

Oromumma is Anti-Vestige Ideology Destroying Heritages in Ethiopia

Desalegn Birara*

Curator of Cultural Heritage, National Museum of Ethiopia, Ethiopia

Abstract: This research has been undertaken to assess the empirical implications of the ruling political ideology, since 2018, on the endeavors of protecting cultural heritage in Ethiopia. The study employed critical reviews of the grand-development projects emphasizing the impacts of reconstruction/reestablishment interventions on heritages. Longitudinal data of cases has been collected using site observations and key informant interviews to analyze the status & impacts of interventions. A cross-sectional in-depth interview with key informants and site observation at the Monasteries of lake Tana was undertaken, besides the case follow-up of Heritage houses in Addis Ababa. In both research contexts the assessment uncovered the same pattern of events that destroyed heritages. Heritage houses & items that memorize the monarchical era and the Orthodox Christianity are beleaguered intervention contexts. The construction projects entirely changed their context and features, erasing their cultural and historical background. It is asserted that Oromumma is a political & sociocultural ideology that erases existing features to lay its foundations on a scratch. In the case of the island Monasteries, frescoes are found to be dilapidated because of renovation deprivation. The style of painting and the raw materials used to make the paint for making these frescoes in the medieval era is not available anymore. Hence, discussions with heritage owners and expert opinions commend consideration of revitalizing the ancient knowledge of making and curating frescoes in the academic curriculum to produce capable human power.

Keywords: Oromumma, Ethiopia, Tana Monasteries, Heritage Destruction, Frescoes, Ideologies.

INTRODUCTION

Political programs and ideologies of different regimes in Ethiopia had their own perception and impacts on heritages. Preservation of cultural and historical heritages in Ethiopia is clenched with multiple challenges. Political ideologies, social organizations, ecological environments, structural infrastructures, traditional belief systems, policies and most profoundly historical narrations affected the endeavors to protect heritages in the country. Heritages faced these dangers because of intrinsic conservation limitations and flaws on risk prevention.

Previous studies [1] assessed the challenges of protecting cultural heritages in Ethiopia with the profound assumption that government policies intend to protect heritages. They were designed to deal with the multitude of variables that affected the condition of heritages keeping in mind that the government and citizens indisputably have the will to protect the heritages. Not only the will, but also unreserved efforts to withstand the challenges, and keep heritages safe. Accordingly, the studies emphasized the impacts of scarcity of resources, illicit trafficking, natural disasters and accidents, collateral damage of conflicts, management and mandate clarity in regulatory bodies, adequacy of curatorial skill, availability of infrastructure and so forth as determinant variables. Hardly few

studies in the Ethiopian context have slightly assessed the challenge or damage of heritages by the purported policy initiatives. Nonetheless, priceless heritages have been demolished as both collateral damages of discrete conflicts and targeted attacks.

A case study of H.I.M. Hailesilassie heritage house in Ethiopia [2] scrutinized the assumption and assessed drastic damages of heritages by organized structures and social movements. The study reported a targeted attack on heritages by individuals and groups that worked in clandestine for various goals. Few interest groups such as the *Wolayta Yalaga* [2] organized and led mobs that destroyed heritages as a means of manifesting grievances on certain policies or government actions and to enforce political agendas or gain economic benefits, or combined effects. Even though the success rate can be irrelevant, government agencies and regulatory organizations did their best to withstand those criminal turns.

Paradoxically, today runs a regime with a crystal-clear racial ideology that vehemently erases the semitic peoples' memory in Ethiopia, abolishes Islamic and Christian relics blatantly, and flagrantly institutes an Oromo traditional belief system called *Waqé-fenna* as a state religion [3]; and Oromumma as an integrated socioeconomic and political ideology [4]. This paradigm installation brought about a destructive intervention in heritage contexts, structures, and items. This research is executed to explore the status of heritages in the contexts where the interventions are introduced.

*Address correspondence to this author at the Curator of Cultural Heritage, National Museum of Ethiopia, Ethiopia; E-mail: abalomender@gmail.com

METHOD AND MATERIALS

The study utilized both secondary and primary sources of data. Crucial publications as sources of secondary data were reviewed. Qualitative data was collected from field work employing triangulated techniques. Case reports of heritage houses and institutes in Addis Ababa have been assessed for five consecutive years from 2018 to 2022; and data from the Island Monasteries of Tana, Amhara region is collected through cross-sectional design.

Complaint's service desk at the federal Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCCH) cooperated the researcher to access the cases of heritage houses that are identified by the government for reconstruction and followed up the cases in the time span of the study. Owners and caretakers of the heritage houses were interviewed about the processes, their responses, and efforts to save the edifices and contained elements. Local authorities and the federal heritage authority officials and officers were also interviewed to explore their awareness of the undergoing operations and their mandate on having a say regarding the cases.

A month-long field work has been undertaken in the Islands Monasteries of Lake Tana to gather qualitative data using different tools and techniques about the church relics. Systematic observation on the status of heritages and the interaction of the faithful people with the heritage structures was employed. In-depth interviews to two Monastery administrators and key informant monks were administered. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) that consisted of the local government heritage & tourism office head, local government's heritage conservation officers, a curator from the federal heritage authority was organized. The primary data collected in the different tools was integrated to the case updates and reviewed resources for the sake of easier analyses & presentation. The original data was collected in Amharic language and later translated for reporting in English.

OROMUMA IN BRIEF

"Oromummaa eliminates differences that may emerge because of religious plurality or regional differences" (Asafa Jalata, 2012:12)

As a master ideology Oromumma, aspires each individual Ethiopian to become ethnically Oromo [5], speak Oromo language, believe in Oromo religion,

accept historical narratives as presented by the elites of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and works with the perimeters of the Oromo value system. As Yonas Biru in his analysis presented 'the ideology is a low grade Nazification movement' [6]. Even ethnically Oromo citizens are obliged to accept Oromumma as a full package ideology consisting of its own religion, social relationships, roles, values, and life ways. In Oromumma, it is not possible to be Oromo and Muslim or Christian or any other believer or non-believer, other than waqeffenna; and make relationships outside the provided Oromo circles.

The ideology is not only monolingual, but also establishes a myth of creation that puts Oromo at the head of the creed in its religious chunk. According to Oromumma Waqa is the God of Oromo. The Myth narrates the detail 'Waqqa let a creature rise from a lake water and it rose up and stood up right; then waqqa called it Oromo' [7] and with a squint of waqqa at Oromo, the myth explains that the creature split in to two persons – one female and one male. It deduces therefore, all human beings descended from these two Oromo halves.

The general Oromo-centric construction of myths and narration of the common past is designed to be perpendicularly antisemitic and requiring [8,9]. Oromumma as a new dynasty enthusiast that constructs models and theories to blame the past and seeks a suitable sphere, out of its ravage. It explains the most glorified history of black people on earth, as the victory of Adwa attests, using colonial thesis: as if one black community had a colonizer relationship to the other black. The destructive choice emanates from this victimhood narration of history. It craves to revenge history and lay new foundations from clear surface. The ideology has dozens of destruction programs, starting from re-writing historical facts to the demolition of physical monuments and edifices.

ERASING THE MONARCHICAL MEMORY FROM ETHIOPIA

Heritage houses in Addis Ababa have been neglected to collapse. The government not only turned deaf ears to reports about their deterioration, but also had tacit plans to demolish them. As Piet Nieder [10] reported, heritage preservation was not on the agenda of Ethiopian decision-makers. On the contrary, heritage buildings were often regarded as obstacles to development, for those buildings are often situated close to the city centers and occupy valuable land. It

can be concluded as a common strategy to deliberately let heritage buildings unmaintained until they are dilapidated enough to have a good pretext for demolition. The demolition of the Dejazmach Amde Kassa villa – the grandson of Leul Ras Kassa Hailu, [11], the demolition of the historical Ras Abebe Aregay house [12], demolition of the *Anbesa* Pharmacy – the earliest medical store in the country, and most recently, the demolition of the heritage trust head office itself, prove the intention and dedication of the regime to eradicate historical things, to name few.

It followed that, by the cover of renovating the national palace, the age old Menelik II palace has been massively changed in its contents and transformed into a public recreational park.

“... the historical palace compound with the oldest and most interesting gems had been converted into a public park by the federal government. ... there is also a political notion to the so-called “Unity Park”, as heritage is instrumentalized to tell a specific story about one’s nation. From an outsider’s perspective, it seems contradictory that Ethiopians generally value their country’s history so much, but when it comes to architecture, they are blind to one eye. Not only are heritage buildings being destroyed, but entire historic neighborhoods are being cleared for new developments without context.” (Piet Nieder, 2023:5).

After the silent denigration of the great Menelik II palace, a half trillion value palace complex is under construction at the top of Entoto mountain [13]: with the rudiments that the ruling Oromuma ideology stipulates [14].

The introduction of *SHEGER EXPRESS BUS* in Addis Ababa was intended to diminish *Anbesa* bus – the oldest city transport service in the country. *Anbesa bus enterprise* is hated by the regime and craved to vanish for its reminiscence of the monarchical era. “The *Anbessa* City Bus started as a share company in 1945. It was owned by Emperor Haile Selassie and members of the royal family, before it was nationalised in 1974.” [15] *Anbesa* bus had symbol of the Lion of Judah. In order to eradicate the symbol and associated memories of the monarchy, the current regime brought up the *Sheger* Express Bus with its own brand color and mark. Now, *Anbesa* bus is at the verge of

extinction as an institute. The large garages, offices, data, buses, and other properties of *Anbesa* bus enterprise are being merged with (transferred to) *Sheger* express bus [16]. The buses gradually change their colors from the famous orange Lion Bus brand to the Blue *Sheger* Bus, erasing their previous mark and symbols; and most likely will be similar story to the city of Addis Ababa being swallowed by the surrounding Sheger City. The Sheger City (Geda economy zone, as stated by the Oromia region president Mr. Shimeles Abdisa) is designed by Oromuma to encircle Addis Ababa and takeover all the economic, social, cultural, and political dominance in the country [17]. The monarchical symbols such as the lion of Judah, including the national flag of Ethiopia, have been hunted by dismissive projects all over the country. Perhaps, it is undoubted that the Ethiopian Airlines is no exception in the eyes of Oromuma as it poises the flag that high, and stands against the governing ideology.

There had been a reconstruction intervention in the Meskel square – a UNESCO registered world heritage site owned by the Orthodox Tewahedo Church that lasted nearly three years. The reconstruction project was not a singular intervention. It was a confinement of the site for the followed mega project in the area. The vicinity was by large transformed into *Hora Finfinnee*, just in a year after completion. Thus, the world heritage site was surrounded with the emerged *Irecha* rites. The area turned out to be the largest Oromo religion and traditional ceremony place that replaced the previously known center in *Debrezeit (Bishoftu)* town, and hundreds of thousands of attendants from all over Oromia gather. As soon as the gathering started the rites in this new set up, they were observed instantly claiming the heir of Meskel square. The organized youth portrayed slogans of seizing Addis Ababa and chanted marching in the streets. It was intended to threaten the city resident and property owners; and had none of a facet of celebrating cultural ceremony. Oromo region president Shimeles Abdisa made a speech to the crowd saying, “we seized the land we aspired for so long. Our fathers and mothers were broken here, and now has come our time. We have broken them. We have broken Neftegna (Amhara) at the place where they broke us once in the past. We celebrate our feist in our own city, feel at home!” [18].

Uninterruptedly, renaming the Meskel square to Eid square was an agenda brought about to make the faithful community restless. The regime wants the conflict between religious groups more than the

nomenclature by itself. Replacing Meskel square with Eid square was not an agenda of the real Muslim faithful. It is a design to make the conflict resemble religious. When the two groups fight, Oromumma's claim of the entire area will come as a neutral third-party solution. Oromumma basically seeks to abolish both Islam and Christianity; albeit wants them to diminish by their own antagonized energy. The ideology aspires the type of domination that allows no differences to exist in the country. That is why the state's spiteful intervention in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church did not stop with the Meskel square issue. It further went about long-lasting chaos in the church.

Oromumma attempted to establish an Oromo synod protested from the Orthodox Tewahedo Church (illegally, according to the church's ordains) [19]. The regime's intervention in religious affairs targets to divide and weaken parts so as to eliminate sects to achieve the long run goal of wiping out the Abrahamic religions and install *wage-fenna* in substitution. Thus, the conspiracy of splitting the Orthodox church has deep rooted attacks further. Methods and tactics of uprooting the institutional bases of the church are strategized. Crucial contexts and contents are targeted for evil manipulations and unnoticed attacks. The Tana

Monasteries are among the primary targets with the disguise of surrounding mega projects.

MUSEUM CONSTRUCTION AFTER HERITAGE DEVASTATION

Tana monasteries are the densest heritage populated areas in the country. A few kilometers away from the very place where the *Gorgora* project, are located the Tana Monasteries that hub the multi-centuries old heritage collections. The *Deq* Island hosts the monasteries of *Narga-Silassie* and *Kota-Mariam* amongst the oldest ones. These monasteries repeatedly requested the local government and the federal heritage authority to prioritize conservation of priceless heritages that were irreversibly dying. Among the most deteriorated ones are the frescoes of *Kota-Mariam* church that aged nearly a thousand years.

The systematic observation noticed that painters of these frescoes are not traceable. They do not write their name and signs on paintings of saints; as explained by a monk it was duly, perceived to be posturing the painter equivalent to the saints. Hence, painters of all the wall paintings are unknown for the sake of humbleness. Further exploration on the status



Photo 1: Deteriorated frescoes of Kota Mariam (photo: by the writer).

of contents in the churches revealed that there is an intentional neglect of authorities to the pleas of the churches. The Monastery administrator and interviewed monks told their worries about the daily falling components in both structure of the church building and elements in and around the church. The church communities were prevented to restore it by themselves unless a written permit is provided to do so by the heritage authority; and the authorities did not permit or attempt to restore it. Albeit supervisors from the state culture and tourism bureau visit the churches periodically to report the statuses until it completely vanishes.

Monks and administrators told conservation of these wall paintings has been tough for two dimensional problems. There are four intrinsic challenges and an extrinsic problem. First, the painting technique of these frescoes by far differs from the ones painters make today [as generations had their own styles, focus, and method (20)]. This doubted everyone on proper restoration of the original looking. Second, the substances, processes, and methods of preparing the paints that were used to make the original frescoes is different from the ones painters use today. Applying the present paints to conserve the age old frescoes may worsen the problem. Third, believers of the orthodox Christianity (who access the church and attend religious services) gently touch [rub] the fresco walls and pat their body parts in belief that these saints heal their body and spirit. This aggravated the deterioration, as prohibiting believers to do that contact may arise dogma issues and larger scale conflict. Fourth, termite is a huge problem.

As an extrinsic challenge, the tactless response of the government for quests of renovative intervention was discussed. Even more dreadful and worse plan to destroy them by depriving apt care, was deeply scrutinized. The heritage authority warned the monastery administrators not to make any physical changes on heritages without permission; and never acted until the heritages completely vanish. On contrary, a multitude of expert recommendations and advises had been submitted to officials to avert the aforesaid hazards [21]. Basically, consideration of the *Deq* island, *Daga stephanos*, and monasteries by the western lake shore, in the *Gebeta Lehager Projects of Gorgora* town, as an integrated tourist attraction were recommended. This integrated development was sought to maintain the historical, cultural, religious, and ecological values, features, elements, and significances of heritages. Construction of the Museum

at *Daga Stephanos* had also to be in congruence with the essences of the context originality.

DISCUSSION

Heritage destructions in Ethiopia in the past five years showed patterned operations and can be characterized by their salient outcomes. All cases of intrusion had analogous methods. The step-by-step destruction of precious heritages has been undertaken using *anesthesia projects*. Anesthesia projects are beautiful ideas of development designed in/around the target heritages. These mega projects are introduced as a strategic approach to destroy heritages in Ethiopia. Procedurally, these project plans are deliberately over and over advertised to the public for exhaustive discussion so that the public falls good sleep in the aftermath operations. In most cases, the hypnotized public contributes a large amount of budget without questioning the pros and cons of implementation. The moment of operation of destroying the heritages is painless as the citizens and patriotic civil societies are engrossed with the glittering project designs whilst destructions are undertaken in the shadow, voicelessly. They are called big names such as 'mega project'.

All the so-called mega projects have rival targets prearranged for elimination. Sheger express bus was established to eliminate Anbesa bus; The unity park was in such a scale reworked to eliminate its historical elements; Sheger city is planned to displace non-Oromo residents and dissolve Addis Ababa; Holly monasteries are invited to become neighborhoods of luxury; and so forth. Mega projects fundamentally change statuses of sites and eliminate them, ultimately. The emphasis of the government on these *mega projects* serves as a double standard. First, it helps the regime rationalize its deprivation of budget to heritage protection as priority would be given to the mega projects, which the public emotion supports; and it also justifies the neglect of dilapidating heritages. Second, it makes the abolition of heritages excusable as they already become too dilapidated and not worth it to spend more resources on. Thus, the focus on 'future Ethiopia' instead of 'the past Ethiopia' is presented in tantalizing shows.

Finally, the new establishments that completely erased historical, cultural, social, and religious backgrounds realize the Oromuma's dreamed *cultural republic*. No wonder how Oromuma envisages to turn the majestic *Tana* Monasteries into island hotels and

luxurious lodges. Oromumma is clever in manipulating and betraying the public, with its mega projects encircling predefined rivals and elimination tactics. It is a simple and effective model that has been applied not only to destroy heritages but also to destroy the northern Ethiopia political blocks – Amhara and Tigray.

Abiy Ahmed in his book titled ‘*እርከብና መንበር - Stirrup & Saddle*’ clearly stated the regimes deceiving tactic in Amharic saying ‘ሳፋን እያሳየህ ትወስደውና ከገደሉ ሲደርስ “በሬ ሆይ ሳር መብላትክን እንጅ ገደሉን ሳታይ” ብለህ ትቀልድበታለህ’ – which means “you ride the ox to the cliff showing the grass he wants and when he approaches to the edge of the cliff, push him off and laugh”. Title of the book tells how the regime planned: on whose shoulder to step up and grab power. Obviously, the ‘Stirrup - እርከብ’ is Amhara - the society that supported him wholeheartedly, to seize power; while መንበር-Saddle [throne] is Oromo, as we realize now. His strategy was convincing, confusing, and deceiving as they unashamedly revealed later. Oromumma has long ago devised the lip services, nice agendas, and attractive occasions to make Amhara a reliable stirrup until the regime settles on the throne. Amhara had been deceived by these projects in a seamless analogy to the ox that is deceived by the pasture, according to the stated strategy in the book. The architect of the Oromumma ideology professor Asafa Jalata also authoritatively wages ‘intra-ethnic democracy and inter-ethnic dictatorship’ [22] form of relationship in the regime. Thus, it is obvious that dictatorship is the rule applied to erase the components of history, culture, and social life that the ideology is not fond of.

CONCLUSION

Protecting heritages in Ethiopia is an interlaced issue of sociocultural, historical, political, economic, and environmental problems. Government policies are changed according to hallucinatory malicious desires of the regime to the extent vexing the UNESCO convention and international heritage protection protocols & laws that Ethiopia adopted as a member country. Therefore, every concerned body ought to be aware of the undergoing and act before it is too late. Calling the global society and governments to advocate for the heritage protection, imposing international sanctions on the regime - Oromumma, and influencing its political decisions; and parallelly activating the grass roots level community who owns the heritages and resides nearby, can help heritages withstand the destructive ideology.

As a temporary coping mechanism, maintaining heritages and sites is recommended to be optimally a secular intervention. The concerned groups and

religious institutes ought to work together according to the terms that the heritage owners state. This gives the heritage owners the freedom to set and adjust the extent of intervention, schedule operations according to the urgency of demands for preservation and conservation. Because, some of them become absolutely unrecoverable for any prolonged year of restoration. In this intricate demand of heritage conservation, a museum has been under construction at the hilltop of the famous *Daga Stefanos* island; with the moral *supply of tail for demands of heads*. This is examined to be a more dreadful whitewashing plan than rudimentary misstep of priority-setting; and the curative plans ought to be wary of the depth of Oromummaa’s engagement.

As a long-term strategic solution for challenges of heritage conservation in the country, redesigning curriculums and academic programs in a way that revitalizes indigenous knowledge of artwork and curatorial techniques, is paramount. Because the revitalization of indigenous knowledge can restore the knowledge of making and understanding the characteristics of the old ages’ products, applying their own original styles, raw materials, and processes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest whatsoever in this research.

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