

**In lieu of a Forward
Welcoming the ‘*Finfinnee Journal*’**

Bekele Gutema¹

The commencement of the *Finfinnee Journal* (FJ) by the Department of Afaan Oromoo, Literature and Folklore is an important turning point in the history of the Oromoo struggle of over a century for a genuine emancipation and authentic identity. The new Journal gives us another opportunity to know ourselves and a venue to air our concerns, to educate ourselves and reorient our youth about our people and their values and to communicate our causes to the international academia to enable them understand us better.

We have to situate the launching of the *Finfinnee Journal* within the context of the establishment of Departments of Afaan Oromoo in different universities and in various institutes/centers of Oromoo studies. We all know the suppressive situation in which Oromoo Language (Afaan Oromoo) has been for a long period of time. There was a deliberate plan to kill the language as a policy of building monolithic nation by subsequent rulers of the Ethiopian empire starting during the last quarter of the 19th century. The likes of Tedla Haile advised Emperor Haile Selassie on how to kill other languages, particularly Afaan Oromoo in order to forge an Ethiopia in which one language alone can be used. It has been overcoming similar protracted efforts that Afaan Oromoo has survived and reached a stage where it is used as a medium of instruction in junior secondary schools and is being taught at the tertiary level of education. The inauguration of this journal is another important chapter in this struggle. The journal will hopefully give us an avenue to develop, standardize, and systematize the language and make it the medium of technology to serve the world, the Oromoos and non-Oromoos alike.

This in turn enables us to once again revisit the purpose for which we establish research institutes, departments and the like for developing Afan Oromoo. It is to pursue in-depth research into subjects for which the research institute/center has been established. A research institute/center starts with a vision and mission. Hence its purpose is to carry out research that enables it to realize its mission.

¹ Professor of Philosophy, Addis Ababa University

Research is about the pursuit of knowledge regarding the subject being studied. In other words, research is a systematic, scientific, critical and rational pursuit of knowledge with regard to specific subjects, topics and problems following methodologies appropriate to the subject. We get involved in research with the aim that the knowledge produced in it enables us to answer questions, enlighten problems, resolves puzzles and enigmas and contributes to the unraveling of hidden or suppressed facts, identities and so on.

Conducting research presupposes an epistemology that is a key to the production of knowledge. One of the issues that Oromoo studies should address primarily must be the problem of epistemic justice. Oromoo studies is one of the important tools through which we challenge the epistemic injustice that the Oromoo and the other peoples of the South have been subjected to.

When our ways of knowing, our institutions, our language and our culture are denied or marginalized, the chance of carrying out our normal life and tasks in general our collective growth will be in jeopardy. That is what is called epistemic injustice. The denial of a person's /communities way of knowing is characterized as epistemicide, because it promotes knowledge that suppresses our ways of knowing. We know that knowledge empowers. But what kind of knowledge is it that empowers? In societies like ours where there are different kinds of conflict, it is impossible to find knowledge being produced by a certain group to be empowering knowledge for all. In such situations knowledge which empowers some at the same time marginalizes others. It is the act of resisting such marginalization that made the establishment of the institutes/centers of Oromoo studies a necessity.

In real life, in matters regarding culture, politics and similar subjects, it is impossible to find a position from nowhere. No position is from nowhere, meaning, it is from somewhere be it from economic interest, social position, cultural pride, political expediency and similar issues. In other words, it could emerge from certain cultural, historical, class or ethnic positions, hence the marginalization. That is what W. L. Van der Merwe states:

There is no neutral ground, no "view from nowhere" in philosophy with regard to cultural differences...This realization impels one to enter into dialogue with the traditions of wisdom and thinking of other cultures - not so much in the hope that one will reach a trans-cultural and meta philosophical consensus, but as a way of acknowledging the particularity of one's own viewpoint and discovering the cultural

contingency of one's own philosophical presuppositions and allegiances (1997:76).

Historically Oromoo studies began as an exotic move by foreigners who came to Oromoo land, encountered the people and came to know some of the ways of the life of the people. They were fascinated by the people's way of life and institutions which resulted in excitement in the iconic traditions of ours. This means Oromoo studies has started centuries ago. As a result, some descriptive studies about the Oromoo people, documents on Afaan Oromoo, the Oromoo religion and other cultural aspects have started to come out. The important point is that such studies tried to lay the foundation for a future study of a people who have been denied the chance to live their own authentic life in accordance with their culture, barred from using their material resources and spiritual culture, obstructed the right to self-expression and forced into self-denial.

It is the studies that began in this manner that benchmarked the Oromoo Studies Association (OSA) during the last quarter of the 20th century. In order to know the contributions of OSA to Oromoo studies, it suffices to have a glimpse into its publications, the *Journal of Oromo Studies (JOS)* which has already produced about 30 volumes in a time of about thirty years and its regular yearly conferences and midyear conferences. OSA conferences and its publications touch up on nearly all fields of knowledge of Oromoo in the social sciences and humanities, and other areas.

The institutes of Oromoo studies, established by some universities, have embarked on the path of producing knowledge about the Oromoo. It is gratifying to see that a number of institutions or centers of Oromoo/Gadaa studies, in the in, Amboo, Arsii, Bulee Hoora, Haramaaya, Jimmaa, Madda Walaabuu, and Wallagaa public universities and Rift Valley private University and a few more. These are to undertaking research in wide areas to know the Oromoo past and present in order to chart a better future for the betterment of upcoming Oromoo youth.

It is not as such easy to study the Oromoo culture, institutions, history and the like for a variety of reasons. It is by coming out of a design or plan to deny the Oromoo ontology, epistemology and history that we are at long last trying to discover the truths, most of which have been either destroyed and/or hidden deliberately. We have traversed through phases that denied the existence of the Oromoo and that have deliberately attempted to obscure and destroy the Oromoo knowledge systems, and institutions that could be testimony to

Oromoo identity. The tasks undertaken to overcome those challenges and reconstruct the past has already started to bear fruits. There are a lot of works on Oromoo that have significantly become voice for the Oromoo people and the Oromoo cause. If we focus only on the works done in the 20th century, and particularly the second half of the twentieth century, we have works like that of P. T. W. Baxter, H. S. Lewis, L. Bartels, C. Sumner, Mohammed Hassen, Sisay Ibsa and B. Holcomb, Asefa Jalata, Mekuria Bulcha, Abbas Haji Gnamo, Tesema Ta'a, Martha Kuwee Kumsa, Gemetchu Megerssa and Annissa Kasam and many more. While those can be considered as trailblazers, the amount of works being done today is immense.

The changes that occurred in 1991 resulted in reestablishing the Oromiyaa region and the subsequent commencement of using Afaan Oromoo as an office language and medium of education in the region have opened a new chapter in the history of the struggle of the Oromoo to regain its authentic identity and genuine self-realization and self-expression in many senses.

It is as a result of these changes that have started to occur after 1991 that universities started to grow in number in the country. Particularly, Oromiyaa is a beneficiary from this growth as a number of universities were established in the region has increased. This has paved the way for the universities to establish institutes/centers of Oromoo studies. The need for such institutes cannot be overstated. For a people who have been subjected to campaigns of annihilation and assimilation for over a century, there is no better way than to studying its past, its institutions, its philosophy and culture to recover what were in there. Because without such knowledge, it is impossible to talk about the present, since the future without the past

The newly established institutes/centers of Oromoo studies have rightly accepted their tasks and are working hard to realize their mission. When we consider the publications coming out of these institutions and the quasi-regular conferences that they are holding, they are a testimony to the fact that they are trying to be up to the expectations of the universities that established them and the Oromoo people who host the universities. These institutions, housed in Oromiyaa, have a moral responsibility to the Oromoo people and it should be their task to solve the diverse problems of the Oromoo people through the knowledge they produce.

It is also necessary to scan through the research outputs conducted so far and that are being conducted for the various aspect of knowledge of the Oromoo

they publicize. While we are happy about what have been done so far, and we should also be encouraged to intensify research, publication and widen discussion forums and conferences. We should also pause and assess the contents and quality of what have been done so far. We should take stock of Oromoo research resources done so far and assess the strengths and limitations and chart a new future for research that ventures into territory that has not been touched up on so far.

Here I have a couple of points in mind that relate to recycling and reacting. Our researchers should not feel comfortable by recycling what the pioneers of Oromoo studies have done. We should use those as foundations and a spring board to take the research endeavors to new levels and frontiers. What have been done regarding the *Gadaa* system, history, anthropology, literature, etc. are very important and enormous. There seems a sense of contentment about those achievements and recycling them. This is not a constructive development and needs immediate intervention. Hence, it is essential to use these resources as spring board to venture into areas that have not been touched so far. The wealth contained in the Oromoo way of life and intuitions is immense. Oromoo is rich in sources of knowledge that are contained in its cultural practices which could be surfaced not only for the Oromoo but also the world at large. Talking about Oromoo philosophy and comparing it to ancient Egyptian philosophy, Charles Verharen asked “what are those things in Oromo philosophy that are vital for human survival and flourishing?” Our research should contribute in finding answers to such foundational inquiries. In other words, if we are able to do that, we are not only find answers to fundamental question but also, we can accomplish an important task in pushing forward intercultural dialogue not only with people and cultures that are our immediate neighbors but also far away and thereby establish the centrality of research on Oromoo in African studies. This is just one issue, but when we look at our environmental ethics, the farming systems and other practices that have stood the test of time and have sustained our communities for generations. But these have been given due to attention so far and thus will eventually disappear as the custodians of those forms of knowledge, our old wise persons die. That is why we say the death of our wise elderly is equivalent to the perishing of a library. Therefore, we shall waste no time to engage our sages as time spent would mean the perishing of our libraries.

A similar point can be raised regarding reactive positions. By this, I want to refer to the point that we had labored a lot to resist identities imposed on us. At a certain point this is necessary. Since our people are denigrated, denied the right to self-expression and humiliated for long, it is necessary to put that in

proper perspective and debunk the stereotypes, prejudices and false narratives about the Oromoo. In this regard, our historians and other scholars have done a commendable job in refuting false narratives that used to deny the Oromoo civilization. The success in registering the Gadaa System as an intangible heritage of humanity by UNESCO is an aspect of this endeavor. The tasks of reacting against the negative portrayals of the Oromoo and addressing the associated prejudices and biases have to be carried out in parallel with other areas of research that can bring about new findings.

One of the tasks of our research has to be the analysis of the concrete situations in certain fields like politics, economics, sociology and anthropology, education, etc. There is no doubt that the study of the Oromoo past is indispensable for the Oromoo present and future. However, depending on those it is also imperative to engage in a painstaking analysis of the concrete situations as they relate to the subjects I just mentioned. Such analysis of the concrete situation is necessary step to overcome the kind of predicament in which we are. The Oromoo is in a crisis that is detrimental to its survival is not an understatement as the Oromoo is in a crisis characterized as an existential threat. This is what makes our intellectual engagement an imperative more than ever before. An intellectual engagement that addresses the issues I raised regarding concrete analysis and more importantly about the unity of the Oromoo is very important.

The struggle of the Oromoo for authentic identity, equality, self-rule, social justice in one-word *Abbaa Biyyummaa* has continued in different forms for about a century and a half. It is not far from truth to say that the Oromoo people and their leadership at different times have responded to the situation of subjugation as circumstance permits. Traversing through a long and difficult path filled with many ups and downs, here we are at cross-roads not only with formidable challenges but also with transcendent opportunities. Our chance to realize these opportunities depend on our ability to use our knowledge and other resources that are at our disposal and act in unison leaving aside differences among us. This should be the unequivocal message we should like to send to our leaders if we have to come out of this quagmire.

Our researches are searches for truth. It is about what the Oromoo was, what it is now and what it ought to be next. This involves among other things the study of our culture, our history and our relations with others. We have to be able to primarily point out our strengths and weaknesses in our understanding of politics and our relations with others. It is important for all of us and

particularly our young generation scholars to critically examine our culture of boundless tolerance in establishing relations with others. With a risk of generalization, I would like to say that it is our boundless culture of tolerance that has subjected us to untold misery. Such tolerance may be useful and acceptable in some circumstances. But in other situations where historical facts are right out denied and people's right are trampled up on without inhibition by certain groups who think that the country belongs to them alone, tolerance does not make much of a sense.

You remember Haacaalu Hundessaa's song 'Maalii Malisaa?' A line in this song says, "Garaa laafne buluu keenyaan diinaaf salphaa taane" This line in the song has a clear message on the level to which our tolerance should reach the brim and should not spillover. The culture of tolerance that evolved from the Oromoo values of *safuu and nagaan* which promote and preaches peace and harmony hardly brings results in the context of the politics of zero-sum game in which we are found. This simply means that in a culture of zero-sum game where the owner of the gun takes all, tolerance makes little sense. How can a people with boundless tolerance, preaching peace and harmony attain anything in a situation where the *modus operandi* is the winner and takes all? The Gadaa assemblies work towards consensus where nobody is left behind/out. But we are in a situation where the whole task is to win, not give and take. It is hard to blame the Oromoo in this situation. It is high time that we understand this and learn strategies of counteracting the *modus operandi* of winner takes all. Hence this inspires to rethink regarding our engagements in politics and related issues of intercultural concern.

Denials of historical facts and the proliferation of narratives that have hardly anything to do with the reality have made communication hardly possible let alone going forward in our understanding of the history of the country. Those have hindered us from having a common understanding of history and where or how can we move forward if we do not have consensus in understanding how we have reached where we are?

On the other hand, the philosophy and culture of the Oromoo have not been studied sufficiently although a lot is being undertaken. Our research institutions have to be able to work with the spirit of returning to our source, since we can be/are able to address many of our problems in this way. Of course, returning to the source is neither nostalgic nor romanticizing the past, but it is about reappropriating our knowledge and values that are time proven and can still help us. Here it is necessary to remember that many of the things that are unique to the Oromoo have been deliberately undermined or

misappropriated. But I think that without going back to these we will not be able to move forward. Such moves are justified not only from the perspective of social justice, but also that of epistemic justice.

How do we, for example, see the indigenous communal land ownership (land belongs to the clan) system that has been undermined for over a century and a half? What kind of positions and proposals could we bring forth through research in the situation where the move and slogan of privatizing land has the ultimate goal of grabbing land making Oromoo farmers landless? Is it not the alien land ownership system imposed on us that undermined our people who did not have problems of food self-sufficiency prior to the introduction of the system? I think that it is important to challenge models imposed on our people from far or near whose sole goal is generating profit from the landgrab. The idea of returning to the source could be something worth trying in this regard and in many others.

This implies that there are lots of issues that become the task of future research. I still have issues of the environment, the Gadaa System and our political orientation or system. This encourages us to cover a wide spectrum of the Oromoo philosophy and knowledge system. We should not also limit ourselves to the fields of the social sciences and humanities alone in the research institutions. Beyond them, I think, we can venture into science and technology, agriculture and others. This is based on the grounded view that the Oromoo have farming systems that are environment friendly and are useful to maintain harmonious relationship between human beings and nature for generations after generations, rather than the one that is driving us in the direction of catastrophe in the form of droughts, global warming, and the drying of rivers and lakes and so on. Of course, at this point in time the role of science and technology is important.

In our educational systems what type of policy do we really need to follow to bar technology not to drive us to self-destruction? We have to ask ourselves the question, education for what purpose, and technology for what purpose too. Is it to come in attunement with nature or to dominate nature as the latter will have devastating consequences?

I have very recently come across a book being made ready for publication entitled, *Exploring the Potential of Gadaa System for Industrial Management and Productivity Improvement*. In the first place I was astonished to find such a conception that the Gadaa System has ideas

appropriate for industrialization at first. I did not want to get into value judgment about the book, but I found it useful, among other things in inspiring researchers to venture into new territory regarding the potentials of our Gadaa System in modern industry management.

There are lots of research conducted by Oromoos and non-Oromoo. In my opinion, those who deal with the past constitute a good part of such research. The past is very important in showing us how we can move forward. Moving forward cannot be thought of, as I said earlier, without knowledge of the past. In Addition, the question of the kind of knowledge that could enable us to move forward is crucial. It should be the one that is properly anchored in the past and is able to chart a future that can reestablish *safuu* and *nagaa* aka peace and harmony thereby showing the way for development and transformation.

Moreover, the issue of language is very important in research. The use of Afaan Oromoo in schools and government offices in Oromiyaa has brought tremendous success in developing Afaan Oromoo. However, we should continue developing, systematizing and standardizing the language continuously. Those who in earlier days were working hard to make Ethiopia a monolingual country by killing other languages like Afaan Oromoo would now want to advise us, as to which alphabet is appropriate for Afaan Oromoo. What is astonishing is that many of the people who want to advise us on this do not even understand a single word of Afaan Oromoo. It is necessary to understand the sinister motive behind their advice and work hard to further develop our language using *Qubee*. In a language are encapsulated the culture of a people as a whole and the people's history. AS Joseph Ki- Zerbo writes,

Language is like a bank or museum in which, over the centuries, each ethnic group has deposited all it has built up and accumulated in the way of mental and material tools, memories and resources of the imagination. By means of an in-depth and wide-ranging study of the language, through religious documents, fable and legal customs, medical and educational prescriptions, instruction in craft and technical skills, it is possible to uncover the entire grid pattern underlying a culture or a civilization: how they behave...their conceptions of...love, the hereafter, human destiny, and so on (1990:94).

Here it may be necessary to add the ideas of Ngugi Wa Thiongo who precisely underlined the importance of using one's own language as it conveys not only messages but also values, He wrote,

Culture embodies...moral, ethical, and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which they come to view themselves and their place in the universe. Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All these are carried by language. Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next (Wa Thiongo, 1997: 14-15)

We need to have a clear understanding of the nature and capability of language. Any language can be useful in any field of knowledge if it is developed through research, hard work, dedication, investment and commitment. All of the languages that are languages of science and technology today have not been created with these capacities. The capacities have been developed through generations of hard work and huge investments. We have to stop lamenting about our language that is not being developed and cannot be used in science and technology, and start in earnest to develop it into a language of science, technology, literature and others. Let's not forget that nations with a few million speakers or even hundreds of thousands have been able to develop their languages into languages of science and technology and are using it at the tertiary level of education for teaching and research. This should be one of the main tasks of the departments of Afaan Oromoo, the institutes of Oromoo studies and more importantly that of the Academy of Afaan Oromoo that needs to be established if it has not been established so far.

We have to know that the use of a mother tongue is a human right and an important aspect of the decolonization of the mind. Without disregarding the importance of being multilingual, it is also necessary to use one's own language in literature, science, philosophy and other areas as it decolonizes the mind. When we use a foreign language, we develop that language and our language gets impoverished in the inverse proportion. K. Wiredu and Ngugi wa Thiongo advised that using a native language in philosophy and literature respectively is an important component to liberate the mind. Conceptual and mental decolonization calls for rethinking about the concepts that we inherited from some other languages with the assumption that such concepts are

universal to all languages. Hence, we should research our diverse heritages and look for philosophical, literary, scientific and other concepts contained in our language.

Our compatriots who think that if we use our languages, or use an alphabet different from theirs, or if the different nations of Ethiopia practice self-rule will be the end of Ethiopia should not worry because it's time for all of us to celebrate diversity. Ethiopia experimented with nation building and learnt that it could not go forward as Ethiopians from different walks of life started to ask the question, "who is an Ethiopian"? I think that, if we accept that all of us are Ethiopians, none more equal than the other and work towards the realization of a multination federation than becoming a stumbling block to it, we can live together with our differences. The opposite that is trying to go back to the imperial dispensation can usher in the end of Ethiopia.

Our research has to produce liberating knowledge not only for the oppressed but also for the oppressor and the misguided. The oppressed, of course, require the production of knowledge based on facts to counter the partisan narratives that deny the oppressed to have their own history and values. It is through such scientific, evidence-based knowledge that adversity and denigrating narratives that impose identity of oppressors on others can be halted for good and peaceful coexistence will be flourished. That is why we commend such knowledge to liberate not only for the oppressed but also for the oppressor. The oppressor entertains delusion when it denies historical facts, imposes invented identity on others and attempts to perpetuate inequality. When doing so, the oppressor is also victim of false consciousness. Hence, the production of true knowledge liberates the oppressor from false consciousness, and thus it can liberate both the oppressor and the oppressed. Therefore, our research has to basically be preoccupied with the search for truth. Truth that has been denied and hidden must come out. We say this with a reason that such truth liberates both who have become victims of oppression, denial and so on. It also liberates those who have become victims of falsehood.

To winding up this short paper, I would like to say no a country has perfect history packed with glory alone. The history of nearly all countries is filled with travails and tribulations along with successes and failures with which the country can be proud of as well as with which it can be ashamed of. Ethiopia's history is no exception. Along with its "glory" with which some would like to identify themselves, it also has a history of slavery until it officially abolished it in 1942 though went on for decades unofficially. It also has a history of serfdom until the system was abolished in 1975 and all acts of oppression,

discrimination, and subjugation, not to mention the atrocities of the late 19th and 20th centuries. We have to be able to see both sides of this history as history cannot be the narration of things that are positive alone. The aspects of the history with which some are proud can be agonies for others. It is important to realize this, be open to aspects of the history of the country that gloss over facts and try to chart a future that is acceptable to all. The future of Ethiopia, and its peoples, does not and cannot lie in denial of historical facts, monologue and denigration of a certain segment of the Ethiopian society. The future of Ethiopia can only lie in dialogue, recognition of diverse identities and aspirations of its diverse communities, respect and celebration of diversity. Our endeavors at the production of knowledge particularly in the social sciences and humanities, and in fact in all areas of knowledge, has to earnestly take note of those points if it wants to make a difference.

It is in this spirit that I want to welcome the *Finfinnee Journal* as one of the turning points in the history of the struggle of the Oromoo to live its own authentic life as laid down in its culture. The Department of Ethiopian Languages existed in Addis Ababa University for decades while teaching only one language, i.e Amharic, what a joke? It was trying to systematically ban other Ethiopian languages from being taught in the department with lame excuses like ‘we don’t have academic staff who could teach the other languages aside from Amharic.’ Contrary to this idiocy, it is important to remember how it has been possible to teach them now. The reason “we don’t have qualified academic staff” is one way of making it impossible for other languages than Amharic to be languages of writing and education following the imperial policy of making Ethiopia a monolingual country as was advised by T. Haile and vigorously promoted by supporters of the imperial dispensations. It is with reluctance that at long last it was possible to teach Afaan Oromoo and Tigrigna at AAU. Once this was possible, the other front on which they started to undermine Afaan Oromoo was to advise us to use the Sabeen script to write in Afaan Oromoo. While there are more than convincing linguistic reasons to use Qubee to write in Afaan Oromoo, what is paradoxical is that those who advise us to use the Sabeen script were/are persons who either do not understand Afaan Oromoo at all or those who cannot go beyond *akam* aka ‘how are you?’

The department of Afaan Oromoo, Literature and Folklore and the College of Education and Language Studies have to be commended for launching of a multilingual journal that will play an important role not only in fostering the development of Afaan Oromoo but also in initiate communication and

dialogue with other languages. The Journal can also be an important avenue for other Ethiopian languages that could not get such a platform of publication.

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