

Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries
By P. T. W. Baxter, Jan Hultin, and Alessandro Triulzi, eds.
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Ethnicity has regained intellectual currency in African studies, thanks in part to its resurgence in global politics and shifts in scholarly attitudes. As ethnic chauvenisms escalated from Canada to the United States, and ethnic conflicts erupted from Bosnia to the former Soviet Union, ethnicity no longer appeared as a peculiarly African or third world curse, but as a modern, indeed, a postmodern condition, a complex and contradictory product of the globalisation of capital, commodities, and cultures, a struggle by communities within the increasingly porous spaces of the nation-state for the narcissisms of minor difference. The primordialist view of ethnicity increasingly gave way to the instrumentalist view, that ethnicity is not a static historical atavism, but a dynamic social construct which mutates to conform to the processes of social change. But the argument that ethnicity is imagined or invented often verges on the Marxist dismissal of 'false consciousness', thereby ignoring the messy fact that being an 'invention' does not mean it lacks reality, that it reflects concretely constituted and historically grounded relational states of being. Ethnicity, as a form of group consciousness, represents a contextual invocation of accumulated, selective, and binding cultural memories and imaginations.

The complexities of ethnicity, as a conceptual and a sociopolitical construct, constitute the subject of this collection on the formation of Oromo ethnic identity. Invoking foggy and idealised memories of a shared precolonial past, buttressed by more concrete and recent recollections of colonial conquest, persecution, and exploitation at the hands of the Ethiopian and European colonialists, and those of continued subjugation and subordination in post-revolutionary Ethiopia and postcolonial Kenya,

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Oromo ethnicity developed gradually, investing itself with the exclusivist pain and pride of repression and redemption, its cultural politics increasingly focused on nationhood. The papers in this book seek to trace this fascinating process. The best ones attempt to explain, not sanctify, the formation of ethnicity. The poor ones aspire to be Oromo ethnic charters.

In the essentialising narratives of nationalism, differences of language, religion, economy, and territoriality often wilt into insignificance. Writes Mergerssa: 'For the Oromo, the belief system, ethnicity and identity are given with birth... An Oromo is born with *Orumumma*. 'Thus, the simplest definition of an Oromo would be that he/she is born of an Oromo father' (p.94). This is a moral community that is not only homogeneous, but resolutely male. Following this immaculate conception of Oromo identity, some of the authors proceed to present idealised and static images of the Oromo polity (Bassi), cosmology (Dahl), and marriage rituals (Baxter). The historical and sociological realities are, of course, far more complicated. In fact, many of the pieces discuss, not the Oromo as a collectivity, but Oromo subgroups, especially the Boran of Kenya. In their chapters Oba and Helland show the complex processes of identity formation among the Boran along the resource frontiers of northern Kenya where the Boran, Maasai, and Somali have competed for control and advantage. Amesen takes the argument further, locating the historical construction of emergent Oromo identities in the complex intersections of shifting Oromo territoriality, colonial state formation, and capital penetration.

Perhaps the most compelling are the three chapters by Lewis, Bulcha, and Hassen, all of which show that Oromo ethnicity is rooted, not in some ancient past, but in twentieth century 'modernity'. It first emerged among the educated and urbanised Oromo in Ethiopia, in spaces and institutions marked by acute competition for resources and recognition, which fostered and reproduced their marginalisation and inferiorisation by the dominant Northerners (Amhara, Tigreans, Eritreans), and heightened their perception of difference and rhetoric of ethno-nationalism. Oromo nationalism was relatively slow to develop, it is argued, because of the very slowness of the project of modernity in Ethiopia. Tired of the indignities of assimilation, the Oromo intellectual elite began asserting their cultural and linguistic rights, and then proceeded to build their own

organisations, which eventually materialised into political movements for equal citizenship or sovereignty, especially following the Ethiopian revolution of 1974, during which the 'nationalities question' was recognised, although not resolved. That it was a nationalism inscribed by modernity, is shown by the fact that its most potent symbol was the new alphabet adopted in 1974: the nation could now script itself into being, narrate its eternal homogeneity and exclusivity.

These chapters make the book worth reading. Also, it is gratifying that seven of the twenty chapters are by Oromo researchers. All too often in Africanist collections, scholarly voices from the societies being analysed are usually conspicuous by their absence. The authors may not always agree, and their contributions are quite uneven, but the differences are not along the predictable lines of nationality. That in itself shows that ethnicity is not everything.