

# THE POLITICIZATION OF MY OROMO-ENGLISH DICTIONARY: THE WRITER'S REFLECTIONS

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## **Background**

Many Oromos wonder how I was able to write and publish *The Oromo-English Dictionary* (OED) in Ethiopia under Mengistu's regime, a regime that had been openly hostile to the Oromo nation. Here, I offer my reflections on the writing of the work and some of the difficulties encountered in publishing it.

Before I began writing the OED on May 1, 1980, I had leaked out news that I was in the process of writing an Amharic-Oromo-English trilingual dictionary. Some of my Abyssinian colleagues at Addis Ababa University (AAU) were more excited about the idea than I was. The appearance of "Amharic," though ostensible, at the beginning of the trilingual dictionary probably explains why they showered good wishes upon me. Very soon, my name and the title of the elusive project appeared in one of Addis Ababa University's research news bulletins. To complete this 'ingenious' project without any difficulty, I was advised to submit a research proposal so that I could be entitled to a grant and a reduced teaching load. I thanked my enthusiastic Abyssinian friends and tacitly ignored the suggestion because I did not want to commit myself, in writing, to undertake the so-called ingenious project.

I believe that the regime's ubiquitous security members took my story on trust because, after the news release, I could move about freely and mingle with Oromos with whom I had parted company at my village (Bure) when I was about thirteen years old. Thus, I was able to refresh my memory of how our people in the rural areas still speak *Afaan Oromo*, the Oromo language, in spite of one hundred years of the flagrant policy of suppression by the Abyssinian colonizers of Oromiyaa.

I visited Arsi, Baale, Gamu Goofaa, Goojjam, Harar, Kafaa, Shaggar, Sidaamo, Wallaggaa, and Wallo. I did not have to visit Ilu Abbaa Booraa, my birthplace. Due to my own reasons, I could not go to Tigray to interview Raayyaa, Azabo, and Waajiraat Oromos, either. However, I stayed

in Waldiyaa, Wallo, overnight, where I had an opportunity to chat with an elderly Raayyaa Oromo. Despite a minor difference in our pronunciation, kaleesha/kaleessa (yesterday), for instance, we could understand each other very easily. After he told me, with a clear expression of concern on his handsome face, that the younger generation must be taught *Afaan* Oromo and be urged to use it, he said *nagaatti* (good bye) and left. In addition, when I was attending a conference in Nairobi in 1972, I had the opportunity to gauge the situation in Kenya where about half a million Oromos live. After these visits, I concluded that the pronunciation used by Oromos in both Oromiyaa and Kenya is almost identical at the lexical level. The then-rampant and alarming rumor that there were wide regional variations in *Afaan* Oromo, I became convinced, was baseless.

As already stated, I began writing the OED on May 1, 1980, three years after I had witnessed the Red Terror which wreaked havoc on those suspected of having any affiliation with a party whose views were out of favor. I saw corpses lying about in the streets of Finfinne (the city renamed "Addis Ababa" after the colonization of Oromo country). I saw corpses being shoveled out of dump trucks and strewn on the sidewalks for all to see and presumably with the message that they should behave themselves! I saw boys, girls, young/old men and women thrown out of speeding military jeeps and shot dead.

There were two primary reasons for attempting to write this one-man, bilingual dictionary. First, confident that almost everybody in the Empire had cowered in the aftermath of the brutal Red Terror, Mengistu's dictatorial regime sped up its literacy campaign in the name of socialism and communism. The tacit policy of the campaign was not only to discourage the spread of English but also to thrust the Amharic language down the throats of every nation/nationality in the Ethiopian Empire. The unsuspecting victims of this tacit policy were beguiled into believing that fifteen languages (of the total 80 or so languages in the Empire) were selected and were being used to promote literacy. In my view as a linguist, this position amounted to propaganda. To give credence to its propaganda, the regime allowed the distribution of literature written in the Amharic script in areas where the fifteen languages (representing over 90% of the population) are spoken. The Amharic syllabary, which cannot be adapted to writing the Kushitic

languages, was a fiasco. Kushitic people could not crack what appeared as a strange-looking code in which their respective languages were written. In other words, they simply could not understand the reading matter the regime sent to their respective regions. Neither could they cope with learning about 280 Amharic characters as compared to about 35 Latin symbols required to write, if adapted carefully, most Kushitic languages.

The opposition voiced by Kushitic people against the use of the Amharic script was made to appear by the regime's cadre as a resistance against learning their own respective ethnic languages! The regime's cadre started to report that all the nationalities, including about 30 million Oromos, prefer to learn the Amharic language instead of their own respective languages for practical reasons since Amharic is the official language of the Empire. The implication of this argument was in effect to urge the regime to abandon altogether the policy which I considered specious all along of allowing the use of nationality languages and then declaring openly an "Amharic only" policy. To my mind, this was clearly an attempt to assimilate the non-Amhara groups into Amhara culture.

It is to be remembered also that prior to the eruption of the Ethiopian "revolution" in February 1974, a grade of C in Amharic had been one of the minimum requirements for candidates who wished to join institutions of higher education. Because of this requirement alone, many non-Amhara students had been barred from joining AAU. Obviously, the native Amharic-speaking students had an advantage over the non-Amhara students for whom Amharic was a second language. Even after joining the freshman program of AAU, the non-Amhara students had to overcome another hurdle: they had to pass the required Amharic 101 and 102 courses to remain in the university. More difficult still, some of those who succeeded were forced to join the Education Faculty, major in Amharic (then offered by the Amharic Department), and teach it after graduation. In the heyday of the revolution, the non-Amhara students put up a strong resistance and had this arbitrary requirement rescinded. They also managed to have the Amharic Department closed altogether.

However, after the non-Amhara students' anger had subsided, the regime reinstated the same Amharic Department in a very subtle way. One approach the regime came up with was changing the name "Amharic

Department" to "Ethiopian Languages and Literature Department". The change, the department declared, was necessary to accommodate the nationality languages. In fact, what it did was to offer, in addition to Amharic, an archaic language called Ge'ez -- a language used only in the liturgy of the Coptic Church. Once again, using the misnomer "Ethiopian languages and Literature" as a façade, the department continued to resist the very idea of introducing and teaching any of the nationality languages in the university.

To realize the ambitious plan to eliminate or to cast the other languages into oblivion, the regime made a substantial effort. To further promote Amharic, it decided to discontinue even the use of English as a medium of instruction in the high schools, colleges, and in AAU. The regime's "revolutionary" cadres started their campaign against English, denouncing it as a "capitalist" language. In Addis Ababa University, a generously funded committee was established to translate science and technology terminology into Amharic. A cadre who overheard me say, "things are going a bit far", said to me, perchance in jest, "you Englishman, you are not a good Ethiopian!"

All these stratagems were clearly designed to promote Amharic at the expense of the languages of the other nations/nationalities. I could easily see through the regime's tactics. I was bitter. I thought *Afaan Oromo* would not be able to endure and that Wallo's fate was looming up for all Oromiyaa. So, though I had no money for the project I did have interest and determination, and thus I made up my mind to try to save my language from sinking into oblivion by recording at least a part of its vocabulary on paper.

The second reason for my writing the bilingual dictionary was to enrich the English vocabulary of Oromo students through a bilingual dictionary and at the same time enable them see their language in its written form. As stated in the OED itself, I believe that in an environment where contact with the native speakers of English and exposure to their culture is almost nil, the OED is extremely useful. Although some foreign language teachers may frown upon the idea of using bilingual dictionaries to teach a foreign language, it does no harm to tell an Oromo speaker that, for instance, qoru, qooru, qorru, respectively mean to investigate, to dry, and to feel cold (See OED, pages 396 to 397).

Regarding the question of what symbols to use to write *Afaan Oromo*, I had two options. One option was inventing 33 symbols that could represent the 33 Oromo phonemes. After dallying with this idea for a while, I abandoned it because it proved to be impractical. The second option was to adapt any suitable script. Here again, after trying the Amharic syllabary, the Latin, and the International Phonetic alphabets, I concluded that the Latin alphabet is the best of the three for writing *Afaan Oromo*.

Also, a similar conclusion had been arrived at in the early 1970's. A group of Oromo scholars in Europe anonymously wrote in 1973 an excellent grammar book titled, *Hirmaatadubbii Afaan Oromo: Beekumsi durii jireenya har'aatiif akka tolu*. As can be seen from this 139-page book, the authors almost perfected the adaptation process for us. They show short/long vowel sounds by single/double vowel letters, respectively, as in *busaa/buusaa* (malaria/fringe), and to indicate gemination, which is phonemic in *Afaan Oromo*, they use double consonants as in *badaa/baddaa* (many/highland). So do we today. Perhaps, the only difference is that whereas they use diacritical marks to represent five sounds, we now employ the digraphs *ch, dh, ny, ph, sh* for the same sounds. Because of this added refinement, it is now possible to use any typewriter or computer that has keys for all the letters of the Latin alphabet and the Arabic numerals. The *qubee*, the Oromo alphabet in its present form, has now firmly established itself in Oromo culture in spite of the Abyssinian opposition.

### **The Oromo-English Dictionary (OED): the Writing Process**

The work was done in three stages: planning/decision-making, writing, and publication.

#### **Planning/Decision-making Phase**

I decided to proceed as follows: to make all the necessary decisions carefully, write them down, and place a reminder, i.e. paper or card on which the decisions are written in a convenient place for easy reference. I was aware that to ensure consistency, lexicographers must stick to their decisions throughout. Changing his/her mind after typing on a manual typewriter, say,

400 pages, can be costly and time-consuming drudge. Here is an example from my own experience: I discovered that I had made two minor mistakes. One was using three consonant clusters as in /Kur`CCi:/ instead of just two as in /Kur`Ci:/. The second mistake was that I had assumed that there was a shade of difference in length between /a:/ and /a/. However, after typing, using the conventional typewriter since I had no computer then, 307 pages I realized that, in the phonemic transcription part, either /a:/ or /a/, not both, could have been appropriate to represent the long vowel sound. In other words, I should have transcribed, for instance, the present / ka:'su: / and / kaw'u: /, either as / ka'su: / and / ka'wu: / or as / ka:'su: / and / ka:'wu: /consistently. Obviously, it is not difficult to imagine the formidable task of going over 307 pages had I attempted to make the changes!

The first decision I had made before I began writing the OED was to compile a bilingual dictionary that educated Oromos could use. All Oromos educated in Ethiopian schools know at least two other languages besides their own. They can read and write the other two or more languages except, for the most part, their own first language.

The Oromos are not illiterates in their own first language by choice. For over one hundred years, the Abyssinians spared no expense to prevent Afaan Oromo from becoming a written language and from being used in schools, in courts, and anywhere near the bureaucracies that have always existed as exclusive clubs to serve the interests of members! They banned both the production and the introduction of any Oromo literature in/into the Empire. They even burned the Bible for being written in *Afaan* Oromo. Ironically, the fact that the translator of the Bible, Abbaa Gammachiis, used the Amharic syllabary, which Abyssinians consider sacred, did not save him from cruel harassment and witch-hunts! They hunted down Shaykh Bakri Saplo, who died mysteriously in exile, because he tried to invent an alphabet for writing *Afaan* Oromo. It is my view that if such harsh measures had not been applied, no Oromo would have chosen to remain illiterate in his/her own mother tongue.

My second major decision before starting writing the OED had to do with the number of entries and the dialect to be included. I decided to include all the words and morphemes in the language. Dictionary writing can be a very difficult undertaking for one person. Dealing with, say, ten

thousand entries is like working on ten thousand projects, not just one project. I tackled it without the benefit of the computer and financial assistance. So, if once in a while, one cannot find in OED what one considers a household word, it is understandable and, in due course, rectifiable.

The words came from my own store of vocabulary, from the scanty literature available at the time, from radio broadcasts, and from conversations. After coming across an unfamiliar word, I made it a point to meet or telephone at least five persons to clarify its meaning before entering it in the dictionary. Obviously, I did not always expect an accurate definition; it was enough if they uttered the word and its collocation. For instance, I remember asking a man if he knew the meaning of (h)imimsu (to snort). Somewhat surprised at my ignorance, he answered my question with a question: "Maal, (h)imimsu jechuun maal akka ta'e himbeektanuu? Imimsu jechuun imimsu dhuma kaa! Farda malee ammo maaltu himimsa?" (How come you don't know what himimsu means? Himimsu means himimsu, it's that simple! Besides, what else snorts except a horse?).

What about foreign words that have firmly established themselves in the language after being adopted, adapted, or translated? Certainly, words like kootii (adoption of the English word 'coat'), rophilaanii (adaptation of 'airplane'), abbaa buddeenaa (probably translation of 'ye injeraa abbaat' which in Amharic literally means 'father of bread', step-father) cannot be ignored by a lexicographer whose responsibility is to record words as objectively as possible.

In fact, I would like to propose that we Oromos encourage judicious adoption and adaptation of technical and scientific terms. New commodities and concepts are introduced along with the jargon/terms by which they are identified in the country of their origin. The word 'sputnik', the name for the machine the then Soviet Union made to orbit the earth in 1957, is adopted and used in the English language today. Regarding dialect, I made it a point not to mention. In an environment where antagonists were looking for every opportunity to divide the Oromo people, I did not want to give them a weapon, a wedge to be put between us. There is no need for using labels such as "Tuulamaa" or "Maccaa" dialect. I adopted the position that an Oromo word used anywhere is a property of all Oromos everywhere. It is a

treasury that we Oromos all fall back on when we talk or write on topics such as administration, arts and sciences, business, diplomacy, judiciary, politics, science and technology, etc.

Pertaining to standardization, some Oromos have started talking about the need for resolving this important issue as soon as possible. I believe that the issue can wait until at least two prime requirements are met. First, we have to collect all the linguistic data from all over Oromiyaa and understand what the differences actually are. Some minor differences that could exist, for example, in terms of what words mean and how they are pronounced in different parts of the nation, must be identified and analyzed scientifically. Doing the job well requires time, patience, dedication, money, and material resources.

The second important prerequisite for standardization is autonomy/self-determination. When the Oromos themselves begin to administer the affairs of Oromiyaa, they will develop *Afaan* Oromo as they see it fit, not on the basis of the directives that are sent down to them from "ye belaay akaal" (the higher echelon), the invisible decision maker from the corridors of power. As a language at work *Afaan* Oromo will of necessity standardize itself. Standardization is already in motion. For instance, when I was writing the OED, not only were there different names of the months, but also there were contradictory versions of the order in which they were cited. The present edition of the OED reflects that confusion. The OLF calendar has now standardized the names of the months for us, and we are able to say, off the top of our head: Amajjii, Guraandhala, Bitootessa, Caamsaa, Ebla, Waxabajjii, Adoolessa, Hagayya, Birraa, Onkoloolessa, Saddaasa, and Arfaasaa (January to December), in that order.

Finally, the most politically sensitive decision I made was to use the Latin alphabet instead of the Amharic syllabary. Because of this and the decision to abandon (for being cumbersome and expensive) the projected "Amharic-Oromo-English Dictionary", the first typed draft of the OED was caught up in Abyssinian politics. Even though I deliberately avoided using the standard Oromo spelling we now use because it is identified with the OLF, the decision got me into all sorts of problems. I was harangued almost everywhere: in my office, in the corridors, and in the staff lounge. The bureaucracy got tougher with me and used any pretext to at least delay the



publication of the work. After the bureaucrats got copies of the first draft, my occupation became thinking of the most effective, diplomatic way of answering their frequently asked questions, " Why the Latin alphabet? Why not the Amharic alphabet? Why the OED? Why not OAD or AOD, i.e. Oromo-Amharic Dictionary or Amharic-Oromo Dictionary? Why a bilingual dictionary? Why not just an Amharic or Oromo dictionary?" As it will be clearer later on in this paper, the tactics of asking irrelevant questions and of setting up a committee of inquiry worked to delay publication. It took five more years for the work to be published, i.e. between the completion of the first draft in 1984 and its publication in 1989!

### **Writing Phase**

A brief discussion of the irony of an event that actually facilitated the writing of the OED is in order here. I was the Dean of the Education Faculty, AAU, when the president of the university (an economist), the vice president (a lawyer), and the Dean of the Social Sciences Faculty (a geographer), met secretly (probably in 1977) and wrote a controversial proposal which in effect dismantled the Education Faculty. Without consulting any member from the Education Faculty, the trio of University bureaucrats, agents of the regime themselves, proposed that most of the major departments under the Education Faculty should be transferred to the Natural Sciences and Social Sciences Faculties. As might be expected, all the members of the Education Faculty, except one whom I considered a renegade, were diametrically opposed to the proposal. I was accused of inciting the members against the university administration, a dangerous precedent in a "communist" Ethiopia, I was warned.

That was the time (sometime in 1977) when the regime was labeling Oromos with phrases such as "Right Roaders" and "Narrow Nationalists". When I arrived at my office one morning, I saw three large posters hanging on the walls close to the door of my office and a woman standing in front of it. On one of the posters was written, in large letters and in red ink, the sentence, "Xabbaab bihertanyochi innaa qanyi mangadanyoch yi wadimaallu!" (Narrow Nationalists and Right Roaders shall be annihilated!) Whether her presence was by design or by coincidence I am not sure, the

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woman said in Amharic and with an affected voice choked with emotion, "Oh! How glad I am to see you! My husband, who was one of your students, and I were crying all night because we heard that you died!" I thanked her for her concern and said, "As you can see for yourself, I am still alive."

The same day, the man I referred to above as a "renegade," whom I helped to join the Education Faculty after he had been dismissed from the Ministry of Education, came to my office and gave me a great deal of advice on how to work with the bureaucrats smoothly. Of the many things he emphasized I always remember the saying with which he concluded his diatribe. It goes like this: "Sittaazzi inda geetaa; sittittaazzaz inda baariyaa" siibbaal alsammaahim? (Haven't you heard the Amharic saying, "When you order, pose like a master; when you are given orders by your superior, you must cringe and obey like a slave?") To my mind, this misguided philosophy is one of the core problems of Abyssinian bureaucracy, which functions as an exclusive club. The person stationed at every level of the bureaucratic hierarchy takes the hint that he/she is entitled to be approached with servile obedience and adulation by those who are in the lower echelon. The existence of a law, no matter how nominal, does not matter to the bureaucrat who is usually a law unto himself/herself. Because of this mentality, there is not much that one can claim as right unless the bureaucrat's *malkaam faqaad* (graciousness) is secured. Nor is there a pleasant atmosphere conducive to genuine, democratic discussions between the bureaucrats above and below.

Frankly, that morning, I was distraught with worry because of the posters, the woman's mention of my "death," and the renegade's diatribe. In the afternoon of the same day, the Vice President asked me to arrange a staff meeting of the Faculty for the next day. At the meeting, a heated argument ensued. All the members but the renegade insisted that the courses (Biology, Chemistry, Mathematics, Physics, Amharic, English, History, Geography) that had been so meticulously designed, and over the years, had proved to be very effective for would-be high school teachers and should remain under the Education Faculty. The vice president, the regime's loyal cadre, did not agree. To make matters worse, he added Educational Psychology to the list of courses that should be removed from the Education Faculty. He also shut

down Prince Beide Mariam School, the Faculty's laboratory where students had done their practice teaching. After the meeting, he told me that he had no problem with my ability as a whole and said that, all the same, it would be better if I stayed away from any administrative activities at least for as long as he, the leader of the moment, wielded the power. He was true to his word: he relieved me of all my administrative duties and transferred me to the Institute of Language Studies (ILS).

That transfer was a blessing in disguise for me because writing the OED as a member of the ILS was more justifiable than writing it as a member of the Education Faculty. Besides, since I had been barred from administrative responsibilities at the ILS, I was able to concentrate, after teaching the required maximum of 12 hours a week, on my project during my free hours at night and on weekends. As a result, I completed writing the work in the summer of 1984.

### **The Publication Phase**

Some time in 1984 I gave the completed draft to the AAU Research and Publications Office (RPO) for assessment. According to AAU rules and regulations, any work submitted for publication must be assessed by two anonymous, external reviewers who must also be at least one academic rank higher than the author of a work to be published. The two reviewers lauded the work and strongly recommended that it be published. However, one of them asked, genuinely and out of curiosity, why the Latin alphabet was used instead of the Amharic script. Gradually, this question gathered momentum and became a cause into which almost every Abyssinian staff of AAU threw himself/herself heart and soul. Surprisingly, while conducting my father-in-law's funeral service, even the priest, suddenly, out of the blue said, "ahunimmaa woromo dikshinariii tatsifowaal yibbaalaal!" (It is said that even an Oromo dictionary has already been written nowadays!). The comment about an Oromo dictionary was so unrelated and inappropriate to the occasion that even the most anti-Oromo Abyssinians present were embarrassed.

Since the OED was not Amharic but was *Afaan Oromo*, a language that is condemned to death, it must be assessed again. I can imagine what

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a bureaucrat might have said to the RPO people, "More reviewers, not just two, must be involved in scrutinizing this controversial work." I believe that due to the pressure coming from higher up, the Office went against its own rules and had the OED reviewed again by three more persons. Apparently, this time the work was sent to reviewers who must have been handpicked because all of them literally called me names for using the Latin alphabet. Among other things, they labeled me a chauvinist intellectual, a narrow nationalist, an enemy of Ethiopian unity and of the Amharic script. One detected a single misspelled word in the "Introduction" to the OED and concluded that I was not fit to be an English teacher! Amazingly though, they, too, still recommended that the work should be published.

Using diplomatic language, I tried to prove my innocence. I assured all concerned that the OED was only a scientific endeavor and that I was not out to destroy the Amharic script. To prove the point that I do not hate the Amharic syllabary and to allay their fears, I wrote an article titled "Ye Beet Siraa" (Homework) in Amharic and had it published in a party-sponsored education journal. Incidentally, for this article I was sent a check for 150 *Birr* (US\$30). In addition, in a paper I presented in Finfinne at the International Conference on Ethiopian Studies, I tried to convince all concerned that the Latin alphabet was selected specifically for the purpose of writing the OED and that it was not an endorsement of its use in general.

After the conference, some participants, mostly Kushitic scholars from Europe, U.S.A., the then USSR, and Asia, expressed their support for and interest in the work. Very shortly, a publishing company in Germany wrote me a letter in which it promised that it was ready to publish the OED at no cost to me.

At every opportunity, I capitalized upon this letter. I started to appeal to the ego, prejudices, and fears of AAU bureaucrats. I argued that instead of giving away its work to a German publishing company, an autonomous university, whose purpose is to enhance teaching and research, should welcome works such as an OED and publish it itself. If published in Finfinne, the relatively low cost of publication would make the work affordable in Ethiopia. Besides, not only can the university earn money by producing and selling the work in bulk, but also the Amharic-speaking governors deployed all over Oromiyaa, could use the work for checking their

interpreters. More importantly, it is good politics for the Ethiopian government whose very public policy at the time was its commitment to “developing” the nationality languages!

These proffered reasons started to produce positive results. I was even advised to submit the letter from Germany together with the OED draft and request the university Senate to promote me from the rank of Assistant Professor to that of the Associate Professor. I got my promotion, although some thought that I should have saved the OED for a promotion to the rank of Professor. One able member of the Senate, a professor, first congratulated me and then jokingly said, “When playing rummy, people never throw away their jokers! Few short articles would have been enough for the promotion to the rank of Associate Professor.” I laughed, but I did not tell him that my greatest ambition was not to get the rank or money but to see the OED published. Another positive result was, except for the staunch conservatives, many stopped opposing the publication of the work.

Actually, in my opinion, the main reason for the ebbing away of opposition was the involvement of the Dean of the ILS at the time. Practically every member of AAU was in awe of the Dean, not only because he was the representative of the Party and a man often seen on TV sitting beside Mengistu, but also because he was in charge of all AAU political affairs. After going over the draft, he said that the OED must be published and that any opposition to this worthwhile work should be silenced. Definitely, there was a temporary respite after the Dean’s position became clear. To my great surprise, even “Reasons for Choosing the Latin Alphabet for Writing Afaan Oromo”, a paper prepared for the Conference on Ethiopian Studies to be held in Moscow, was accepted.

Unfortunately, that relatively calm, opposition-free period was short-lived. At the Conference in Moscow, there was an attempt to sabotage my presentation. In the program, one that had been prepared in Finfinne and distributed in Moscow, the words in the title of my paper were so jumbled that the title did not make any sense whatsoever. I suspected that was deliberately done to embarrass me and discourage attendance. But a large audience turned out in spite of the misprinted announcement that had appeared in the Conference program. Before I started my presentation, I requested that the participants correct the title of my paper. Although I was

told I was free to use the whole afternoon, I wound up my presentation in one hour and opened the forum for discussion. A group of about four conservative Abyssinians who were occupying the front seats started to warm up to the familiar theme that writing *Afaan* Oromo in Latin alphabet cannot be justified. They took it in turn to repeat the same timeworn question, "Why the Latin alphabet, why not the Amharic syllabary?" One of them said with an air of authority something like, "In making the decision to use the Latin alphabet you have taken only linguistic considerations into account, but what is more important to us is the political decision!" After this verdict, some questions flashed through my mind: "As a researcher, don't I have the right to choose and use any symbol for writing my language? Why do the Abyssinian bureaucrats have to make that choice for me?" In that moment I realized that their decision to block the publication of the OED was nothing but a mere playful pinch in comparison to the heavy blows targeted against Oromos who struggle to throw off conditions of oppression: imprisonment, torture, expropriation, and death. When my mind flashed back to the plight of Oromos in general, I lost my composure and even burst into tears. One of the participants, a Russian, grabbed the microphone, singled out the director of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES), and confronted him with a rhetorical question, "Being the Director of the IES, how come you don't appreciate this work?" The chairman of the session suggested that we should take a break.

When we returned, I found the hecklers' seats empty. I was glad that the group had absented itself because it became possible for the other participants to objectively discuss both the content and the form of the OED. Some wanted to know if the sounds represented by the international phonetic symbols / ʃ, ʃ / do in fact exist in *Afaan* Oromo. One who had not seen the draft asked if *warraaqsa* (revolution) was entered or not. I enjoyed answering such questions to the same extent that I had hated hammering the reasons for choosing the Latin alphabet into the heads of people who appeared impervious to reason. It is my experience that Abyssinian bureaucrats never acknowledge the justice of an Oromo cause. Even when a daring disputant corners them with indisputable facts, the bureaucrats frequently respond by merely snapping, "biihoonim, biihoonim, biihoonim..." (even then, even then, even then...).

At the Plenary Session, the spokesman for the Linguistics Section, a highly respected American scholar, turned the table on the opponents of the OED. After giving the summary of each paper on linguistics, he finally announced that the committee had voted the OED to be cited as the magnum opus at the Plenary Session. I was completely vindicated, and naturally I was also exhilarated. Henceforth, I thought, the enemies of the OED would be forced to capitulate.

On arriving in Finfinne, however, I observed some signs indicating clearly that my opponents had not relented. First, they omitted my name and the title of my presentation from the AAU News and Events Bulletin which appeared with the list of "Ethiopian scholars" who came back safely after presenting scholarly papers at the Conference on Ethiopian Studies held in Moscow. The omission could not have been an oversight because the media would usually blare out any news of success. Second, even colleagues at the University who had been giving me at least a stiff smile started to give me the cold shoulder and to ignore me altogether. Third, one student of mine who had been a party cadre before joining AAU, told me that the OED was mentioned at a Politburo meeting and labeled as a work written in disguised OLF script. The situation I was in was very tense indeed. Under the circumstances, though, all I could do was to follow the Oromo maxim "karaa cabe haa yaa'u" (let it run its course) and wait calmly for all eventualities.

The eventualities I had expected were (1) the banning of the OED, (2) loss of my job, (3) imprisonment, or even (4) death. Luckily, none of these happened. Instead, the RPO people asked me to defend the work in the presence of its Research and Publications Subcommittee established by the university Senate to assess the work. I pointed out tremulously (for by then I was almost on the verge of being broken) that I had already convinced six reviewers and defended the work at two international conferences on Ethiopian Studies. The curt reply was "No, you must convince the subcommittee members; their decision is crucial because they are experts in matters of linguistics." Actually, only one of them was a linguist.

The Subcommittee reminded me, from my reading, of the Inquisition or the Holy Office! Most of the members had been the very persons who had been openly condemning the work. Three of them had

already heckled me in Moscow. What could I expect from them? Whatever the outcome, I thought, it would be better to answer every question they might ask as politely as possible without reasoning with them. As I had anticipated, each of them started to raise primarily questions of political nature. In addition to the oft-repeated question, "Why Latin, why not Amharic syllabary", one of them also asked me why I had not included a bibliography! To avoid embarrassing him, I refrained from saying that I have never seen a bibliography at the end of a dictionary. My plan to compose myself worked. Everybody, including the university's guru in matters of linguistics, was positively impressed by my obsequious behavior.

Sometime after the interrogation, I was instructed to omit, among other things, the statement "The present estimate of Oromo population in Ethiopia is 19 million". I complied and after all the changes and the omissions were made, the work was accepted for publication. Henceforth, a part of my job became shuttling between my office and the office of the general services that provides AAU printing house with stationery. That shuttling alone lasted about two years because, I was told, the ship that was supposed to bring the stationery from abroad arrived much later than usual.

To my mind it was worth going through the ordeal of the red tape because the work was published at last. When about 1000 copies were brought to AAU Bookstore in October 1990, mostly Oromo students in the university and other Oromos queued up for copies at 30-birr each. The book eventually sold for about 300 Birr (US\$60) a copy outside Finfinne. I learned that the demand was so great that the bookstore had to ration customers to one copy a person. The university received 90% of the book price for printing the work whereas my share was 10%, an arrangement I agreed to because making money was not my goal in writing the OED.

The intense love the Oromo people have for their language surprised even me. Persons who had been hiding their Oromo identities came out of their shells – shells that had never fully protected them from Amharas who appear to me as exceptionally gifted at scrutinizing and identifying a non-Amhara no matter how hard one tries to pass as an Amhara. Some users of the OED expressed their appreciation through gifts, letters, and positive comments. For instance, although I did not send him a copy, Professor Baxter sent me a hand written note in which he said, "Thank



you for putting this pearl in my hand". One enthusiast made me laugh when he said to me, "You know, after going over the OED I realized that *Afaan Oromo*, too, has eight parts of speech just like Amharic and English." A medical professor at the Black Lion Hospital, an Englishman, also made me laugh when he said, "I didn't thank you as soon as I got a copy of the OED because first I wanted to check the accuracy of the entries I had sampled. Selected Oromos who live in the outskirts of Finfinne helped me with my project. You are okay."

My own observation and experience has led me to conclude that it is this kind of burning interest that the Abyssinian bureaucrats have striven to extinguish from the hearts of Oromos. It does not seem to matter to them if *Afaan Oromo*, the language of 50% of about 60 million people living in Ethiopia is obliterated, as long as Amharic, the traditional palace language, reigns. Their futile attempt to undermine 80 or so languages in the country has always been under the pretext of saving "Ethiopian unity," a euphemism for forced assimilation of other nationalities into Amhara culture. The custodians of "Ethiopian unity," however, have fashioned governments that operated as exclusive clubs. Each successive form, whether it was absolute monarchy or socialism/communism/democracy has targeted the Oromos. The "club" mentality produced members who would even stoop to condemn an apolitical writer of a dictionary, as "anti-Ethiopian unity". One colleague of mine, an Englishman, bluntly told a vociferous group in the AAU staff-lounge at the Sidist Kilo campus, that if one dictionary could divide Ethiopia so easily, the country had never been united!

I offer my account of the difficulty I faced in having my *Oromo-English Dictionary* written and published in Ethiopia between 1980 and 1990 because it sheds some light on the kind of processes of control and intimidation that were in operation against the Oromos in that country. My experience reveals that Abyssinian bureaucrats went to great lengths to keep Oromos under close scrutiny and provides an example of the effort to undermine our legacies—language, culture, and history. The OED, in the words of one reviewer "a singular contribution to Oromo Studies," did not escape such scrutiny.