

Introduction, Expansion, and Practice of Islam among the Muslim Communities of Illubabor

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Abstract

Focusing on southwestern Ethiopia, this study explores how Islam took root, spread, and became part of daily life among the Oromo of Illubabor from the nineteenth into the early twentieth century. It finds that Islamization was neither a simple adoption of an outside faith nor a purely internal development. Instead, it resulted from a dynamic interaction: the internal weakening of the socio-political and spiritual order of the Gadaa system created an opening, while external agents—primarily Jabarti and Afkala Muslim merchants and preachers from the north—provided the new religious framework. The analysis highlights two key pathways for this spread: the commercial networks of long-distance trade and the crucial political patronage of local rulers, most notably Chali Shone. The paper further examines how Islam became locally anchored through the establishment of enduring institutions. The shrine (Quba) of Sheik Mohammed Sultan and the network of mosque-centered schools served as vital centers for community gathering, learning, and spiritual practice, ensuring the religion's deep integration. Methodologically, the paper draws on qualitative historical analysis, archival documents, and carefully cross-referenced oral histories to address a notable gap in the regional history of Islam in Ethiopia. By detailing this case, the paper contributes to wider Africanist scholarship on religious conversion, emphasizing the synergistic relationship between local readiness for change and the external diffusion of religious idea.

Keywords: Afkala, commercial networks, Islamization, Jabarti, Quba

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Introduction

The earliest contact between nascent Islam and Ethiopia occurred when a group of early Muslim refugees sought asylum in the Kingdom of Aksum, fleeing persecution by the *Quraysh* oligarchy in Mecca (Hussein, 2001, p. 45). Their arrival marked a significant milestone in the introduction of Islam to the region, laying the foundation for subsequent religious and cultural exchanges (Trimingham, 1952, p. 130; Braukämper, 2002, p. 93). Over time, the gradual expansion of Islam within Ethiopia was facilitated by trading communities, including religious figures that traversed the caravan routes linking Aksum to the Red Sea. The geographical proximity of Ethiopia to the Arabian Peninsula, combined with the settlements of Arab traders, Islamic scholars, and political refugees, played a crucial role in the diffusion of Islam into the Ethiopian hinterland. By the seventh century, coastal regions of Ethiopia had undergone a relatively peaceful process of Islamization, characterized by the gradual adoption of Islamic beliefs and practices among local communities (Hussein, 2001. p. 125). However, the spread of Islam to the interior region of Illubabor followed a distinct and later trajectory, becoming significant only in the 19th century due to regional trade and socio-political changes.

In fact, a particularly transformative period in the expansion of Islam occurred in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the revitalization of trade under Egyptian rule in Sudan and its neighbouring territories accelerated the diffusion of the religion. This economic network not only fostered commercial interactions but also served as a conduit for religious dissemination, reinforcing the presence of Islam in Ethiopian society (Atieb, 1973, pp.30-40; Bahru, 1976, pp. 50-60; Birhanu 1973, pp. 25-35).

Despite its deep historical roots, the pace and extent of Islamization varied significantly across Ethiopian regions. Some areas, such as the eastern lowlands and Somalia, embraced Islam between the eighth and sixteenth centuries. At the same time, other regions, including Illubabor, did not fully integrate Islam until the nineteenth century (Guluma Gamada, 1993, pp. 65-69). This variation raises a critical research question: what underlying factors influenced the uneven spread of Islam in Ethiopia? Scholars have proposed multiple explanations to account for these disparities. Braukämper (1977, p. 56) posits a direct correlation between medieval Islamic traditions and the Islamization of the Arsi Oromo in the nineteenth century. However, this argument does not fully explain the delayed conversion of the Oromo in Illubabor. While broader patterns are known, the specific ways, actors, and socio-political context of Islam's introduction and

consolidation in Illubabor remain underexplored. This study directly addresses this gap.

The broader scholarly discourse on Islamization in Africa has debated the relative importance of internal and external factors in shaping religious conversion. In this regard, Fisher (1985, pp. 154-160) emphasizes the role of external agents, such as Muslim merchants, clerics, and reformist movements, in propagating Islam. Accordingly, the central argument of this study is that local inhabitants were followers of traditional religion and later converted to Islam, which was introduced by merchants and preachers. The positive attitude towards Islam and peaceful conversation was attributed to the monotheism (believing in one Supreme God) of both religions (*Waqqa* in traditional Oromo religion and Allah in the case of Islam), similarities of some of the institutions and religious practices between the two relations (*Wadaaja & Mouwliid*) and the good knowledge and understanding of the preachers of the local language and culture.

This article seeks to critically analyze the complex processes that influenced the spread of Islam in Ethiopia, with a particular focus on regional variations in conversion patterns. The study particularly focused on Illubabor, referring to the political and administrative unit of the former province (*kiflehager*) prior to the 1990s. By engaging with both historical sources and contemporary scholarly debates, this study aims to provide a detailed understanding of how trade, migration, political transformations, and local societal structures collectively shaped the Islamization of Ethiopia over the centuries.

In the early nineteenth century, present-day Illubabor experienced significant socio-political changes. These transformations required a new ideological framework as social development unfolded among the Oromo in general and Illubabor in particular. To discuss the process of Islamization in Illubabor and the surrounding areas, I draw on Fisher's insights (1985).

To this end, I employed qualitative methodology to treat oral interviews as sources of meaning and lived experience. For my study of Islamic history in Illubabor, interviews provided insider perspectives—local genealogies of religious authority, communal memories, and social practices—that lie beyond the written record, enabling a detailed, contextually grounded account. My interlocutors, all of whom live in Illubabor, were relatives or young hood acquaintances, which established a foundation of trust. I clearly explained the research purpose to each, and they willingly shared their knowledge. Given these existing relationships and my transparent approach, no ethical concerns arose.

Through this approach, the study contributes to a broader historiographical discourse on religious diffusion in Africa. Accordingly, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Through what specific channels and actors was Islam introduced to Illubabor?
2. How did internal socio-political transformations, particularly the decline of the *Gadaa* system, create receptivity to Islam?
3. What roles did local Islamic institutions (e.g., shrines, mosques) play in consolidating Muslim identity and practice?

Socio-political transformations in Illubabor

During the early nineteenth century, Illubabor underwent many social and political changes. The society transitioned from pastoralism to plough agriculture, cultivating cereal crops such as maize, millet, and *teff* (*Eragrostis tef*) and hoe cultivation of root crops like *enset* (*Ensete ventricosum*). They also produced coffee and traded with merchants from the northern and eastern parts of Ethiopia, who were attracted by the region's agricultural potential (Lewis, 1965 pp. 30-40).

The decline of the *Gadaa* system

New socio-political changes took place within the society. Initially, the *Gadaa* system was modified and then gradually abandoned. Many factors contributed to the changes and transformation within the *Gadaa* system. For this paper, it is important to focus on the religious aspect of the *Gadaa* system. The system served the religious needs of the Oromo. The society, supported by *Gadaa* officials, performed religious activities in large gatherings. The leader of the *Gadaa*, *Abba Bokku*, along with the *Abba Dulla*, the leader of the war, and the *Qallu*, presided over religious gatherings and other ritual ceremonies. The system, as a whole, provided social harmony, order, and spiritual fulfilment to the community (Asmarom, 1973, pp. 45-55; Tesema, 1986, pp. 65-70; Mohammed, 1994, pp. 65-75).

The concept of *Waaqa*

Several scholars, including Lambert Bartels and Eric Karl Knutsson, have written about Oromo's religious activities. Bartels (1983) asserts that Islam was introduced to south-western Ethiopia peacefully. Emphasizing the traditional religion of the Oromo, he explains that *Waaqa*, who created all living things and whose order is unbreakable, is the Supreme Being in whom the Oromo believe (Bartels, 1983, pp. 25-35). Knutsson (1967), on his part, explains that the Oromo acknowledge the

existence of Waaqa as a supernatural being and central object of belief. According to informants, Waaqa is considered black when playing a protective role for human beings and red when offended by evil acts, thereby becoming a punishing force (Itana Agmso, Personal Communication, June 4, 2021). Karl Knutsson also describes Waaqa as the Supreme Being, with several lesser spirits, known as *Ayyaana*, below him. Waaqa is considered the creator of all things and is omnipotent. He is believed to have the power to punish wrongdoers and reward the righteous. His blessings are sought for success in social life, as they are seen as a sign of Waaqa's favor and that of the *Ayyaana*. Conversely, misfortune, social disorder, and natural calamities such as famine and disease are attributed to the absence of spiritual guidance (Knutsson, 1967, pp. 73-76).

The Oromo of Illubabor believe in two types of lower intermediary spirits below Waaqa, to whom offerings and sacrifices were made. The first group was associated with the black aspect of Waaqa, while the second was linked to the red aspect. *Ayyaana* and *Sanbata* were considered helper spirits. These spirits were believed to implement the wishes of *Waaqa Gurracha*. *Ayyaana* was considered a guardian spirit, while *Jenii*, or the harmful spirit was considered evil. In the traditional religion, *Waaqeefanaa Abba* (Fathers' *Ayyaana*) and *Ayyaana Haadha* (Mothers' *Ayyaana*) were also revered. Natural features such as sycamore trees, rivers, mountains, and other landscape elements were respected. Animals were sacrificed as *arsaa* (offerings) near or under these natural objects to Waaqa, so that he would accept the offerings and protect families from illness and other misfortunes (Adam Guyo, Personal Communication, March 20, 2022; Bartels, 1983, pp. 53-60).

The role of Waaqa in social order

Waaqa is believed to have created and governed the universe. Due to this belief, he is considered *Umaa*, the creator of human beings. Killing living creatures was forbidden unless they posed a threat to human existence or material well-being. Dangerous wild animals that posed a risk to humans, domestic animals, or crops were killed. Animals traditionally consumed by the Oromo of Illubabor were only slaughtered when necessary. According to informants, other wild animals were hunted as game trophies (Kemal Musa, Personal Communication, March 8, 2020; Nemomsa, 1997, p. 8).

Misfortune was often interpreted as a consequence of an individual's misconduct. This misfortune could manifest as illness, the death of cattle, child mortality, or barrenness. Such suffering was believed to result from an individual's failure to align with Waaqa's will. In such cases, people would say that Waaqa had

withdrawn from the individual. Misfortune was understood as the consequence of the victim's behaviour, leading to Waaqa's abandonment of them. However, when the cause of misfortune was unclear, people would say, "Waaqa knows," implying that Waaqa had acted incomprehensibly (Jemal Oumer, Personal Communication, July 6, 2020; Bartels, 1983 pp. 43-53).

The belief in Waaqa as the omnipotent sustainer of all aspects of life resulted in his presence in every prayer. Prayers, offerings, and sacrifices were considered means of maintaining a connection with Waaqa. In addition to seasonal offerings and sacrifices, there was also the *Buttaa* ceremony. On this occasion, sacrifices were made directly to Waaqa for peace, prosperity, and health. Thanks were given along with prayers for the blessings received over the past seven years and for the ability to attend the *Buttaa* ceremony (Hultin, 1977, pp. 15-25; Bartels, 1983, pp. 23-38; Nasro Musa, Personal Communication, April 4, 2020).

The mystical bond between humans and land

During sworn renunciations, *Lafa* (the earth) was also invoked alongside Waaqa. It was said *Waaqafi lafatti ba'ee kakate* (He swore before Waaqa and Lafa). The earth seems to have held significant importance for the Oromo of Illubabor due to its natural functions and provisions, which were indispensable for survival. There appears to have been a mystical bond between humans and the land, as it was the dwelling place of both the living and the deceased. This bond was recognized, and clans living in an area were believed to have a deep attachment to the land (Hultin, 1977, pp. 15-25). Recognizing this bond, the Oromo believed that land ownership could not be changed through force during intertribal wars. Instead, victorious parties would only take cattle and other goods as war trophies, leaving the defeated party in control of their land. As a result, land was seen as a symbol of clan solidarity. The informants also confirmed that land was, and still is, regarded as the home of both the living and the dead, providing pasture, water, and grain (Mohammed Qadire, Personal Communication, April 4, 2020; Hultin, 1987, pp. 35).

In summary, this period of transition, which was marked by settled agriculture, integrated trade, and the weakening of the Gadaa system, created a societal context ready for new ideological frameworks. The spiritual and organizational vacuum left by the declining Gadaa system would prove crucial in facilitating the acceptance of the structured religious and social order offered by Islam.

The rise of *Chali Shone* (Illubabor) and the decline of the Gadaa system

As indicated above, the Oromo of Illubabor experienced many social and political changes in the late nineteenth century. The most significant leadership change was the decline of the Gadaa system, which had served the society for many years. The decline of the Gadaa system led to the rise of *Chali Shone*, popularly known as Illuu Abbaa Booraa—hence, the present-day Illubabor. Based on oral accounts, “Iluu” was the name of his clan, and “Booraa” the name of his horse.

Scholarly works also confirmed that the kingdom of Illubabor was founded by Chali Shone (Taye, 1997, pp. 12–21). He emerged as a famous leader of his Ilu clan after a series of clashes with the Bunnoo clan, particularly over using mineral water near the Gaba River. According to sources, Chali Shone was born into a warrior family renowned for fighting for control of land (Faris Adem, Personal Communication, July 15, 2021). His father, Shone, and his grandfather, Guyoo, were reputed as to be great fighters. Chali followed in the footsteps of his predecessors as a strong warrior. As informants stated that he was the *Motii* (king) responsible for safeguarding the territorial integrity of his kingdom (Qajeelcha Aadaafi Beeksissa Godina Iluu Abbaa Booraa, 2001; Taye, 1997, pp. 35-40). During his reign, the territory of his kingdom extended as far as the Baro Qala River in the southeast, the Birbir River in the west, the kingdom of Shekatcho in the west, the Muslim kingdom of Gumaa in the north, and the kingdom of Leqa Naqamtee in the northwest (Yasin, 2009, p. 21).

Chali Shone’s early life and rise to power

Chali, at the time of his father's death, was a young boy. His mother, Biiftuu, raised him. His childhood hobbies included horse riding and hunting. Before Chali's rise to power, authority was in the hands of the Gadaa council. However, the Gadaa council became increasingly powerless as Chali grew more assertive. As the political power of the Gadaa council gradually diminished, Chali Shone established his own leadership in the region (Fatiya Ahmed, Personal Communication, September 15, 2021; Taye, 1997, p. 43). It is difficult to determine when Chali came to power. However, he was a contemporary of Bakaree Godanaa, the founder of Leqa Naqamtee, who rose to power around 1841 (Tesema, 1980, p. 25). Over time, more and more clan members rallied behind Chali Shone, completely undermining the Gadaa council and its rulings. This created an opportune moment for Chali to disregard the leadership of the Gadaa council in almost every respect. He then organized his clansmen under his full political authority (Girma, 2007, pp. 4-5; Guluma, 1993, pp. 73-75).

Territorial expansion and military campaigns

The political transition from the Gadaa system to individual leadership among the settled Oromo brought changes to the political, social, economic, and cultural structures of the time, favouring one-person rule in Illubabor. By the time Chali rose to prominence, he had rapidly expanded his territory. From his base at Gicinaayhaliii Gomboci, in present-day Yayoo *Waradaa* (District), he organized both infantry and cavalry contingents and launched attacks against neighbouring clans. Within a few years, Chali incorporated Hurrumu, Mattuu, Allee, Buree, Suppe, Daarimuu, Cooraa, and Bunno (Nasro Musa, Personal Communication, September 20, 2020; Taye, 1997, p. 54).

In his expansion, Chali first attacked the Hurrumu clan, defeating them with the full support of the Hadheessoo sub-clans. Using the human and material resources obtained from Hurrumu, he proceeded with ferocious attacks against other groups. The Mattuu clan was subdued next, followed by Addale, Alle, Buree, and Daarimuu (Girma, 2007, p. 35). At this stage of his expansion, Chali appeared almost unchallenged. However, Suppee and Bunnoo were determined to resist his forces. Nagawoo Boroo of Suppee and Dimma Tamboo of Bunnoo were particularly powerful, and Chali knew their strength. Before mobilizing his troops against Bunnoo, he planned to attack Chora by dispatching a few of his courageous warriors. Eventually, Bunnoo was also defeated. Following his success against Bunnoo, Chali turned against Suppee. Nagawoo Boroo organized his clan members and attempted to defend his position. However, he ultimately lost the war and fled to Alga, where he took refuge in the thick forests of Saylem (Adam Guyo, Personal Communication, May 3, 2021; Taye, 1997, pp. 30-35).

The consolidation of power and the introduction of Islam

After his successful military campaigns, Chali Shone focused on consolidating his power over the newly established political entity, Illubabor. From his political center at Gicinayi Gombochii, he began organizing an effective administrative structure throughout his domain. His political center was strategically located between two hills, Ilu and Tiggi (Yasin Mohammed, 2009).

After consolidating his power, Chali Shone sent delegates to *Abaa Jobiir* of Gumaa, requesting mutual relations and the presence of religious scholars. It is said that *Abaa Jobiir* warmly welcomed and accepted the delegates. Moreover, they visited the area's palace and madrasas (Muslim religious schools). They were impressed by the discipline of the students. The delegates expressed their wish to have Muslim religious scholars in Illubabor. Understanding their needs, *Abaa Jobiir* agreed to send religious teachers with them. He also sent royal gifts,

including fine clothing and perfume (Dawud Oumer, Personal Communication, May 7, 2021). The delegates returned to Illubabor with two religious scholars and reported what they had observed to Chali Shone. While these accounts form the core of local historiography on the event, the subsequent establishment of Islamic teaching and the pattern of political-religious alliance in the region lend them contextual credibility.

Chali's request for scholars was not only a spiritual pursuit but a calculated political strategy. By adopting Islam and patronizing religious teachers, he legitimized his rule under a new, centralized authority, distinguishing it from the decentralized Gadaa system. This top-down conversion of the elite provided a powerful model for the broader population and forged a strategic alliance with the economically influential Muslim network of Gumaa.

The impact of Islam on Illubabor

At the initial stage, these scholars managed to convert the children of dignitaries. Chali Shone developed a strong relationship with these scholars, which facilitated his conversion to Islam, followed by that of his family and political advisors. With the arrival of religious teachers, a growing number of Muslim merchants came to Illubabor, selling goods in the markets of Suppee and Daa Poo (Badriya Oumer, Personal Communication, September 8, 2022; Levioztion, 1979, pp. 56-62). Accordingly, the expansion of long-distance trade between northern Ethiopia and the south-western region contributed to the Islamization process, as Muslim merchants and clerics from northern Ethiopia played a key role in spreading the faith (Eide, 1996, pp. 57-60; Tesema, 2012, p. 102).

Islam played a crucial role in reinforcing Chali Shone's administration's political authority and economic prosperity. Adopting Islam enabled the ruling elite to secure their internal political legitimacy while simultaneously forging strategic economic alliances with long-distance merchants. This religious transformation strengthened governance and stimulated commercial growth in the region. Under Chali Shone's rule, Illubabor became a hub for Muslim merchants drawn to the area due to its expanding trade opportunities. Merchants from the neighbouring kingdoms of Gera, Gomma, Guma, Limmu, and Jimma actively engaged in commerce. Their presence established long-term settlements and production enterprises in key areas like Yayoo, Hurumuu, Mattuu, Goree, and Buree. This influx of traders not only boosted the local economy but also facilitated the broader Islamization of Illubabor (Dawud & Itana Agmso, Personal Communication, September 22, 2022; Guluma, 1993, pp. 69-71; Lewis, 1965, pp. 76-81; Levioztion, 1986, pp. 27-33). It has been claimed that Chali Shone welcomed

Muslim merchants for their economic contributions and as a means of fostering prosperity and development in the region. His interest in imported goods and trade expansion significantly influenced his engagement with Muslim traders. However, beyond economic motives, Islam resonated with the local population's spiritual needs, particularly in the wake of the decline of the Gadaa system, which had long structured their social and religious order.

The collapse of the Gadaa system was perceived as the disintegration of traditional cosmology, leaving individuals without the blessings of Waaqaa (the Oromo Supreme Being). As a result, many lost confidence in their indigenous belief system, leading to widespread uncertainty. Islam emerged as a new spiritual framework, offering a path to re-establish harmony and order (Itana Agmso, Personal Communication, April 4, 2021; Guluma, 1993, p. 75; Tesema Taa, 2012, pp. 102-103). Accordingly, the transition to Islam restored the relationship between individuals, society, and the Supreme Being. In Islamic teachings, Allah served as the supreme deity, and among the Oromo of Illubabor, Allah was readily identified with or even replaced Waaqaa (Rumana Outer, Personal Communication, April 4, 2021; Mohammed, 1994 p. 53). As a result, Islam became widely accepted and eventually emerged as the dominant religion of the area.

Long-distance trade, merchants and Islam

Expanding long-distance trade connecting the northern Ethiopian region with the south-western part contributed to Islamization. This was associated with the arrival of clerics and Muslim merchants from northern Ethiopia. Increasing commercial ties between northern and south-western Ethiopia facilitated the influx of Muslim merchants and clerics, who initiated the preaching process (Eide, 1996, pp. 57-60; Tesema, 2012, p. 102).

Role of merchants and religious teachers

In south-western Ethiopia, religious teachers who accompanied Muslim merchants in the late nineteenth century established amicable relations with the local society through commerce. Ethiopian Muslim merchants from the north, such as the *Jabarti* and the *Deritta*, actively traded and exchanged commodities with the Oromo. The *Afkala* (Oromo local traders) played a crucial role in establishing a regional commercial network, serving as middlemen between the local community and Muslim merchants (Lewis, 1965 p. 65; Mohammed, 1994 p. 65). At the time, the *Afkala* (local Oromo traders) merchants dominated trade in the region and sometimes travelled as far as the market centers north and southeast of Ethiopia

(Braukamper, 2002, p. 126). Religious teachers accompanying these Muslim merchants also fostered friendly relations with the local community (Mohammed, 1994, pp. 78-80).

Before their conversion to Islam, the Oromo of Illubabor practiced their traditional religion and believed in Waaqa or Waaqayyo, the Supreme Being who created everything in the universe. In traditional Oromo religion, the *Qaalluu*, a ritual expert or priest, played a vital role. To maintain harmony, the *Qaalluu* acted as an intermediary between the Oromo people and the *Ayyaana* (spiritual forces). Once or twice a year, the Oromo visited the *Qaalluu*'s ritual site, known as *Galma*. A significant pilgrimage in the traditional Oromo religion was the *Abbaa Mudaa* pilgrimage, where people sought blessings from their spiritual leader (Mohammed, 1894, p. 70).

Before Emperor Menilek banned the *Abbaa Mudaa* pilgrimage around 1900, fearing Oromo interethnic contact, pilgrims from Shawa, Wallagga, Illubabor, and Jimma travelled to Haroo Walabu or Walal. Additionally, the Oromo *Wadaaja* ceremonies were significant religious events within the *Gadaa* system (Mohammed, 1994, p. 780; Barthels, 1983 pp. 25-30). The ban on the *Abbaa Mudaa* pilgrimage and the subsequent decline of traditional Oromo religious institutions created a spiritual vacuum that contributed to the expansion of Islam in Illubabor. With the suppression of the pilgrimage and the weakening of the *Qaalluu* institution, many Oromo began searching for alternative spiritual frameworks. Islam, which traders and religious scholars were already introducing, provided a structured religious system that resonated with the Oromo's belief in a single Supreme Being. This growing Islamic influence among the Oromo paralleled the broader dominance of northern Muslim merchants, particularly the *Jabarti*, in the caravan trade of the Ethiopian Empire until the mid-nineteenth century. Oral sources indicate that Oromo traders from Wallo, Shawa, and Jimma were also among these Muslim merchants. Through trade, they established amicable relations with the Oromo society of Illubabor (Trimingham, 1952 p. 65; Hussen, 2001, p. 76; Dawud Oumer, Personal Communication, June 5, 2021).

The process of Islamization in Illubabor

Islam was introduced to Illubabor by traders and religious scholars, but the exact date of its arrival remains uncertain. Historical sources indicate that Sheik Shorge, a devout Muslim from the Jimma area, played a crucial role in spreading Islam in Illubabor. The Shorge family of Waabeekoo became the first Oromo converts, followed by many others (Yasin, 2011, p. 135). Sheik Shorge Isa began preaching Islam from his base in Waabeekoo, gradually gaining followers in Algee, Suphee,

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Hurmuu, Mattuu, Aallee, and other waradas of Illubabor. He systematically introduced Islam by first teaching the Quran to children. He successfully converted their parents once he influenced his students (Adam Guyo, Personal Communication, March 5, 2021). Accordingly, the conversion to Islam in Illubabor was gradual, as Islamization occurred peacefully through preaching and teaching. In addition, the adoption of Islam did not result in the complete eradication of indigenous Oromo values. Instead, it facilitated a synthesis in which traditional beliefs coexisted alongside Islamic teachings (Bederu Awol, Personal Communication, March 8, 2020).

Additionally, the simplicity of Islam played a crucial role in its acceptance. Its core tenets were accessible and comprehensible to the ordinary Oromo, making the religion more appealing and adaptable. Even after conversion, the Oromo of Illubabor retained a strong connection to their cultural heritage, a sentiment reflected in their songs and oral traditions, which continued to embody elements of their indigenous belief system. The following poem exemplifies this connection, illustrating how the Oromo of Illubabor embraced Islam while maintaining elements of their indigenous heritage.

Oromo	English
<i>Gogaa Jabbi comaa Hundeen Botoro dhaa, Kimilaa Dargee dhaaa Sodaa Rabii sooma, Hundeen Oromo dhaa.</i>	A calf grows strong beneath the Botoroo tree, Feeding on the grass of time. So too, Oromo, fast the month of Ramadan, strengthen your soul through faith in Allah.

This poem illustrates how Islam was adopted without completely negating Oromo identity.

In reality, elements of traditional Oromo beliefs and customs persisted in various forms. This suggests that while significant aspects of the traditional religion were abandoned, the new faith was, to some extent, integrated within the framework of the old belief system. For instance, the communal Oromo prayer of Wadaaja continued to be practiced even after Islamization. Additionally, Muslim

sheikhs replaced the traditional Qaalluu religious leaders. Among the Muslims of Illubabor, the Muudaa pilgrimage was transformed into an Islamic form of pilgrimage (Dawud Oumer, Personal Communication, March 7, 2020; Mohammed, 1994, p. 95; Lewis, 1965, p. 36; Trimmingham, 1952, pp. 55-68).

In summary, Islamization in Illubabor was flourished by three interconnected mechanisms: (1) the political adoption and patronage of Islam by the new elite under Chali Shone; (2) the socio-economic integration facilitated by Muslim merchant communities; and (3) the ideological resonance between Islamic monotheism and the Oromo concept of Waaqa, allowing for a degree of syncretism that eased the spiritual transition.

***Qubba* (Tomb) of Sheik Mohammed Sultan**

The veneration of saints (*Awliya*) and visitation of their tombs (*Qubba*) is a widespread phenomenon in Ethiopian Islam. The shrine of Sheik Mohammed Sultan represents a localized manifestation of this practice, serving as a crucial node for religious and communal identity in Illubabor.

In Illubabor, an Islamic pilgrimage center known as Qubba Sheik Mohammed Sultan was established at Waabeekoo. Much of Sheik Mohammed Sultan's early history remains obscure. Furthermore, there is no uniformity among various oral informants regarding the Sheik's origin, which may be attributed to his frequent movement from one region to another. The scarcity of written records on his activities, the challenge of locating his contemporaries, and the lack of unanimity among oral informants make it difficult to establish his early history. Despite this, informants provide various traditions regarding the origin of Sheik Mohammed Sultan. One group claims that he was a Gurage who arrived at Waabeekoo after spending several years in the Kingdom of Jimma, specifically in Abbalti. Another group asserts he was a holy man from the Ya'a area in Assosa. Some of his followers even believe that he was from the family of Prophet Mohammed (Dawud Oumer, Personal Communication, March 5, 2021). Regarding the origins of local saints, Trimmingham noted that "Saints were rarely born among the people in whose territory their shrines are situated; they are men who came from outside, claiming in many cases to be descendants of the Prophet" (Trimingham, 1964, p. 53).

It is also said that Sheik Mohammed Sultan had spent time in the Kingdom of Jimma, in Abbalti, before coming to Waabeekoo. Regarding his lifestyle, it is claimed that he preferred to stay in the houses of the poor (Faris Yasin, Personal Communication, March 8, 2020).

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Sheik Mohammed Sultan was not initially recognized as a saint (*Awliya*) and was instead referred to as a *fuqura* (ascetic). However, once he was believed to have performed miracles, he acquired a saintly reputation and was eventually accepted as a *Waliyi* among the people (Trimingham, 1952 p. 98; Fetiya Ahmed, Personal Communication, May 6, 2021). Despite his religious stature, Sheik Mohammed Sultan did not directly engage in the propagation of Islam. Instead, he primarily focused on his personal practice of Islamic principles. There is, however, some indication that he occasionally taught the Hadith (Prophet's traditions) to specific individuals (Yasin Adam; Personal Communication, March 5, 2021; Hussein, 1984, p. 135).

Sheik Mohammed Sultan passed away during the period when *Ras Tassama* governed Illubabor. He was buried at Waabeekoo, near the present site of the Mandara Mosque. After his death, his tomb (*Darith*) became a shrine where the Prophet's birthday celebration (*Mawlid*) was held annually. As a result, Waabeekoo gained special significance as a center for collective religious experience, social interaction, and Islamic pilgrimage in Illubabor (Hussein, 1992, p. 140).

The sheik death and the pilgrimage

Following his death, Sheik Mohammed Sultan's reputation as a *Waliyi* attracted large numbers of pilgrims from surrounding areas and distant places, particularly during *Mawlid*. Pilgrims would undertake votive sacrifices and pay their respects at his shrine, further solidifying Waabeekoo's status as an important Islamic pilgrimage site (Dawud Oumer, Personal Communication, October 8, 2021). Pilgrims to Qubba Sheik Mohammed Sultan from nearby localities began arriving a few days before the main events, constructing temporary shelters or huts in the open area surrounding the main permanent structures. These structures included a mosque, a house containing the saint's remains, and the shrine keeper's residence. A wooden fence separated the shrine from the other buildings, and the ground within the enclosure was regarded as ritually pure. Upon arrival, pilgrims would prostrate themselves before the saint's tomb and kiss the walls of the main building, reciting:

Oromo	English
<i>Mohammed Sultaan Sheekii Manadaraa</i>	Mohammed Sultan of Sheikh Manadaraa,
<i>Kaaraa Keessan dhufnee Mee Nuu haddaraa.</i>	We have come to your home, so welcome us warmly.

This short poem reflects the veneration of Sheik Mohammed Sultan as a saintly figure whose blessings are sought by pilgrims. It highlights the belief in his spiritual authority and intercessory power, which aligns with the broader tradition of saint veneration in Islamic mysticism (Sufism).

Pilgrims also visited the house of the shrine's representative and custodian, where they presented personal or votive gifts. These offerings, given either in cash or in kind, were handed over after kissing the custodian's hand, a gesture believed to serve as a physical medium through which blessings from the saint were transmitted to the pilgrims. On the eve of the festival, a large number of sheep, goats, and bulls brought by the pilgrims were slaughtered. The meat was then cooked and freely distributed. Each year, pilgrims travelled to the shrine from various regions of the country.

In the afternoon and throughout the night of the main festival, people gathered in small groups of family members, neighbours, and acquaintances to begin the celebrations. The ceremony was marked by the conspicuous consumption of *khat* and the recitation of litanies in honor of Prophet Mohammed and Sheik Mohammed Sultan. The small circles of devotees surrounding the main shrine created an impressive display of collective worship (Itana Agmso, Personal Communication, March 7, 2020; Watt, 1961, p.36; Trimmingham, 1975, p. 55). First-time visitors often made vows to return with gifts—whether modest or expensive—if their vows were fulfilled through the saint's power of intercession (Dawud Oumer, Personal Communication, October 8, 2021).

The celebration of *Mawlid al-Nabi* (the Prophet's birthday) at Qubba Sheik Mohammed Sultan in Waabeekoo, Illubabor, provided an important occasion for social interaction among people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. It also brought together members of the ulama, allowing them to exchange ideas and experiences. The festivities included acts of gratitude, during which believers gave alms (*zakat*) to the poor and the needy, visited one another, and shared meals and drinks (Rumana Oumer, Personal Communication, March 3, 2021; Abdo, 1992, p. 25).

Mosques and Islamic teaching centers

The *darassaas* (students) of Illubabor acquired higher education in Gummaa and in Jimma, particularly in Abbalti. The sheiks of Abbalti, by the standards of that time, were renowned for teaching *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *Nahw* (Arabic grammar) (Yasin, 2011; Endale, 2007, p. 7; Informants: Itana Agmaso, Personal Communication, March 5, 2021). When the *darassaas* (students) completed their education, their teachers blessed them. During the graduation ceremony, Abbaa

Jifaar presented gifts to the students, such as books, money, coffee, and even mules for the brightest students to ride when returning to Illubabor. Due to this generosity, Abbaa Jifaar held a highly respected place in the Islamic history of Illubabor (Dawud Oumer & Itana Agmso, Personal Communication, March 5, 2021).

The Italian occupation (1936-1941) marked a significant shift. The fascist administration, seeking to undermine Ethiopian Orthodox Christian authority and cultivate Muslim allegiance, actively supported Islamic institutions. This policy, though politically motivated, inadvertently accelerated the formalization of Islamic education and worship in Illubabor. Accordingly, the Italians supported Islamic activities and their dissemination in the Illubabor. They established learning centers and hired teachers. The darassaas who had previously travelled to distant places for higher education now began to attend schools in nearby villages. The Italians also encouraged Muslims to perform Hajj, one of the pillars of the Islamic faith. For the Muslims of Illubabor, the Italians facilitated the pilgrimage by providing some financial support. This period marked a significant turning point in the history of the Muslims of Illubabor (Nasro Kemal, Personal Communication, September 4, 2021).

During the Italian period, ten Muslims from Illubabor went to Mecca for Hajj. The Italians provided them with financial support, and they returned to Illubabor after completing their pilgrimage. However, after the liberation, the Muslims of Illubabor faced problems related to burial places. According to archival sources, six *gashas* of land in Aallee Warada were allocated to the Muslims for burial purposes (Folder 3, Files 1-10, Matu, 1965 E.C). When Emperor Haile Selassie visited Illubabor, the then governor of Illubabor, *Daijazmach* Tassaw Walelu, presented the emperor with the problem of landless Muslims in the region. In response to this request, the informants stated that the emperor ordered the governor to allot government land to Muslims in different waradas of the province (Badere Oumer, Personal Communication, May 6, 2021).

Despite the Emperor's order, the concerned provincial authorities of Illubabor did not execute his directive. As a result, the Muslims of Illubabor were forced to appeal directly to the emperor, traveling as far as Addis Ababa. One of the cases involved the Muslims of Alee Warada, who applied to the emperor through their representatives, Mohammed Ayanso and Mohammed Nursalle. In their application, they explained that the land previously given to them for burial purposes by Ras Tassama had been taken over by *Ato* Taddassa Dilbo (Illubabor administrative files 1963 E.C.) Several other appeals and petitions by the Muslims of Illubabor were recorded and filed in the Matu archives. These appeals reveal

that, although the Muslims were engaged in land utilization, they were not granted the right to own the land. Interestingly, these appeals and petitions were written in Amharic, and the Oromo Muslims of Illubabor tried to win the favour of the central government by studying and using the language of the government to gain their economic interest. This strategic use of Amharic in their appeals reflects the pragmatic approach of the Muslims of Illubabor, who, despite the lack of official land allocation and the unfulfilled promises from the provincial authorities, sought alternative means to secure their religious and communal needs. In the absence of formal recognition and support, the Muslims of Illubabor turned to purchase land from individuals for burial purposes as well as for the construction of mosques, a practice that continued until the 1974 Ethiopian revolution, demonstrating their determination to maintain and strengthen their religious practices in the face of challenges (Illubabor Administrative File, Folder 3, Files 1–10, Matu 1965 E.C.).

Early centers of Islamic learning: *Kalawas*

Before the expansion of mosques in Illubabor, *Kalawa* was used as a center for Islamic learning and dissemination. Before the Italian presence in Illubabor, mosques existed only in Gore and Matu. In other parts of Illubabor, congregational prayers took place in open spaces, under large trees, and in expansive compounds. In some areas, *Kalawas* and the residences of Sheiks and other dignitaries also served as mosques. *Kalawas* were the most important centers of Islamic learning in the early days of Islam in Illubabor (Nasro Itana, Personal Communication, September 4, 2021).

In contrast, others could hold as many as ten. Many *Kalawas* were situated near the homes of *Ustazes* (head teachers). These *Kalawas* were regularly kept clean and closed. Therefore, it can be claimed that before the construction of more prominent mosques, Muslim communities in Illubabor used small, house-like structures that served the purpose of mosques. These small, house-like structures, often referred to as *Kalawas*, were not only used for prayers but also served as multi-purpose spaces within the community, offering a place for rest, gatherings, and the education of students. Beyond formal education, these *Kalawas* functioned as vital community hubs, fostering social cohesion and solidifying a distinct Muslim identity within a predominantly non-Muslim or recently converted population. However, the *Ustazes* did not receive regular salaries for their services; instead, they depended on charitable donations from the local Muslim communities (Dawud Oumer, Personal Communication, March 5, 2021).

Islamic education in Illubabor initially aimed to teach the community Islam and its principles. Another objective was to train qualified Muslim scholars who

would serve the community as teachers, *Imams* (prayer leaders), and *Qadis* (judges). For the Muslim communities of Illubabor, acquiring knowledge of Arabic through Islamic education was crucial, enabling them to connect with the larger Muslim community worldwide. Fluency in Arabic was seen as a sign of modernization. Moreover, it facilitated the establishment of friendly relations with Yemeni Arabs, who were already engaged in trade in both Metu and Gore towns. These Yemeni Arabs operated shops, tearooms, and bakeries in the area. The Muslim community of Illubabor maintained amicable relationships with these Yemeni Arabs, which, over time, led to marital ties. Some prominent Yemeni Arabs in Gore and Matu towns included Yaya Habab, Jafar Seid, Abdu Teif Allah, Seif Ali, and Seid Seif (Merema Oumer, Personal Communication, March 5, 2021; Hussein, 1992, p. 83).

The introduction of the Tijaniyya order

The Tijaniyya order became the dominant Islamic order in Illubabor, Qellem Wallaga, and Benishangul. It was introduced to the region from eastern Sudan by a Nigerian Sheik, Alfaki Ahmed Oumer, also known as Sheikii Dambi (Haji Dawud Oumer, Personal Communication, April 6, 2021). The meeting between Alfaki Ahmed Oumer and Sheik Muhammed Sultan of Waabeekoo marked a turning point in the history of the Tijaniyya order in the region. Alfaki Ahmed Oumer, who had been traveling back from Mecca, passed through Ethiopia (Jabo, 1989, pp. 5-6).

Alfaki's influence and establishment of centers

Alfaki travelled to what is today called Qellem Wallaga, then under *Dajazamach* Birru W/Gabriel. The governor welcomed Alfaki, who knew traditional medicine. He was allowed to settle in Fincho, Hawa Galan Warada, Qellem Wallaga, where he treated and cured the mother of Dajazamach Birru, who had been ill for a long time. As a reward, the governor granted Alfaki large tracts of land around Rippa, near the present-day Dembi Dollo airport.

A large Muslim community began forming at Rippa, near Alfaki's home. Due to his practical curing abilities and the miracles he allegedly performed, his reputation continued to spread (Kedir Abdisa, Personal Communication, April 5, 2021). As the size of the Muslim community and the number of visitors grew, Alfaki sought out more extensive tracts of land. He established a new center at Minko, close to the town of Dembi Dollo. He received support from a prominent local *balabat*, Burayu Abba Gosa, who helped him construct mosques at Minko, situated near the Birbirsa River, was rich in agricultural products such as corn, teff,

beans, and peas, which grew abundantly. The mosque in Minko became a major center for spreading Islam and Islamic teaching in Illubabor (Yasin Adem, Personal Communication, June 5, 2021).

After many years, Alfaki moved his residence from Minko to Ya'a, where he continued to be visited frequently by followers. Like Minko, Ya'a was rich in agriculture. Alfaki established a large mosque there. When Alfaki died, he was buried in Ya'a, and the site became a well-known Islamic pilgrimage center in south-western Ethiopia (Jabo, 1989, p. 11; Nuradin Seid, Personal Communication, March 3, 2021). Following Alfaki's death, his influence continued to grow through his close associations, particularly with prominent figures such as Haji Abdu'qadir Adam, a Jabarti Muslim merchant from Dembi Dollo, who played a significant role in supporting and spreading Alfaki's legacy. Haji Abdu'qadir supported Alfaki financially and accompanied him during his religious activities. Haji Abdu'qadir Adam was also the founder of the Anuar Mosque in Dembi Dollo. With the mosque's establishment in Dembi Dollo, Qur'anic schools were opened in various parts of what is now called Qellem Wallaga, including Mugi, Dolla, Gidami, and other areas. The contributions of prominent Muslim sheiks such as Hussen Diga of Gara Halo, Hassan Jorga of Matta in Sayyo Warada, and Siraj Bashir of Dolla were instrumental in the teaching and spread of Islam in the Sayo, Anfillo, and Gidami waradas of today's Qellem Wallaga (Keder Abdisa, Personal Communication, and July 15, 2021).

Conclusion

This research has charted the historical journey of Islam's arrival, growth, and establishment within the Oromo communities of Illubabor between the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rather than a sudden imposition, the evidence reveals a gradual process shaped by the coming together of local circumstances and outside influences. Within Illubabor, the weakening of the Gadaa system and its spiritual framework left a void in social and religious life. From beyond the region, the trading activities of Jabarti and Afkala networks—along with the scholars who travelled with them—introduced a new religious structure. The decisive role played by Chali illustrates how political leadership and support for religion can speed cultural transformation.

These insights contribute meaningfully to wider discussions on the spread of Islam in Ethiopia and other parts of Africa. The Illubabor experience shows that conversion cannot be explained simply as either external pressure or internal change alone. Instead, it highlights a pattern of adaptive integration—where Islam took root because its belief in one God resonated with the Oromo idea of Waaqa,

and because it flexibly accommodated local customs, from pilgrimage practices to communal worship. This underscores a broader reality: across much of Africa's interior, Islam often spread through dialogue and adjustment, with local communities actively influencing how the religion was understood and lived, giving rise to distinctive regional expressions within the global Muslim tradition.

Like many historical studies that draw deeply on oral testimony, this work faces the inherent challenge of verifying specific events and timelines. Yet this same characteristic points toward valuable directions for further scholarship. Future studies comparing Illubabor with adjacent regions such as Jimma or Wallaga could clarify which patterns of Islamization were unique and which were shared. Additionally, investigating the roles of women, the evolution of local Islamic legal traditions, and the detailed histories of prominent Muslim families would greatly enrich our knowledge of this period.

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