

Notes on Cinnamon Country and the “Peace of Jamjam”: Towards a Reconstruction of
Ancient Oromo History

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This article is a summary of my presentation at a recent OSA conference. It is posted here in response to requests from the audience. The topic attempts to answer two interrelated questions: what do ancient Greek, Latin, and Arabic sources say about the Oromo? When did a written source first report a functioning *Gadaa* System?

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A variety of sources indicated the Oromo played a significant role in the ancient world, dating back to Egyptian New Kingdom times (1570-1069 B.C.E.) and here we refer to them as Proto-Oromo. Greek and Latin sources emerged following Alexander the Great’s conquest from the Mediterranean Sea to India (336-323 B.C.E). The nineteenth century classist Sir Harry Johnston has posited that first Egyptian Pharaohs, then the Persians and finally the Greeks ruling Egypt relied on the ancestors of the Oromo for information on the sources of the Nile River. The desire to learn the source of the Nile was not a mere curiosity. The Greeks in particular were interested in gathering commercial and geographic intelligence about African coasts of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden for two reasons. The first was the search for the origins of spices: frankincense, myrrh and cinnamon. These spices were expensive as gold because they were in high demand for uses in religious rituals and to fumigate the homes in the crowded ancient cities. While frankincense and myrrh were obtained from ancient South Arabia (today’s Yemen) and northern Somali maritime zone, the source of cinnamon, *burguda*, was a mystery. This is because the South Arabian intermediaries concealed the sources of cinnamon to maintain a monopoly on its commerce. Alexander’s successors in Egypt were naturally interested in finding direct access to the source of cinnamon. The second was to capture live elephants to use in warfare, just as the Indians did against Alexander and the Greek army. Thus, the Greeks ruling over Egypt established trapped-elephant collecting stations along the African Red Sea littoral, today’s northern Somali coast, as far as Cape Guardafui. The geographic and commercial intelligence gathered in these projects provided new information that shed light on the regional environment, resources, cultural and political situations. This information were subsequently compiled into books. Many of these books were lost but some have survived. In the surviving sources today’s Oromo land is referred to as the Cinnamon Country.

Eratosthenes (234-194 B.C.E) the first systematic geographer, Hipparchus (197-127 B.C.E) astronomer and mathematician, Strabo (54 B.C-24 C.E), the descriptive Geographer, Pliny the Younger (61-113 C.E), lawyer and popular writer, and Ptolemy, the geographer, have documented aspects of the Cinnamon country, its location and the producers. Eratosthenes, Hipparchus, Strabo, and Ptolemy provided the latitude and longitude of the Cinnamon Country. They also symbolized the ancient habitable world in the shape of a parallelogram. One endpoint of the parallelogram was the Cinnamon Country. South of the Cinnamon Country was described as torrid and inhospitable. The location of the Cinnamon Country was shown to be on the

headwaters of today's Waabe River, which the Greeks mistook as the Nile or a branch of the Nile. These same sources named the Harusi as cinnamon producers. The Harusi ran cinnamon plantations and also harvested the spice from forest vegetation. The Harusi were probably the descendants of the Arusi who were mentioned in Egyptian papyrus of the New Kingdom as cinnamon exporters. One unidentified leader of the Cinnamon Country was described as having sent the cinnamon plant to the Roman Emperor, Marcus Aurelius who ruled from 162 to 180 C. E..

There are two important takeaways from this historical information. One, the Oromo formed part of the ancient known world and located on the first world map because of their natural resources. The Greco-Romans learned about spices from the ancient Egyptians who referred to the region of cinnamon as the Land of the gods, or the Land of Punt, somewhere in today's northeast Africa. Along with the people of Punt, the ancient Egyptians named the Aromi or Eremi as cinnamon suppliers. Second, a prefix that preceded the name Punt in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics is now translated to read as *bia*, and Egyptologists today refer to Punt, as *Bia-Punt*, or "the wonderful Country of Punt." Currently we know the meaning of the word *bia* in the Oromo language. However, we have yet to understand the evolution in the meanings of this word between the 14th century B.C, the time of Egyptian expedition to *Bia-Punt*, and the first century A D, the time historical linguists tell us marks the emergence of the Oromo as a distinct group. Did the word *bia* change its meaning in the many Cushitic languages, but retained its meaning in the Oromo language? We can refer to this remote period of the ancient history as the time of Proto-Oromo. But the Greco-Roman sources indicate the active participation of the proto-Oromo regionally and internationally in their present location.

With the decline of the Roman world after the 4th century C. E. and the rise of Christianity and Islam lesser volumes of spices were imported from the Cinnamon Country along with new commodities of trade. Additionally India and Ceylon emerged as the primary exporters of cinnamon. But two names, *Zenj/ Zingion* and *Jamjam* continued to appear in the Persian and Arabic sources from the sixth century C. E until the advent of Europeans in the sixteenth century. The name *Zanj* or *Zingion* was initially mentioned in connection with spice trade from the Horn of Africa. We do not know whether *Zanj/Zenj* was a corruption of *Ganjii*, an Oromo sectional name. The available sources suggest the name covers diverse group of inhabitants. However, the nineteenth century European colonial historians interpreted *Zanj* to mean only Bantu speakers in eastern Africa, a standard that until recently has been widely accepted. But Persian and Arabic sources clearly show *Zenj* included both Bantu and Cushitic speakers. *Jamjam* was widely reported on in these sources interchangeably with the *Zanj* or northern *Zanj*. The people of *Jamjam* were also reported as having moved southward from the Nile-Atbara down the Takaze River in the distant past. They were mentioned in conflicts with the Egyptian Pharaohs and Nubian kings. The label *Jamjam* is today wrongly identified with the *Gujii*. Whether the mountain by the same name in *Gujii-land* caused this confusion is not yet clear. However, the *Jamjam* were the forefathers of many of today's central, eastern, and southern Oromo. Many Arabic sources named today's Waabee River as the *Jamjam* River in the past, though some Arab geographers borrowed Greek naming and referred to it as the Nile or the Nile of Mogadisho after the 14th century. During the tenth century C. E *Jamjam* referred to a stretch of land from the

source of the Waabe River to northern Tanzanian coast. Here “Jamjamness” was a social construction since the many inhabitants were Bantu speakers.

The information about the Jamjam contained in the above mentioned sources can be summarized under five important rubrics. First, based on the *Gadaa* system the Jamjam had built connections with the Bantu and probably with the Khoisan speakers, and extended their influence from the headwaters of the Waabee River as far as today’s Tanzania’s coast. Second the leaders of the Jamjam carried the title *Ilmawaaq* and commanded 300,000 strong cavalry, according to al-Masudi who visited eastern Africa twice, the last in 915 C. E. Third, *Ilmawaaq* was an elected “king” with a jeweled crown. Arabic sources referred to him as one of the two black kings in the ancient world, (the other being Indian *raj*). *Ilmawaaq* was expected to rule with justice. If this elected “king” violated the *Gadaa* rules he was deposed and his descendants were permanently disbarred from holding public office. Fourth, Arabic sources described *Buttaa* ceremony in a document composed in 851 C.E. This is the earliest date from written evidence indicating the existence of a functioning *Gadaa* before the sixteenth century. Many Arab writers described the proceedings of this ceremony. They applied the phrase “literary language” in describing the Oromo language or the speech of the Jamjam or the northern Zanj. Al-Jahiz, the most prolific Arabic writer of the ancient world, described the Oromo orators as the most eloquent people who addressed the multitude from sunrise to sunset. He used their eloquence, rhetoric, and wisdom to defend the equality of the blacks with whites in the emerging Muslim-Arab Empire. Al-Jahiz is the first to argue for racial equality using aspects of the Oromo *Gadaa* system. Fifth, a written tradition dated to around 1200 showed a group of east African Bantu speakers practicing aspects of the *Gadaa* system, most probably introduced via the Jamjam. Remnants of this institution still exist in eastern Africa.

Evidence of this legacy is today seen partly from the two marriage forms practiced from the Kenyan coast to Tanzania and the Comoro Islands. The first and most prestigious form of marriage is called *harusi ada* in both the local Bantu and Swahili languages. This marriage form is mostly for those over thirty years-old, wealthy, and required expensive wedding outlays. The lady of the house wedded in this form of marriage is referred to as *bibi harusi*, and her husband *bwana harusi* (respectively mistress and master). The second form of marriage is *mna daho*, “little house.” This form of marriage is for the young who have yet to save money needed for the expensive wedding. The two forms of marriage correspond to the age-grade system, known locally as *hirrimu* from *harriya*. In east African anthropological and historical researches these Oromo words were considered of unknown origin. The source of this confusion comes from the Ethiopian historiographic interpretation that limited the chronology of Oromo history to the post-sixteenth century.

By way of conclusion the Oromo were active in the ancient world the Greco-Romans described and were located on the first world map the Greeks had drawn. Long before the Greeks and the Romans, the proto-Oromos were active in their today’s location as well as the Nile Valley, Atbara and Takaze River corridors. Their interactions with the ancient Egyptians and the Nubians were evident. The Jamjam had established a form of *Gadaa* system that connected the Bantu and Khoisan speakers from today’s central-south Oromya to northern Tanzania. Evidence

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