and Refugees**

Bahrey recounts several stages, beginning with the first Oromo incursion, which he dates to the reign of King Lebnä Dengel (d. 1540). The Oromo repeatedly attacked and soon controlled multiple Ethiopian provinces, forcing the displacement of most indigenous people. With the country still reeling from the trauma of Ahmäd Ibrahim’s jihadist war of 1529 – 1543, the Oromo met only feeble resistance in Bali and Däwaro provinces, which succumbed by the late 1550s. Däwaro suffered the mass displacement of indigenous Christians to neighboring provinces, as witnessed by Portuguese traveler and Ethiopian resident João Bermudez (c.1495 – 1570) who reported: “We also cleared the country of women, boys, and everyone who could not

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<sup>51</sup> Baxter, “Repetition in Certain Boran Ceremonies,” 62.

<sup>52</sup> Huntingford, *The Galla of Ethiopia*, 64.

fight; with these went nearly all the inhabitants, great and small, from fear of the cruelty of the Gallas [Oromo]. A country like that is quickly depopulated, for the inhabited places have no buildings that are defensible, nor which cost much to rebuild, as they are all of wattle and straw.”<sup>53</sup>

From the 1560s, Oromo forces continued toward the provinces of Damot, Šäwa, Fätägar and Wäj which came under attack during the 1570s and 1580s. As they moved further west, they encountered the indigenous Gafat. In 1588, when Oromo warriors reached Damot through Wäj and Šäwa, the forces of Damot governor *Däjjazmač* Asbo successfully repulsed them. Asbo’s soldiers killed many Oromo warriors, then freed hostages and retrieved stolen livestock captured in earlier raids. Among the freed captives was the future king Susenyos, who had been held for a year-and-a-half.<sup>54</sup> During the 1590s, Oromo Borän tribesmen under their new leader Mulata, launched another raid against Damot. This time, Asbo retreated to Gojjam province, leaving Damot’s Gafat inhabitants defenseless. Bahrey’s report on the aftermath makes for grim reading: “Mulata of the Borän afflicted the Christians of Damot, scattered them, and devastated their country; from this time, Šäwa and Damot were deserts . . . none remains without submission to [Mulata].”<sup>55</sup>

The loss of significant Christian populations from Damot and other southeastern Ethiopian provinces left Bizamo and Šäwa without protection from ongoing Oromo incursions. During the late 1580s, indigenous people continued their exodus into Gojjam. The general upheaval caused by Oromo incursions was exacerbated by factionalism within Ethiopian ruling classes. Internal conflicts arose over royal succession following the death of King Säršä Dengel

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<sup>53</sup> Whiteway, *Portuguese Expedition to Abyssinia*, 229

<sup>54</sup> Hassen, *Oromo of Ethiopia*, 25-27; Hassen, *Oromo and the Christian Kingdom*, 214.

<sup>55</sup> Bahrey, “History of the Galla,” 124.

in 1597; he left behind a weak and vulnerable administration that could not slow the Oromo incursions. The once-captive Susenyos, a rebel prince and cousin of the late Säršä Dengel, was an active contender for Ethiopia's throne and supported Oromo settlement in the former Gafat and Amhara homelands. Although not Oromo by birth, he had been adopted as an Oromo "son" when captured at age 16.<sup>56</sup> From 1597 through 1607, Susenyos lived as "a condottiere with a large following, who proved useful to the various Galla [Oromo] tribes whom he served."<sup>57</sup>

The Oromo seizure of Gafat territory forced many to reconsider their options and loyalties, which caused clan and native identities to change. Rarely acting as a unified body, the Gafat tried diverse strategies to defend their homelands and way of life. They were faced with three choices, none of them ideal: exodus, resistance, or coerced accommodation. Many actively opposed the Oromo; others lamented their presence but acquiesced to it. Those most opposed fled their homelands. Those Gafat who stayed and militarily resisted assimilation included the Härbawaš, Härbakäl, Wängé, and Ašmān groups. The Abdäray clan originally supported Susenyos and his Oromo following, but would eventually turn against him.<sup>58</sup> The resisting Gafat built strongholds on mountaintops and high plateaus within Šäwa and Wäläqa provinces, from where they mounted a resolute armed defense of their homeland. But they could not hold out for long. In quick succession, Susenyos and his forces stormed and pillaged all their fortresses:

[He] broke into a stronghold called Yazambal that belonged to the Gafat and where a great store of wealth was found. Then he camped at Mugar and fought the Gafat called Ashman [four Gafat tribes that joined forces] . . . and showered poisonous arrows on [them] like hail. After bitter fighting he crossed over and camped in Walaqa. He attacked the Abdaray and the Gambo, and plundered them and seized all they possessed.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Hassen, *Oromo and the Christian Kingdom*, 260–61, Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 207–9.

<sup>57</sup> Merid, "Southern Ethiopia," 439.

<sup>58</sup> Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 23–31.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Hassen, *Oromo and the Christian Kingdom*, 265.

The Gafat in western Šäwa and Wäläqa provinces bore the brunt of Susenyos’ campaign. Hassen writes that “Whenever and wherever the Christian peasants revolted against him, he [Susenyos] attacked them with his Oromo fighters and settled those fighters in the territory of the peasants.”<sup>60</sup> At the same time, some Gafat worked through other channels to negotiate favorable positions within the emerging Oromo-dominated political order. A growing number of Gafat recognized that sustained opposition to the colonizers was politically untenable and armed resistance was futile “after they had seen the massacre of their children, the death of their friends, the enslavement of their women, destruction of their property and rustling of their animals.”<sup>61</sup> Gafat peasants had little recourse but to submit to forced accommodation.

In 1600 Susenyos’ royal chroniclers reported that many terrified Gafat had fled *en masse* from Šäwa province into Gojjam: “[Susenyos] destroyed the Den (clan) and all the Gafat who lived on the crossings of the Abay [River] until they left their country and entered the land of Gojjam. And this (their country) has become a wilderness and a waste until today.”<sup>62</sup> The remaining Gafat in Wäläqa and western Šäwa were scattered, subjugated, or marginalized. Oromo conflict had destroyed their farms, homes and churches, indeed their entire social fabric. Thus “Susenyos forced the various Gafat groups to abandon their land and flee across the Abay into Gojjam, clearing the land in western Šäwa and Wäläqa for the Oromo.”<sup>63</sup> Economically, the Gafat were suddenly impoverished through massive displacement and exclusion from land ownership.

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<sup>60</sup> Hassen, *Oromo and the Christian Kingdom*, 270.

<sup>61</sup> Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 60; Hassen, *Oromo of Ethiopia*, 270. The translation from Ge’ez is Hassen’s.

<sup>62</sup> Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 30–1; Tadesse, “Ethnic Interaction,” 140. The translation from Ge’ez is Tadesse’s.

<sup>63</sup> Hassen, *Oromo and the Christian Kingdom*, 265.

From 1600 onward, most Gafat refugees from south of the Abay River were living in Gojjam, while others moved further north or south. They renamed their new home in Gojjam Damot, after their now-occupied old homeland.<sup>64</sup> Manoel de Almeida (c.1580-1646), a Jesuit missionary who visited Gojjam during the 1620s, offers this description of the scale of Gafat dislocation and the linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity of those impacted. For consistency and readability, the names of the provinces have been anglicized, following conventional English usage:

The other heathens and Christians have as many different languages as there are kingdoms which we have enumerated in this empire. There are many where there are very different languages even in the same kingdom, especially since the Gallas conquered many kingdoms of the empire, lying to the south-east and south, such as Wäj, Fätägar, Damot, Bizamo and others. Their inhabitants have withdrawn to those that the Emperor holds. In some of these are many races and different languages, as in Gojjam where, within a short distance, are found one village of Damotes, another of Gafates, another of Šäwas, another of Zeites, another of Šäts, apart from the Akaus, Gongas and others who are more native to the country and were its first inhabitants.<sup>65</sup>

Areas around Gojjam were most densely settled by the Gafat, as well as by other refugees fleeing the Oromo. The mass exodus left the original Gafat homelands virtually empty, easily available to Oromo settlers.

Although Susenyos was largely responsible for allowing the loss of Gafat homelands and forcing their mass exodus to places like Gojjam, his policies changed when he finally became king in 1607. He then began defending what was left of Ethiopia from further Oromo attacks and territorial losses. Ironically, he also became a self-proclaimed (but very ineffectual) “protector” of refugees and their cattle in Bizamo, Damot and Šäwa. But the Gafat-Amhara people in

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<sup>64</sup> Bouanga, “Le Damot,” 352–62.

<sup>65</sup> Beckingham and Huntingford, trans. and eds., *Some Records*, 56.

Gojjam became Oromo targets for plunder and killing in an intensifying spiral of violence. The total number of raids carried out by the Oromo raiders against both refugees and natives in Gojjam during Susenyos' reign—and those of his successors—is too numerous to list here. Between 1608 and 1620 alone, the Oromo carried out multiple attacks in Gojjam, one of which took “countless cattle from the Gafates, [Agäws] and Damotes, and captured many women and children.”<sup>66</sup> Oromo raids from Bizamo into Gojjam continued until the end of Susenyos' reign, resulting in the death of thousands. A royal secretary and historiographer of the time reported one such raid in 1621 against Gafat refugees in Gojjam:

They also destroyed and devastated the country of Nagashat and Manqorqorya, Enqora, Enshet, Yashur, Zangema and Yakubbat. They devastated all the countries inhabited by Shime, Chome, Gafat and Dabana Ansa and took captives of all the people and cattle. They massacred countless people of these countries leaving no survivor. Since the Galla (Oromo) first raided Gojjam, they had never massacred so many and captured so many [people] and cattle as the present time. There were people from Gojjam who knew of the coming of the Galla [in advance], but they hid it from the emperor, since they feared his plunder.<sup>67</sup>

Unknown thousands of Gafat and non-Gafat Ethiopians were killed during an unrelenting succession of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Oromo raids; for the most part their eyewitnesses and chroniclers have disappeared from history.

The limited evidence we do possess is found mainly in royal chronicles and in the noteworthy recollections of some Jesuit missionaries. One such account, from the *History of Ethiopia* by Jesuit Pedro Páez (1564 – 1622) raises the question of deliberate mass murder, if not

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<sup>66</sup> Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 227. See also Pereria, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 104–7 and 217–224.

<sup>67</sup> Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 223-224; Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia*, 302. The translation from Ge'ez is Hassen's.

genocide. He describes a grotesque 1621 Oromo massacre of the Agäw, a people who lived among the Gafat and Amhara refugees:

Many heathen Gallas [Oromo] came from a province called Bizamo . . . and, after crossing the Abay River, entered the kingdom of Gojjam and fell on some lands of heathen Agäw bordering the land where the father was with those that had just become Christians. They slaughtered many people and carried out extraordinary cruelties . . . they cut to pieces the men and many of the boys and girls that they seized, and they opened up pregnant women with their spearheads and pulled the babies out of their wombs. The people of that land therefore came to fear them so much that nobody dared resist them. They all fled in whichever direction they could, trying only to save their own lives by climbing . . . into mountains and hiding in the bush, which is very thick. But not even this was to any avail, because they pulled them out of there and exercised their accustomed cruelty on some and captured others, principally women and children. They took plenty of cattle, mares and stallions as booty, and they remained there for almost a month as lords of the land. When the father, who was nearby, heard of the destruction they had caused and that they were coming closer, he wrote to [*Ras Se'ela Christos*], who was in another province, about what was happening and the danger he was facing. [...] When these men saw the dust raised by [*Ras Se'ela Christos's*] horses in the distance, they thought there were many men coming and that they would not be able to withstand them, so in a great fury they slew many women, boys and girls. Afterwards the father, who saw them, said that it is a pitiful sight to see some with their throats cut, others with their entrails showing, and many of the women badly slashed and breathing their last, with their suckling children in their arms.<sup>68</sup>

The horrific Oromo violence of 1621 likely inflicted deep trauma on the population of Gojjam. It is not difficult to find intention in Oromo mass killings in reading Páez's account. As noted previously, Oromo raids into Gojjam would continue unabated until the end of Susenyos' reign and beyond. In 1626, the Oromo raided the Gafat refugee enclave of Damot in Gojjam, killing *Däjjazmač* Buko, its converted Christian Oromo governor and confidant of King Susenyos, along with 1200 of his soldiers. This was followed in 1629 by another raid which took the life of

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<sup>68</sup> Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 353-354.

the new Damot governor Fequrä Egzi, among others.<sup>69</sup> By the 19<sup>th</sup> century Gafat culture, undermined by nearly two centuries of relentless Oromo attacks, finally ceased to exist.<sup>70</sup>

Ethiopia's weak monarchy, combined with rebellion among the nobles, had so deeply undermined government control south of the Abay River that the region was abandoned until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This absence of royal governance enabled Oromo settlers to quickly transform it into a largely homogenous homeland governed by local clan leaders and chiefs. Map 1, showing the original and later locations of the Gafat, dramatically illustrates the scale of this transformation. It also shows land loss and indigenous population decline resulting from Oromo colonization. For indigenous peoples, including those Gafat who remained under Oromo subjugation, it was extremely difficult to maintain their distinct cultures and communities.

### **Cultural Genocide by Assimilation**

Lemkin's crucial contribution lies in his emphasis on cultural destruction and genocide being co-constitutive. He demonstrated that genocide is enacted through everyday administrative, legal, economic, and social mechanisms, not solely through overt violence. Thus he describes genocide as a process comprising two mutually reinforcing phases: "the destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group" and "the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor."<sup>71</sup> Oppressors realize their goal either by altering the identity and structure of the remaining population, or by expelling the target group altogether and settling the territory with their own people. Genocide seeks not only to destroy, but also to replace.

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<sup>69</sup> Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 289-290; Hassen, *The Oromo*, 313-315.

<sup>70</sup> Tadesse, "Ethnic Interaction," 142-3.

<sup>71</sup> Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, 79.

Lemkin’s concept is especially germane to Ethiopia as it reveals how Oromo assimilation policies and the absorption of the Gafat people were carried deliberately and with genocidal intent. The Oromo moved so aggressively in eradicating all non-Oromo ethnicity and autonomy, that cultural genocide became a defining feature of their colonial strategy. Drawing on Bahrey’s account, Hassen shows that Oromo expansion unfolded as a three-part process: scouting, surprise attack, and settlement. Moreover, their advance intelligence-gathering minimized risk and identified weak targets, followed by repeated nocturnal raids that extracted booty, terrorized communities, and broke resistance. Indigenous populations could only flee or submit. Conquest culminated in settlement, as Oromo institutions and culture were imposed on abandoned lands and surviving indigenes were assimilated into Oromo society through the process of *mogasa*, the collective “adoption” of non-Oromo peoples, as well as *guddificha*, the adoption of individual captured children by Oromo foster parents.<sup>72</sup> Contrary to modern benign associations of adoption, *guddificha* was coercive, and far from being a fraternal or familial experience.

Similarly, *mogasa* was designed not only to subdue indigenous populations but to restructure social order by permanently crippling or eliminating their cultural identity; its core purpose was the eradication of all non-Oromo cultures and identities. While many details of *mogasa* remain unknown, there are two salient characteristics. First, non-Oromo people were absorbed into specific Oromo clans; Hassen notes that clan leaders officiated in this process. Second, collective adoptions were enacted as public rituals, unfolding in a series of symbolic acts which included spoken declarations, ritualized gestures, and communal participation. Hassen and Triulzi, respectively, summarize the performative process of this element of genocide as follows:

[B]efore adoption animal(s) were slaughtered and a knife was dipped in the blood . . . and planted before the assembly of the *gosa* elders and representatives of other *gosas*. Then

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<sup>72</sup> Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia*, 21-24; Wordoffa, “The Role of Guddifachaa and Moggaasaa in the Social Construction of the Oromo Society,” 43-47.

the leader of the *chaffee* assembly said a prayer, blessing the new members, and the adopted individual or group touched the knife planted (in the place of assembly) repeating in chorus the following words . . . “I hate what you hate, I like what you like, I fight whom you fight, I go where you go, I chase whom you chase” . . . This oath, we are told, was binding and ‘unbreakable’ on both sides. The adopted groups now became collectively the ‘sons’ of the clan or confederacy that adopted them. (Hassen)<sup>73</sup>

Through collective adoption, the affiliated groups were given new genealogies and started counting their putative ancestors in the same way as their adoptive kinsmen. A special blood-mixing ceremony, symbolized by tying strips of hide (*meedhicca*) taken from the sacrificial bull around the wrists of the adopted individuals, made them part of the adoptive clans, thus transforming the assimilated groups into *ilma gossa*, ‘sons of the clan.’ *Meedhicca* and Oromization went hand in hand . . . the new birth was symbolized by the term *dhalata*, ‘he who is born.’ Clan adoption thus cancelled all previous ties the new adoptees had with their own original groups; these included genealogical memory and even that of defeat. (Triulzi)<sup>74</sup>

Through *mogasa*, assimilated people supposedly received new social status, obligations and protection. The adoptees were also given fabricated names that incorporated them into Oromo ancestral lineages. By replacing Gafat names, ancestries and language with Oromo ones, the new *ilma gossa* (“sons of the clan”) were permanently severed from their cultural roots and memories, especially the young. Although some occupied territories retained ancient names on contemporary maps, the Oromo renamed most of their conquered territory after their own clans and tribal founders. The suppression of language, renaming of indigenous territories, dispossession of land, and imposition of fictitious paternal figures all constitute cultural genocide; such acts destroyed the Gafat people’s ability survive as a distinct ethnic community.

My study thus calls into question the very notion that Oromo assimilation methods could be justified through any element of peaceful intention. The example of their erasure of the Gafat and others like them clearly meets all the criteria for genocide. Yet Oromo assimilation has been

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<sup>73</sup> Hassen, *Oromo and the Christian Kingdom*, 156–57.

<sup>74</sup> Triulzi, “United and Divided,” 253.

absurdly cast as well-intentioned and familial, with much historiography portraying *mogasa* as the foundation of a peaceful relationship between the Oromo and conquered natives.<sup>75</sup> Other popular Ethiopian narratives sidestep the cultural and genocidal consequences of the Oromo conquest by labelling it as simply a next chapter in Ahmäd Ibrahim’s jihad.<sup>76</sup> In reality, nothing about Oromo conquest and assimilation tactics were peaceful or benign. Rather than being a continuation of Ahmäd Ibrahim’s disruption, the Oromo incursion was a wholly distinct process of transformation. Historical evidence clearly reveals *mogasa* as an instrument of cultural genocide, responsible for erasing the ethnicity of both willing and unwilling victims.

Studies demonstrate how the system dismantled indigenous identities and paved the way for their inevitable extinction. Oromo scholar Asafa Jalata claims that “the *gäda* system [was implemented] to successfully integrate conquered minorities through adoption, marriage, and cultural assimilation.”<sup>77</sup> Hassen, also an Oromo scholar, emphasizes that “adoption was accompanied by Oromization. The widespread dispersal of the pastoral Oromo from the southern regions was mainly responsible for the Oromization that embraced many non-Oromo groups. Oromo pastoralists absorbed both Cushitic and Semitic speaking groups as clients or serfs (*gäbbäro*) into their clan structure.”<sup>78</sup> Hassen adds that under Oromo rule the *gäbbäro* were often discriminated against and marginalized. Bahrey also notes that the Oromo reduced the people they conquered *en masse* to virtual slavery and called them *gäbbäro*.<sup>79</sup>

Although scholars have documented the cultural dissolution and discrimination resulting from *mogasa*, very little has been done to probe the power dynamics and deeper motives driving

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<sup>75</sup> Wordoffa, “The Role of Guddifachaa and Moggaasaa,” 33-36 and 45-46.

<sup>76</sup> Guidi, “*Leggende Storiche did Abissinia*,” 19-21 and 25-29.

<sup>77</sup> Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia*, 22.

<sup>78</sup> Hassen, *Oromo and the Christian Kingdom*, 157

<sup>79</sup> Bahrey, “History of the Galla,” 116.

the process. *Mogasa*'s actual role in cultural dismemberment raises critical questions about its underlying motive. What was the *real* intent of adopting and assimilating entire cultures? Was its purpose truly social integration, or did it serve deeper objectives? The word *mogasa* has a deceptively gentle and familial tone. But as previously mentioned, such adoptions actually occurred coercively amid profound political and social crises. I contend, therefore, that recognizing the genocidal intentions of *mogasa* is essential to understanding how it impacted language and culture extinction. For the Gafat, this was not simply social integration; it was the obliteration of their collective identity, heritage and ancestry within a hostile intruding culture. The Oromo further devalued the Gafat by holding them in bondage, which enforced their subservient dependence and deepened their marginalization. Thus the massive population turnover resulting from Oromo expansion created an equally massive displacement of language and culture. The cumulative result was nothing less than cultural genocide.

If the Oromo used adoption to intentionally absorb and weaken the distinct cultures of the peoples they conquered, why did many indigenous groups *choose* to be adopted into Oromo society in the first place? As Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan have noted, defining genocide “depends on whether genocide victims are targeted in groups of the kind that allow individual members to escape persecution and death by concealing or abandoning one group identity, and taking up another as a member of a non-targeted group.”<sup>80</sup> Similarly, for some Gafat, accepting new identities seemed to offer one of the few pragmatic survival strategies available. So the Gafat abandoned markers of their identity and declared themselves members of Oromo groups through adoption in order to reduce discrimination and the risk of death. Yet even when identity change offered limited protection, many remained fully exposed to subjugation and

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<sup>80</sup> Gellately and Kiernan, “The Study of Mass Murder and Genocide,” 17.

marginalization. Assimilation failed to erase the divide between settlers and indigenous peoples or protect indigenous communities from enduring colonial oppression.<sup>81</sup>

Although assimilation in principle ensured physical survival, adoptees under *mogasa* were considered as lower-class *gäbbäro*. Allesandro Triulzi note that Oromo assimilation failed to dissolve “internal conflicts between the new settlers and the local inhabitants, or the tensions which derived from the new struggle for power and wealth which marked the post-settlement society.”<sup>82</sup> Indigenous peoples were permanently regarded by the Oromo as outsiders and inferiors on lands which had originally been their own. And being “gradually deprived of their land and ‘primacy of occupation’,”<sup>83</sup> the new dominant settlers did not anticipate a peaceful coexistence with their dispossessed indigenous subjects. Consequently, groups such as the Gafat struggled to position themselves securely within the Oromo-dominated political order. Amharic lexicographer Dästa Täklä Wäld portrays the *gäbbäro* as an anomalous group between the Oromo and Amhara,<sup>84</sup> condemned to a perpetual struggle to maintain remnants of their freedom and identity.

Politically, genocide involves the imposition of the occupier’s administrative system which in the Oromo context is known as *gäda*. The Oromo treated the *gäbbäro* as slaves at worst, and as children at best, denying them adult political rights and social status. They were “placed in the category of ‘eternal youth,’ the sons of boys.”<sup>85</sup> By example, the Oromo had exclusive rights to slaughter a bull and perform rituals, whereas the native *gäbbäro* were not permitted to perform any public religious ceremonies; these and other distinctions reinforced the

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<sup>81</sup> Triulzi, “United and Divided,” 253-258.

<sup>82</sup> Triulzi, “United and Divided,” 253.

<sup>83</sup> Triulzi, “United and Divided,” 254.

<sup>84</sup> Dästa, *YäAmareñña Mäzgäbä Qalat*, 224.

<sup>85</sup> Triulzi, “United and Divided,” 255.

Oromo belief that they were closer to God.<sup>86</sup> The hierarchical marginalization of the Gafat and other groups within Oromo society continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, resulting in continual tension between them.

As I have argued, historical evidence demonstrates that Gafat acceptance of Oromo identity often did not translate into a complete or automatic embrace of Oromo culture. Along with other conquered groups, they saw Oromo acculturation as being temporary, superficial, or even illegitimate. When opportunities arose, they fought back and reverted to their original identities. In 1618, some of the more determined Gafat, along with other groups in Bizamo, Damot and Šäwa provinces, staged the first of several revolts because their rights had been “trampled upon [and] their women and children sold into slavery by their Oromo masters.”<sup>87</sup>

Indigenous uprisings against the Oromo caught the attention of Ethiopian central and regional authorities when the rebels began appealing for support. Documentary evidence shows that they dispatched delegations seeking military aid and requesting to negotiate broader political relationships, with the ultimate goal of restoring full Ethiopian rule over the provinces of Bizamo and Damot. They appealed to Gojjam governor *Ras* Se’elä Christos, who responded by sending soldiers. A royal chronicler reported: “Behold we have quarreled with our masters the Galla [Oromo]. We have fought with them until we have both shed blood. Come quickly and receive us.”<sup>88</sup> With the military support of Se’elä Christos, the Oromo were driven out of Bizamo, but efforts to completely throw off their domination ultimately failed. The chronicler cited above also reports that some Christian refugees from Oromo-held regions were re-baptized upon their

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<sup>86</sup> Triulzi, “United and Divided,” 261-263.

<sup>87</sup> Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia*, 64.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Wolde Aregay’s, “Southern Ethiopia,” 420. See also Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 190–197.

resettlement in Gojjam.<sup>89</sup> Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century the *gäbbäro* lived as marginalized people and the pattern of refugee resettlement continued in subsequent periods.

The rebellion of 1618 reveals a burgeoning Gafat awareness of their place in the new Oromo-dominated Ethiopian social order. This was not simply a battle between settlers and indigenous peoples over land rights and power, but a critical struggle between preserving ethnic identity and resisting the imposition of artificial Oromo ancestry on those whom they conquered. For the Gafat, it meant rejecting *mogasa* and renewing their pride in pre-Oromo Ethiopian civilization, which included the primary role of Christianity, the church, and the restoration of kinship ties to their ancestral highland population. “For from old our origin and descent is from [the Christian Amhara and Gafat],” they affirmed, “and *not* from the Galla” (emphasis added).<sup>90</sup> For the Gafat, their attachment to Ethiopian kinship networks and cultural traditions held greater significance than any supposed advantages of living under alien domination. Ethiopian rule represented shared lineage and heritage; Oromo domination represented alien estrangement.

Resistance to Oromo occupation persisted throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The court chronicler of King Iyasu I (r.1682 – 1706) described indigenous resistance to Oromo rule as both a defense of ethnic identity and an issue that entangled central and regional authorities in Gondär and Gojjam in protracted indigenous rights disputes that had persisted since the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. In 1702 for example, King Iyasu I launched a military campaign into Bizamo from his capital at Gondär. Once in Bizamo, the king sent an urgent message to the Gafat: “We have come at your request; now you too must come swiftly to us.”<sup>91</sup> Two years later in 1704, the Oromo faced their greatest challenge from the Gafat and their allies in Bizamo and Damot, as

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<sup>89</sup> Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 190-197; Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 255-256.

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Wolde Aregay’s, “Southern Ethiopia,” 420. See also Pereira, *Chronica de Susenyos*, 190–7.

<sup>91</sup> Guidi, *Annales Iohannes I, Iyyasu I, et Bakaffa*, text 201.

Iyasu I launched his final attempt to dislodge them from the region. Despite the coordinated efforts of the king and rebels, they ultimately failed to repel the Oromo. Iyasu I and his forces did not stay long enough to consolidate their brief victory or bolster indigenous communities; and by granting their urgent requests for resettlement, he further undermined their culture through population dispersal and the loss of their local autonomy.<sup>92</sup>

But the indigenous resistance movement also illustrates the fragility of *mogasa*, which did not create immediate deep-rooted loyalty or lasting identification. While the Gafat had to live under the Oromo, they continued to believe that their true ancestry and allegiance originated from Ethiopia's indigenous peoples and traditional rulers. Unfortunately, the rulers of that period were ineffective in responding to changing conditions in lands overrun by the Oromo. From the late 1580s to the early 1700s, indigenous populations tried again and again but failed to expel the Oromo. The decline of royal authority and corresponding increase in Oromo power made the sociopolitical environment of the Gafat and their allies increasingly untenable. For the Gafat in particular, geography was also against them. The natural barrier of the Abay River separating Gojjam from Bizamo, Damot and Šäwa provinces made communication difficult. Eventually, Gafat living south of the Abay grudgingly adopted Oromo culture, distancing them even further from the mainstream Ethiopian church and state.

The Gafat rebellions offer a telling glimpse, not only of relations between indigenous cultures and the Oromo, but also of their assimilation rationale. To the Gafat and other indigenous peoples, the Oromo “were not mere intruders but aliens and enemies, who had caused much damage and upset their sedentary way of life.”<sup>93</sup> From the Oromo perspective, allowing groups such as the Gafat to maintain their ethnicity posed a threat to their power. The last thing

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<sup>92</sup> Guidi, *Annales Iohannes I*, text 166, 180-182, and 220-250.

<sup>93</sup> Wolde Aregay, “Southern Ethiopia,” 417.

Oromo invaders wanted to deal with were hostile native populations in their midst with distinct cultural and ethnic identities. “To have resentful subjects was unnecessary and potentially dangerous” particularly “with raids and incursions to be made and new territories to be invaded” (Wolde Aregay 1971: 418).<sup>94</sup> Accommodating them was therefore considered unnecessary and risky. The Oromo motive for fully assimilating the Gafat was to neutralize them by enforcing compliance and subordination. The Oromo process of *mogasa* was therefore aimed at supplanting all vestiges of preexisting culture to prevent the potential resurgence of native identity and resistance.

Other factors contributing to the cultural destruction of the Gafat included miscegenation, enslavement and the trading of new Oromo subjects. Almeida observed that the Oromo people

“have good features and well-made bodies, and today there are many of them who are copper colored rather than black, particularly those who inhabit the kingdoms of Bizamo and Damut (sic). They say that the reason [for their light skin] is that they have intermarried with the Gafates (sic) who inhabited a large part of those territories.”<sup>95</sup>

Although no reliable population estimates exist for the period, indigenous communities of Bizamo, Damot, and Šäwa—likely numbering in the tens of thousands—were reduced to a tiny fraction of that; over time, all identifiable aspects of Gafat presence vanished. Those few who remained amidst the Oromo were trapped in an inherently marginalized existence that only hastened the inexorable dissipation of their culture. Conquest, colonial settlement, dispossession and assimilation were inextricably linked genocidal factors.

In summary, *mogasa* cannot be credibly interpreted as a form of peaceful adoption or fraternal incorporation. Rather than being either a voluntary or reciprocal process, *mogasa* was in essence an instrument of conquest and cultural erasure forcibly imposed upon subjugated non-

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<sup>94</sup> Wolde Aregay, “Southern Ethiopia,” 418.

<sup>95</sup> Huntingford and Beckingham, *Some Records*, 136.

Oromo populations. Despite its invocation of kinship and brotherhood, *mogasa* was fundamentally bereft of any genuine benign intent and functioned through hierarchy, exclusion, and coercion. Like many imperial and colonial genocidal practices, it demanded that the conquered abandon their languages, relinquish their lands, erase their cultural practices, and sever their historical memories and ancestral ties, all in the name of nominal acceptance. The Oromo incurred no reciprocal loss and bore no obligation to establish equality. The idiom of imposed kinship thus operated not as a moral principle, but as an ideological façade for dispossession and cultural erasure; in a word, genocide.

### **Ethiopian and European Perceptions of the Oromo**

In this final section, I outline contemporary portrayals of the Oromo from both Ethiopian and European standpoints. Ethiopian and Jesuit writings from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries have been viewed by many scholars as works of “othering,” biased against the Oromo.<sup>96</sup> While there may be truth to tropes of “savagery” and “barbarity” that figure in much writing of the period, neither Ethiopian nor European accounts should be taken as representative of all contemporary views. They are valuable nonetheless as a means of appreciating the perception of both cultures toward the Oromo. Although negative judgments are expressed about some Oromo customs and their aggressive forms of warfare, nowhere do Jesuits or Ethiopians use language that can be read as generalizing for all of Oromo culture.

Both Jesuit commentators and the Ethiopian monk Bahrey found they had little or nothing in common with the Oromo. In reality, Oromo society was a complete structural inversion of Ethiopian society, including social and political systems, marriage customs, gender

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<sup>96</sup> Hassen, *The Oromo of Ethiopia*, 2-3.

roles, religion, ways of life, and the importance and techniques of war. Thus the Oromo were seen to be “bad,” while native Ethiopians were regarded as “good.” As Bahrey notes, “I started writing the story of the Galla [Oromo] to make known the number of their tribes, their eagerness to kill men and the brutality of their manners.”<sup>97</sup> In so doing, he depicted the struggle between the Oromo and native Ethiopians as a struggle between the forces of good and evil.

Writing about Oromo society and their way of life, both Bahrey and especially the Jesuits, applied a ready vocabulary of savagery. Thus in describing the Oromo practice of infanticide, the missionary Almeida portrayed it in terms of savagery:

Among others, the Gallas [Oromo] have one custom which is among the most savage in the most savage part of the world. For the first six or seven years after they marry they cast away in the open country all the sons and daughters born to them and leave them to die of sheer neglect. It happens that out of pity someone wants to take care of one of these outcasts and save its life, they consider him not merely as an enemy but as an accursed and devilish person. In this respect they are more ferocious than the tigers and lions of the Africa where they live.<sup>98</sup>

Almeida focuses solely on the brutality of infanticide, with no contextual references. Brutal as it may be, he does not consider that the practice may have originated in response to periodic population explosions and the resulting threat of famine.

On the subject of warfare, Ethiopian and Jesuit missionaries both saw Oromo warfare as dishonorable. Jesuits and other Europeans repeatedly describe the Oromo as barbarous foes who killed indiscriminately. Pedro Páez noted that they kill “everyone they find with extraordinary cruelty.”<sup>99</sup> Elsewhere he writes:

Every eight years, the Oromo by custom appoint their war leaders, and their young men have their hair cut and undergo circumcision. Before they do these things, however, they demonstrate their courage by making an attack upon their enemies, so that they can

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<sup>97</sup> Bahrey, “History of the Galla,” 111.

<sup>98</sup> Beckingham and Huntingford, *Some Records*, 136–7.

<sup>99</sup> Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 69 and 87.

anoint their bodies with the spilled blood of their enemies; they also cut off their captives' foreskins just as David did to the one hundred Philistines. When they do not obtain an opportunity for this vengeance, they cut out their enemies' gallbladders with a sword and strengthen their bodies through anointment with blood. For they are convinced that when they have thus anointed themselves with blood, they cannot be seen by anybody at night, while they themselves observe all others with clear vision.<sup>100</sup>

The Portuguese João Bermudez, cited previously, writes that the Oromo “are a fierce and cruel people, who make war on their neighbors and on all, only to destroy and depopulate their countries. In the places they conquer they slay all the men, cut off the privy parts of the boys, kill the old women, and keep the young for their own use and service.”<sup>101</sup>

The early Oromo incursions were particularly violent and spared no one, irrespective of rank, sex, or age. As Bahrey recorded, they “killed people—men and women, horses and mules, leaving alive only the sheep, goats, and cattle.”<sup>102</sup> The fear of Oromo savagery made peaceful coexistence impossible, often causing mass flights of refugees at the news of imminent Oromo incursions. The fall of Wäj in 1577, for example, sent shock waves across Šäwa and Damot provinces. Fearing an impending Oromo blow, King Säršä Dengel's mother, Queen Selus Hayla, who was residing amidst the Gafat in Endägäbṭan and Gendä Bärät convinced her son to postpone his planned campaign to northern Ethiopia. In fear and distress, she asked him; “My son, why have you decided to do this thing against me and your brothers? Do you wish to deliver us to the Galla? Does not our possible doom distress you?”<sup>103</sup> Säršä Dengel heeded his mother's advice and stayed home to protect his people.

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<sup>100</sup> *The Jesuits in Ethiopia (1609-1641)*, 71.

<sup>101</sup> Whiteway, *The Portuguese*, 228-229

<sup>102</sup> Bahrey, “History of the Galla,” 116.

<sup>103</sup> Quoted in Hassen, *The Oromo*, 206.

Paralleling the contemporary narrative of Oromo savagery is the Christian concept of original sin. Jesuit missionaries believed that the constant Oromo raids were a punishment sent by God for the collective sinfulness of Ethiopians. Missionary Pedro Páez summarized this prevalent perception:

For the last seven years [1615-1622], nothing else has happened in this kingdom but harsh and continual punishments that Our Lord God has meted out on [Ethiopians], as on the impenitent, and they feel it so little that they ask very dispassionately why, if they are such good Christians, God persecutes them so much [through] Turks, Moors, Galas [Oromo], plague . . .<sup>104</sup>

Bahrey's account echoes Páez in its portrayal of deepening bewilderment. He records how "the wise men" repeatedly asked, "How is it that the Galla defeat us, though we are numerous and well supplied with arms?" He then notes a widely circulated explanation—namely, that these reversals were divinely sanctioned: "God has allowed it because of our sins."<sup>105</sup>

The general classification of the Oromo as enemies should not be read, however, as evidence that the authors believed they were innately bad or biologically inferior. Neither Ethiopians nor Jesuits attributed violent Oromo behavior to their innate nature. Bahrey, who attempted to understand Oromo society from within, describes their way of life in remarkably neutral terms. What he condemns is their warlike character and customs that reward and honor killing. While condemning relentless Oromo aggression, Bahrey did not say that the Oromo kill when it pleases them, or without purpose. Instead, he recognized that their warring culture was determined by internal social structure and the age-based *gäda* system.

Bahrey sought to understand the attributes that set the Oromo apart from Ethiopia's very fractured, class-based society and which enabled them to defeat it. "[O]ur nation is divided into

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<sup>104</sup> Páez, *History of Ethiopia*, 65.

<sup>105</sup> Bahrey, "History of the Galla," 125.

ten classes,” he writes, “nine of which take no part whatever in war, and make no shame of displaying their fear; only the tenth class makes war and fights to the best of its ability.”<sup>106</sup>

Bahrey lamented the cowardice he observed in most fellow Ethiopians of his time. Although Ethiopians were numerous, those who fought (as he notes) were but a tiny minority, which led to frequent defeat. Bahrey suggests that the class structure and its top-heavy bureaucracy were major Ethiopian weaknesses. In striking contrast, “Among the Oromo . . . these nine classes which we have mentioned do not exist; all men, from small to great, are instructed in warfare, and for this reason they ruin and kill us.”<sup>107</sup>

European Jesuit attitudes toward the Oromo likewise were quite complex and nuanced. Despite accusing them of inhumanity due to their periodic custom of infanticide, Manoel de Almeida found some admirable qualities in Oromo society. He characterized them as “men of their word and . . . not ill natured” as well as being of “good physique and courageous.”<sup>108</sup> Similarly, although Páez characterizes the Oromo as “extraordinarily cruel,” he simultaneously underscores their courage, military shrewdness, and remarkable physical endurance—qualities vividly conveyed in the passage that follows:

This race of Ethiopians, skilled with the spear and endowed with cunning, makes nighttime journeys in order to carry out unexpected ambushes without any danger to their own lives. Furthermore, they accomplish every journey with such swiftness that nobody else is able to cover in two days the distance they measure out in a single night, even at a fast pace; this is how they are able to attack countries when nobody is thinking about or expecting it.<sup>109</sup>

In the aftermath of violent 16<sup>th</sup>-century conflicts between the Oromo and highland Ethiopians, the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were marked by adjustment and absorption. While the Gafat

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<sup>106</sup> Bahrey, “History of the Galla,” 125.

<sup>107</sup> Bahrey, “History of the Galla,” 126.

<sup>108</sup> Beckingham and Huntingford, *Some Records*, 137.

<sup>109</sup> *The Jesuits in Ethiopia*, 71.

were driven out of their homelands, eventually assimilated and lost to history, the Oromo become allied with Ethiopia's monarchy.

In fact, almost since their arrival in Ethiopia some Oromo were being recruited into royal and regional armies and settling in various areas of Ethiopia still under central control, such as Gojjam and Bägémeder provinces. Interethnic marriage between Oromo and local indigenous peoples continued throughout the Gondärine period. By 1900, provinces where Amhara and Gafat had been the primary inhabitants were predominantly Oromo. By then, the Ethiopian central state had revived and territories once seized by the Oromo were reconquered; but again, they were not expelled. The remaining Gafat and other peoples, having long since adopted new Oromo identities, aligned themselves with their colonizers. Since then, the devastation and genocide inflicted on them by the Oromo have long been obscured by modern conflicts and political developments.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has presented and supported a reinterpretation of the Oromo conquest and the development of Oromo settler society in Ethiopia, arguing that these processes played a decisive role in the cultural genocide of the Gafat people. In the words of Ania Loomba, “The process of ‘forming a community’ in the new land necessarily meant un-forming or re-forming the communities that existed there already, and involved a wide range of practices including trade, settlement, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, and enslavement.”<sup>110</sup> Despite inevitable gaps in the Gafat narrative, I have presented some of the historical processes that shaped their long struggle, resistance and final disappearance. To date, historians have not framed the destruction

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<sup>110</sup> Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 20.

of Gafat culture within the study parameters of genocide and settler colonialism. While previous research has attributed the erasure of the Gafat to forces of evolution, I argue that the Gafat were victims of cultural genocide as a direct result of Oromo conquest, settlement, and assimilation via *mogasa*. Violence occurred with considerable frequency and intensity throughout 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> century Ethiopia. A long jihadist war of extermination, violent dispossession, mass exodus, spiritual crises, cultural destruction and civil upheaval prevailed. The advent of the Oromo into an already weakened country exacerbated the pace and scale of preexisting conflicts. The Gafat were among the indigenous groups who suffered the most extreme effects of geographical and cultural dislocation in the aftermath of Oromo incursions. They lost their land through violent dispossession, while their culture, language, ethnic identity and way of life were inexorably obliterated through genocidal assimilation practices.

My approach to the fate of the Gafat represents a significant historiographic intervention, as it both reinterprets the causes of cultural genocide and the consequences of Oromo expansion. While scholars have generally treated Oromo expansion as a process of migration, resettlement and peaceful accommodation, this study argues that Oromo incursions represented a more intentional campaign of dispossession, displacement, subjugation and absorption. The fate of the Gafat reveals how cultural genocide decisively shaped relations between the Oromo and other indigenous Ethiopians. By identifying the Oromo as authors of cultural genocide, my work provides a more accurate and historically grounded account of their conquest and its far-reaching impact on Ethiopian culture. More study around how the Gafat ethno-culture disappeared could potentially shed new light on important recurring themes throughout Ethiopian history. Language extinction, for example, is not a past phenomenon but an ongoing process affecting present-day Ethiopians. This continuity underscores the deep relevance of early modern histories of cultural

genocide to contemporary Ethiopia. Examining earlier events reveals not only the deeper roots of present crises, but furnishes a framework for anticipating and preventing future cultural losses.

This study examined the destruction of Gafat culture as a local phenomenon and as part of a global narrative of cultural genocide. Recovering Lemkin’s original emphasis has proven essential for understanding genocide as a historical process rather than an episodic event of spectacular mass violence. Building on the insights of Elazar Barkan, Patrick Wolfe and others, I advance the argument that settler colonialism and forced assimilation must be understood as mechanisms of cultural genocide. The Oromo-Gafat case demonstrates that this outcome is not confined to European empires, established states, or to modern industrial-scale killing. Stateless groups such as the Oromo were able to commit cultural genocide through conquest, expulsion, dispossession, forced assimilation, and the intentional destruction of distinct ethnic identities. By foregrounding this broader spectrum of actors and contexts, my study reveals genocide and settler colonialism as interconnected global phenomena that have shaped societies far beyond conventional narratives of empire and nation-state. The Oromo-Gafat example offers a corrective to Ethiopian historiography by bringing conquest and settler colonialism back into focus, and by modelling the study of language extinctions elsewhere.

In writing about the destruction of Gafat culture, my intention has been to restore the agency of this lost people, seeing them not as relics of the past but as a distinct ethnic group whose members actively resisted their ultimate assimilation into Oromo society. They were not passive victims; instead, they weighed choices between resistance, assimilation, migration, or violent death. The incursion of Oromo settlers into Gafat homelands sparked fervent disputes over legal rights, land ownership, cultural prerogatives and political autonomy, resulting in violent confrontations and continual negotiation between settlers and natives. Although space

and scope prevent my going into more detail, I believe much more can be discussed and explored about Gafat cultural survival. They may constitute merely one indigenous group whose historical presence has been erased in the course of Ethiopia’s later development. But in reexamining their dissolution, my aim has been to ensure that their past existence remains historically visible and justly appreciated.

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