

Oromo Indigenous Knowledge: Past experiences, current situation & future prospects for promoting sustainable sociopolitical development in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This article seeks to vindicate the significance of utilizing overlooked indigenous knowledge of the Oromo to promote socio-political development. This circumstance has consistently been resisted and actively contested by dominant partisan interests. As a consequence, today's Ethiopia is identified with the practice of conceiving and implementing social, economic and political policies of developed states which has proven to produce failed experiences and false starts. The main cause is that elites and policy experts alienate domestic cultures in its entirety assuming; they couldn't make meaningful contributions to the way out of sophisticated socio-political predicaments. As per the concern of critical social philosophy, however, theories/policies are constructive when it is founded on, or theorized out of its own traditions, or conceived theories executed according to domestic realities and qualities. Premised by this view, the article seeks to show the significance of exploring, restoring and reproducing thus integrating indigenous knowledge into socio-political program of the state. To this end, I seek to provide the decisive role that Oromo indigenous knowledge may play in promoting sustainable social development and envisioning emancipatory politics. It is, therefore, far from, nor is intended to be, a descriptive account other than to define theoretical problematic in the context of ongoing intellectual and political program in the nation-state.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, Critical social theory, Oromo people, sociopolitical development

1. Introduction

Today's Ethiopia is usually positioned in academic and policy discourse, in the constellation of 'developing' nations of the third world. These entities are seen to be

subject to progressive and profound alteration through their exposure to modernizing influences through the increasingly pervasive spread of Western institutions, research

programs, techniques and interests (Tower, 2000). Paradoxically, whereas this is used to be an era in which cultural diversities has been recognized and even valorized, Western institutions in the guise of disinterested, universal and inclusive have been identified as those which may lead to progressive homogenization. This “homogenization of not only system and techniques, but culture and identity is apparently appears to lead to the convergence of form and substance of thought, behavior and governance on the global level” (Ibid). To the extent that this practice is divorcing than accommodating cultural differences, there exists no or little room for social theories and policies to have specific meaning in the cultural context of non-modern others.

For this reason, developing states need to evaluate the relevance of foreign policies/theories vis-à-vis their own

domestic realities. To this end, their first and most important task is to explore and restore their own domestic realities. It is only in doing so, and after this, can they be able to execute foreign theories and policies according to local standards. To the contrary, the heretofore state discourse is identified by suppressing domestic institutions, particularly, of the Oromo for: (i)its potential threat to state discourse, as invoked anti-political consciousness of society removed from power/knowledge monopoly of the state (1992: 534), (ii)Unlike Western tradition where the autonomy of the academy is guaranteed by its separation from the state and public discourse, academics in Ethiopia are vulnerable to state control and ideologically orthodox. As a consequence, numerous works emphasized on Oromo issues are produced recently by foreigners and Oromo scholars in exile. Even today, Oromo scholars are

interested of being heard by the dominant global powers than by the Ethiopian state although it claims the burden of policy formulation.

Based on perspectives drawn from critical social theory to socio-political study, the article seeks to signify the need to integrate indigenous knowledge of the Oromo and others into states social-political programs. Given this prospect is actively contested, the article is concerned and seek to signify the alterity of the misguided trend so far by broadening alternate views and prospects of utilizing domestic realities and indigenous knowledge.

2. History, tradition and indigenous institutions of Oromo society

The hitherto Oromo studies have been challenged by two fundamental issues. The First one, which is identified with most

African tradition, is the fluidity of oral discourse that discouraged documentation and proper study of traditional Oromo indigenous knowledge. The second is the myth fabricated on the Oromo history, culture and identity by Abyssinian and their intellectuals to justify their own ideological and political program. The origin of this myth, according to Megersa, (1994), can be traced to the work of Bahrey (Abyssinian monk) who wrote as *history of Galla* (Abyssinians derogatory name for the Oromo) in 1593 that portrays Oromo people as strangers, destructive, uncivilized and barbarian. Having thus established itself in written discourses, the myth came to be taken as a factual representation of the Oromo and was perpetuated and given credence and scientific validity by subsequent historiographers and anthropologists who then are established academic traditions without questioning the validity of

the data presented (Ibid). Consequently, after Bahrey, the source of information for Ethiopianist scholarship on the Oromo became the public record in which depictions of Oromo life seldom escaped being strongly colored by the view from the political center (Gabisa, 2001).

What is interestingly notable however is that; none of the myth's accounts have been based upon or presented the Oromo history from the perspective of the Oromo people themselves (Megersa, 1994). Indeed, Oromo society's self-description and knowledge is radically opposite to the myths account. But, those accounts have been the main reason for scholars from within and out divided among themselves to engage in Oromo studies. Scholars such as Mesfin W/Mariam (1972), Aleqa Taye, etc. from within, and Ullendorff (1965), Lipsky's (1962), Braukämper (2002), Marcus (1991) from abroad, are

some of those who uncritically perpetuated constructed false image on the Oromo. To the contrary, Heberald (1963), Baxter (1954, 1996, 1978), Legesse (1973), Levine (2012) among others are challenging and refuting the validity of the myth. For instance, John Sorenson *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggle for History and Identity* (1993) is challenging the authority and authenticity of the myth unfolding the real identity, history and culture of the Oromo. Consequently, it is this deliberate misrepresentation on the one hand; and the fluidity of oral discourse on the other, why Oromo people and their institutions have received very little attention within and outside of the state.

What needs to be the topic of analysis is the reality; both from the Oromo perspective as well as through other literatures. Baxter et al. (1996.) for instance noted that, "There are great gaps in our

knowledge of Oromo history and culture and social constitutions but it is clear, though different Oromo groups vary considerably in their modes of subsistence and in their local social organizations, that they share similar culture and modes of thought". Bates (1979) puts: "the Oromo were an ancient race, the indigenous stock, up on which most other peoples in the eastern part of Africa have been grafted" (quoted in Hussien 2006). It is also common knowledge that "all Oromo groups share common cultural and historical roots in the form of kinship, political philosophy, worldview, and ritual" (Jalata, 2001). Gilchrist's (2003) viewed the Oromo as a strong group of people having distinct social, political, religious, linguistic, and cultural history from the Semitic Abyssinians they have now formed a nation with. Furthermore, studies such as Hassen (1990), Legesse (1973), Hussien (2006), Megerssa (1994)

from within, and all recent critical and extensive ethnographic studies uncover the fact that Oromo people are the largest indigenous ethnation in the Horn of Africa.

In today's ethnic based federal state structure (formed following the fall of Dergue regime in 1991), the Oromo people live in the Regional State of *Oromiyaa* - the largest and the most populous of the nine regional states which controversially constitutes 40% of the total population and contribute 60% of total the state GDP. The Oromo speak *Afaan Oromo* (the language of Oromo), an Afro-Asiatic language and the most widely spoken language of the Eastern Cushitic linguistic sub-phylum (Hussien, 2006: 257). For the fact that majority of Oromo people still speak *Afaan Oromo*, they had and still have maintained traditional indigenous institutions and knowledge systems.

Nonetheless, one thing that makes Oromo people one of the most indigenous people in Africa, according to (Hussien, 2006, Legesse, 2000, 1973, Jalata, 2011) is their possession of *Gadaa* system - the egalitarian cultural, political, economic and military organization - that the people maintained but partially lost as a results of fall under the conquest of Menelik II at the turn of 20th century. *Gadaa* system “represents a repository, a storehouse of concepts, values, beliefs and practices that are accessible to all Oromo” (Jalata, 2001: 59). According to Legesse (1973), the Oromo *Gadaa* system is the most sophisticated socio-cultural and political organization ever known in the cultural traditions of African people. For Legesse (1973, 2000), Hussien (2006), and others, *Gadaa* system was a complex institutional organization that embraced the totality of Oromo peoples’

political, social, economic and religious life.

Gemachu (1994), who produced the finest and most comprehensive ethnographic study on the Oromo, however is critical of his predecessors who emphasize and explain Oromo world-view solely on the basis of *Gadaa* system. For him, *Gadaa* system is “a sub-system in a much larger philosophical thought system of the Oromo”. According to him, Oromo world-view could meaningfully be defined by three interconnected concepts quoted below:

It is three concepts (Uumaa, Ayyaana and Safuu) which together constitute the basis of the Oromo world-view. They are and should be seen as interlinked and interconnected aspects of a whole. Together they constitute three different but related points of view about the rational universe as seen through Oromo eyes. Ayyaana is by which and

through which Waaqa(Oromo supreme God) creates the world, whilst Uumaa refers to the entire physical world, both individually and collectively. In the Oromo world-view, safuu(a moral category which constitutes the ethical basis upon which all human action should be founded) provides the moral and ethical code according to which events, whether at personal, social or cosmic level take place. (My italics, P, 221-226)

Knowledge is acquired, according to Gemechu, by living in harmony with these laws such that a wise man is not a person who merely knows but a man who lives his knowledge.

Another important issue that Gemachu insists is integral to the Oromo system of knowledge is the definition, role and relation of man to one another and to other *Uumaa*'sin the cosmos:

In the Oromo view, man is both logical abstraction in the sense of Ayyaana and a concretely existing being in the sense of uumaa. In the cosmos, man constitutes one of the many elements. But, as a group of beings in the diversity of the cosmos, man occupies a very important place, for unlike all other natural beings, man alone is endowed with the intelligence to comprehend his ayyaana and uumaa through which he is able to understand cosmic events (p, 228).

The Oromo commencement of man is analogous to Heidegger's notion of *Dasien* provided in his book "*Being and time*". This conception of man, according to Gemachu (1994), Workineh (2005), De Salvaic, (1901) and others, above all enables the Oromo maintained harmony and solidarity between natural environments better than other neighboring

people forming the current Ethiopian state.

Bartels also reinforces Gemachu's argument unfolding the complexity, relatedness and diversity of issues underlying the Oromo social structures:

Oromo people speak a mutually intelligible language of their own. Kinship relations and marriage customs are much the same, and so their attitude to leadership on one hand and to freedom of the individual on the other, the position of nuclear family, their concept of man and society, and their modes of experiencing the divine—all things which still find expression in many rites, ceremonies and forms of social intercourse.

(Quoted in Jalata, 2001)

Traditional Oromo institutions have been built on kinship system through which the community has sustained equity, justice, equality and harmony since the time immemorial. It is said to be basic

social structure that fundamentally defines common interests in resource utilization, establishing political and religious leadership, and forming and maintaining harmonious relationship within Oromo society (Megerssa, 1994). Moreover, Oromo society have maintained and used indigenous institutions such as *Moggaasa* (name giving), *siiqe* (female institution), *gudifachaa* (Adoption) etc. These institutions and systems of knowledge have played a crucial role and are still largely exercised among the Oromo community despite being challenged by century old Abyssinian imperial administrative institutions.

3. Prospects of critical social theory to knowledge production

The commencement of theory, Gaukroger put: "Is anything which is, or can be, articulated in the form of a statement or set of statements which purport to offer, or offering, an explanation of

something” (1978). In this view, “A theory in work does not only consist of concepts but of propositions or statements pertaining to its object of knowledge as well, since the conceptual systems are the logical or conceptual conditions of existence” (Ibid). Most significant in the sociological experience Elias has also written: “social theory is the conceptualization of society as a self-regulating nexus of events, and as something which was not determined in its course and its functioning by governments (1984).

Looking back to Durkheim, “sociologists affirm the presence of something like the social realm as a reality, which has its own structure and regularities and generates its own quasi-natural patterns of development” (Ibid). This tradition identified social facts with social groups’ collective representations in which all general ideas and concepts are collective

representations of individual and society. The idea here is that, when members of the same society shared moral or other general concepts, they all had mental states with the same representational content such that; ideas, thoughts and words of a social group stand for or represent the objects and processes in their environment. The ability to analyze social issues from different levels, to see the intersection and their mutual influences therefore lies at the heart of socio-theoretical endeavors:

Social theory is core to establishing frameworks for understanding in social science, interpreting human action and how social processes are contested and negotiated, as well as the interplay between various levels at which social relations take place from the micro to macro and individual to societal. (May and Powell, 2008)

It is therefore plausible to argue that theorization is the task

of either reflecting upon, or assumptions about the nature of knowledge and ideas of human action and consciousness: which are used to examine assumptions, explore basis of social facts, its structural dynamics and the place of human agency within the social world. In such a way, the role of social analyst is to reveal what is actually happening and may be happening, and the relationship of the two within social domains.

It seems then that each theory constituting values of a particular culture may not meaningfully describe other cultures:

First, social theories vary according to the cultural and intellectual traditions under which they are conceived and from which they draw their inspiration. Second, all theories are not simply neutral mediums for interpretation; since they contain a 'persuasive' power which seeks to render their accounts either superior over, or

different from, those of others.

Third, social theory not only seeks to account for the dynamics of society, but also reflects upon how knowledge about the social world is possible, as well as the nature of 'social reality'." (May and Powell, 2008)

It is also plausible to argue that there is lack of insights into an explanation of how social theories are actually related in depth. Because of this, when social theory prescribing values of a particular cultural tradition is strictly applied to study other culture (to which it is incompatible) rather manipulates and corrupts those facts than producing knowledge. This incompatibility coupled with methodological gap in social study caused the emergence of varieties of social theories which questioned the acceptance and credibility of the prevailing.

Frankfurt school, for example, coined critical theory in order to challenge the credibility of quantitative, empiricist and positivist social theories. This school also offered new conceptions it claimed is more adequate in characterizing contemporary society which can be identified by the following features. (i) It emphasizes and justifies social criticism which involves a reflection, a standing back and responding to events and actions which have occurred in course of social formation (Dant, 2003). (ii) As an antidote to noncritical quantitative social theory, critical perspective seek to advance conception of critical and normative theory committed to envision emancipatory perspective (Kelner, 1990). (iii) Unlike conventional social theories, which have consigned culture to a secondary status, culture forms a context of action and thought in critical orientation. (iv) It

intrinsically seeks to challenge institutionally and structurally established norms, and can link together to order expert knowledge. (v), More importantly, critical social theory envisions emancipatory politics by reformulating framework to analyze social and political life based on awareness of the many obstacles to change and difficulties, dangers, and dimensions of social transformation (Alway, 1995: 129). Unlike Marxist theory that sets economic exploitation as the foundation of social revolution, critical theory considerably broadened the category of potential agents of change to develop a more inclusive, expansive and modest conception of radical politics (Ibid).

Opponents however perceived drawbacks of critical perspective. Martin (1996), for example, downplayed the role of theory criticism in social studies commenting: "The proliferation of critical theories during the past

two decades has led to ‘crisis’ and ‘chaos’ in social theories” (1996). He noted that, unlike scientific theories - which are used as a means of testing conjectures and perceptions - theories in literary criticism engender diversity than integrating the results of the study (Ibid). Other opponents also questioned whether critical approach (characterized by diversity of theory and accelerating methodological fragmentation) make valuable contributions to improving conditions of people especially in a situation where technologies and economic status are determining life situation of modern society. While the modest few are raising the fact that; critical theories have not yet succeed to produce comprehensive and disinterested theoretical approach such that each new theory presents its claim as the only sensible alternative to those preceded it which end up to infinite regress (Kellner, 1990).

Nevertheless, Dahms (2008) considers the rejection of critical approach as “the ideology of modern society” that tends to sustain the status quo of modern thinking:

The ideology of modern society may be the most apparent in the rejection of the need to reflect on the nature of reality in general, and of concrete challenges in particular, when reflection impedes the ability of decision makers to pursue well-established strategies or approaches to problems that are a function, and tied into the constitutional logic, of modern society – as a set of social structures and practices (P. 9)

Beyond arguments made for or against critical theory however, (and, since social crisis are associated with structural establishments), critical examination of preexisting social institutions and organizations seems to be the

precondition for solving than regenerating social problems.

Furthermore, the rationale of rejecting noncritical quantitative theoretical modellies in critical theorists' orientation to knowledge and action which can be exemplified by Habermas' saccount. In order to show the gap of noncritical theoretical model, Habermas initially differentiates what he calls 'knowledge-constitutive interests': "a link between scientific methodology and social action" consisting of *technical*, *practical* and *emancipatory* (Scott, 2007). The *technical*, refers to those aspects which are concerned with manipulating the environment and ensuring successful action, gaining and expanding control over natural objects and events (Dant, 2003). The *practical* interest refers to aspects which are concerned with attaining and extending understanding and consensus in inter-subjective

relations so as to achieve community and mutuality, while the *emancipatory* interest - at the abstract level - involves liberating men from historically contingent constraints through a process of 'self-reflection' (Scott, 2007).

Based on these three interests, Habermas recognize three types of Knowledge and theorization. The first one is "*historical-hermeneutic knowledge*" that works through the cycle of interpretation aiming to relate ordinary utterances and social products to social life-world. Theorization in this sense depends upon a prior understanding of the object of knowledge.

The second is "*analytic-empirical knowledge*" which is embodied in natural science. The third one is "*critical-dialectical knowledge*" which according to Habermas is proper to social sciences for it combines the former two by recognizing their limitations so as to reconcile them

in a higher synthesis (Scott, 2007). He is critical of positivist, because they have treated a distorted (*Analytic-empirical knowledge*) as the paradigm for all knowledge which accord to him is too restrictive for social science (Ibid).

What is notable about critical theorists in general and Habermas's account in particular is the idea that; all knowledge systems are aspects of deep structures of social evolution by which we constitute the world of experience. Since these rules are not immediately given to consciousness, they can only be dis-covered reflexively through a process of reconstruction for social transformation. It is therefore evident that critical theorists' distinction of knowledge forms is overlooked or unrecognized in noncritical social theory while it attempts to conduct social studies along methodological tenets of hard sciences. Provided that this practice misses much of social spheres to be studied, critical

approach seeks to fill this gap by examining empirical life situations and goes beyond to grasp historically invariant regularities of social action; and combines the understanding of the two by permitting the realization of both through mutually transcending critique (Ibid: 7).

4. The relevance of critical theory to Oromo study

In light of orientations and aspirations presented in the above topic, the importance of critical social theory to Oromo study lies: First, in deconstructing historical misrepresentation of Oromo culture, history and identity. The assumption here is that "Critical studies challenge a top-down paradigm to either historiography or cultural studies, in order to challenge the production of false knowledge about plural culture maintained in diversified societies of Ethiopia" (Asefa, 2001). As we have seen, the heretofore

Abyssinian state discourses on the Oromo have irresistibly been twisting the reality and truth of the Oromo propagating and justifying their own fabrication for ideological and political projects. This perversion has been carried out by the concomitant of political and intellectual programs as Ezkel (2002) well captured it:

In the eyes of the Ethiopianist political and academic elites, undertaking a study on the Oromo was permissible only if it enriched Ethiopian studies and contributed to the survival of Ethiopia as a unitary state, therefore, the one that deviated from this political goal was dismissed as intellectually deficient, and scholars who dared to produce such a study were derided, besmirched, and ostracized.” (P. 3)

This intellectual canon perpetually resisted critical studies, particularly of which emphasized on the Oromo cultures

such that: “Only interpretations that contributed to the production of a unitary, monolithic, master narrative passed the test of Ethiopianist scholarship” (Ibid).

Seen in this angle, it is self-evident that successive regimes have used political power for the objective of “destroying the cultures and identities of ethnic groups in order to form a nation with their own images” (Jalata, 2001). This objective, however oppressive, appears to be a failed mission such that ethnic-groups’ identity, culture and language remained intact upon which today’s federalism is crafted. In spite of this, social/ethnic groups as they forcefully put together also borrowed each other’s cultures, social practices and religious views. Because, with the intensification of globalization and information technologies, cultural borrowing is apparent among world-wide population let alone among those who have common

lived experiences and are still living in one nation-state. Seen in positive angle, these realities are promising whereas surmounting the reoccurrence of cultural subordination requires forming politics meaningfully uniting all. To this end, critical deconstruction of preexisting historical discourses, social and cultural institutions and structural establishments is the first order task.

The second significance of critical trend lies in exploring, restoring and reproducing overlooked indigenous knowledge of the Oromo. This perspective in fact is recommended for African studies in general for it challenges the status-quo of modern culture in the first place. Critical theorists convinced that: “Since the beginning of enlightenment, historically unspecific theory seems universal, as if the same models and theories pertain everywhere, historical and cultural

differences are overlooked” (Jackson, 2009). And, “attempts to use the same methods everywhere led to a critical reaction from those who felt that other methods were needed when studying human societies” (Ibid: 5). Tsenay (1991) also states that, “it is in the guise of disinterested, universalistic, transcendental, and speculative discourse through which the Occident humanity and rationality standardized for the remaining others”. Critical reaction to condescending attitude of modern thinking therefore is justified as it “was directed not at the ends of the Enlightenment but at the chosen means of achieving them” (Jackson, 2009).

In light of the above remarks, it is understandable that it is likely for non-West cultures left unstudied as incompetent and insignificant when evaluated by Western methodological standards. If so, the problem lies in culture exclusionist Western model.

Because, social scientific study is all about the search for truth based on what Mudimbe (1998) called “the right to truth”; so that, “Each culture should be allowed to grow and develop without interference from others so that the temptation to merge cultures or impose one on another should be resisted. Multiple cultures should be left to develop in parallel, not competing with each other but cooperating (Jackson, 2009). Legesse also noted what should be the aspiration of African study:

We study African cultures so that they may live and grow to become the enduring foundation of a distinctive African civilization. In that process of growth, every culture has something vital to offer. Man "s wider cultural identities must be allowed to grow, not by the predatory expansion of one civilization, but by the complementary integration of many diverse cultures. No

human community, however humble, should be forced to give up its cultural identity without making a critical contribution to the larger reality of which it becomes a part. That remains true whether the larger reality is national culture, pan-African culture, or universal culture.”
(1973: ix)

The main reason for justifying critical perspective to both African and Oromo studies is that, in the same way African history, civilization and consciousness is distorted by European colonizers and their exclusive canon of literacy, so do the Oromo culture in Ethiopian. As Legesse noted: “Ethiopianist scholarship was conducted from the orientalist than Africanist perspective, which tended to dissociate north Ethiopian civilization from its African roots and from those populations of Ethiopia whose culture are entirely African in character” (Ibid).As a matter of

fact, what has been emphasized and presented in Ethiopia so far is the identity, culture and language of one ethnic-group (mainly, the Amhara's) as it would subsume other ethnic groups.

The argument to be made here is that, the continuity of this modality is unlikely to be altered only by criticism. It requires designing research program for the restoration and rehabilitation of cultural integrity of the Oromo society. Levine (2007) studying Oromo culture commented: "Perhaps, the Oromo can contribute not only constructively to the organization of discourse in Northeast Africa, but in unparalleled way to contemporary efforts to organize dialogue in the global community". Accordingly, the most effective approach to cast off the yoke of exclusionist theoretical model of both European and Ethiopianist at the same time is, to adopt critical theory to African and Oromo

study. Given Ethiopia is multicultural, multilingual and multinational state, the finding of distinctive cultures will enable the state to have broader foundation to expose and avoid obstacles to social justice, knowledge production and sustainable development?

5. Instigating principles of Gadaa imperatives of "Emancipatory politics"

Beyond 'deconstruction-reconstruction' role provided so far, prospects of critical theory can also play broader role in the process of political reform .It appears to be essential as critique builds the possibility of resistance: to established views and opinions about governance; to the taken-for-granted authoritative political culture; to simple acceptance on the basis of convention or established authority (Dant, 2003: 7).It offers not only thorough-going critique of sustained

political culture but also a model of thought to change it. In our context for instance critical orientations may offer instances of utilizing social norms and values as integral basis of ongoing democratization program.

Successive governments' political projects actively contested this perspective, which according to Baxter, was crafted along quasi-authoritarian regime in Europe: "Just as the expansion of the European empire in Africa coincided with that of Abyssinian, so the latter took on some of the same sanctimonious assumptions of bringing civilization to the savages (1994). Bulcha (2011) add: "The source of Ethiopian states' exclusionary policy and practice has, in part, been an imperialist arrogance that regards non-Amhara indigenous cultures as inferior and un-Ethiopian". Keller (1995) noted its implication as: "nation-building in Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia has been

unsuccessful, because none of these states possessed the needed cultural basis". The two main factors affecting this task he identified are: "On the one hand, leaders proved to be incapable of developing new social myths which could serve as the ideological foundation for nation-building; and on the other, they attempted construction on principles alien to their culture" (ibid).

The present regime also seen showing little or no concern to overcome the hitherto been constraints to both nation-building and democratization of the state:

The present regime's ethnic-based federal set-up, designed along a liberal democracy trajectory, appears to be failing to produce the desired result. What is being implemented as democratization and decentralization of power by the new regime to address the demands and claims of the

country's diverse communities seems to be leading to a dead-end. The central problem is the contradictory actions of the regime, its democratization and decentralization policy on paper and centralization in practice, which has failed to make a major departure from the country's past authoritarian political trajectory (Merera, 2007).

He adds, "The ethnic-based model of federalism appeared to be a response to the much debated 'national question' since 1960s among the forces of change while multiparty democracy seems to be motivated to get support of the victorious West in the cold war" (unpublished article: *Twenty years of experimenting with revolutionary democracy: Election and Democratization in Ethiopia, 1991-2010*)

During the first decade of administration little political,

cultural and religious freedoms are tolerated whereby majority accentuated it as the antithesis of erstwhile socio-cultural, religious and political oppression of century old Amhara-led imperial regimes. In due course, it revealed that it remained centralist authoritarian in a manner reminiscent of previous regimes where theory and practice are totally different. Like its predecessors, it is endorsing ill-conceived policies and political program of U.S which has mainly shaped by U.S government's¹global strategic interests and geopolitics rather than the mutual benefits of the people (Asefa, 2011: 131). It merely intended to build relation with ruling class and their repressive and exploitative governments:

Since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, the U.S. has been using Africa for its

objective of the so-called war on global terrorism by allying with some dictatorial and terrorist African regimes, such as that of Ethiopia, that engage in state terrorism and gross human rights violations while giving lip service to the issues of democracy, human rights, and economic and social development. (Ibid)

It is said to be a regime in state of political turmoil when offering democratic principles on paper and less inclined to put into practice. This, for instance, is shown by its negligence to address Oromo's demand for *Afaan Oromoo* to be the official language of state among others. Tower (2000: 69) stated: "The entrenched use of Amharic as official language and local color is the indicative of states strategic manipulation of domestic cultures which implicitly

denies the conception of any proprietary or intellectual rights for others in the present conduct or future development". Provided that the Oromo are not linguistic minority and *Afaan Oromo* is the mother tongue of more than forty percent² of the total population, this proscription is morally and politically unjustified. More specifically "given the Oromo, more than any other group, suffered under 'one language' policy of Amharization political program because of their language" (Matsuda, 2005: 5), and at a time when countries such as Canada and Switzerland, among others, are functioning well with more than one language, this prohibition is illegitimate at best and a resort to injurious legacies of the past at worst.

It is reasonable to assume that as long as past experiences are implicating current states of affairs

(And, since there has been no democratic culture whereby preexisting sociopolitical, cultural, economic institutions are still preoccupied by the mind-set of the past legacies) democratization, particularly of multinational /cultural democracy in Ethiopia, by no means is claimed here and now. But, democratization which is only introduced by present regime should be perfected to promote sustainably progressive social, political and economic development. This imperative, according to Keller (1995), Legesse (1994), Baxter (2002), Baissa (1994) and others, who are well aware about realities in the nation-state, is far-fetched unless socio-political program is broadened to incorporate indigenous ethos and values as integral basis of nation-building as well as democratization.

They all justify this perspective by presenting *Gadaa* system as an example: which

according to Oromo historian and researchers is the classic example of traditional African form of democracy that “comprises legislative, executive and judiciary body of Oromo political philosophy” (Keller, 1995: 624). Legesse, who conducted extensive critical research on Borana Oromo *Gadaa* practices, presented the overview of *Gadaa* system as:

Is a system of gadaa classes (luuba) or segments of generations that succeed each other every eight in assuming political, military, judicial, legislative and ritual responsibilities? A ‘generation’ is forty years long and there are five segments (gadaa classes) in it. Each one of the active gadaa classes (luuba)—beyond the first three grades—has its own internal leaders (hayyuaduula) and its own assembly (ya’ii). The leaders of the luuba become the leaders of the nation as a whole when they come to power as a

group in the middle of the life courses. The class in power (*gadaa*) is headed by an officer known as *Abbaa Gadaa* or *Abbaa Bokuu* in different parts of the Oromo nation, terms that mean “father of the institution” or “bearer of the symbol of authority” respectively. (2000)

Accordingly, *Gadaa* system is not independent of other socio-cultural institution, but only functions in the interconnected manner. *Qaalu* institution (electors’ and ritual leaders), Oromo ethics called *Safuu* and national assembly (*Gumii*) are the building blocks of *Gadaasy* stem without which it may not sustain justice, order and harmony among the community since the time immemorial. Moreover, *Gadaa* system has also maintained the principles of check and balance (by its three organs), balanced opposition (among five parties), and power sharing between higher and lowers administrative and

balanced representation of all clans, lineages, regions, and confederacies (Jalata, 2012). “*Gadaa* as an integrative system organize male Oromo according to *hiriyaa* (age-sets) and *luuba* (generation-sets) for social, political, and economic and military purposes” (Jalata, 1991). Most importantly, rule of law is the integral element of the system so that “*Abbaa Gadaa/Abbaa Bokuu* who violates the rule is recalled before the end of his tenure” (Baissa, 1994).

To the contrary of authoritarian structured culture of politics, *Gadaais* identified by the following characteristic features. (i) The ethos of *Gadaa* placed great value on solidarity than domination which in turn necessitated the pursuit of unanimity, (ii) its philosophical foundation is cosmological (eco-centric) than purely anthropological as it gives priority for harmonious relationship between humankind and natural environment, (iii) it

essentially promote the principle of sharing than exploitation that of which is undermined in contemporary politics, (iv) “In contrast to Western democracy that of which characterized by pushing aside young and elders thus deprived legitimate role in political life, age and generation based democracy of the Oromo does a better job of distributing power across generations and age groups,” (Legesse, 2000). In such a way, *Gadaa* system ensure that rights are distributed among generations thereof no generation that is mature enough to be able to bear the rights and duties of citizenship is prevented from taking part in political life (Ibid: 248).

Furthermore, *Gadaa* is a political system grounded on indigenous ethos of the Oromo whereby norms of society plays a key role in political leadership. Its philosophical aspect is rooted in belief system of the people

sustained across generations in that each class of society partakes to determine political, economic, religious, social and cultural affairs. By virtue of this, Baissa (1994), Legesse (1994, 2000), and Harbert S. Lewis (1994) overtly argue that *Gadaa* transcends the realm of mere governance principles of modern democracy. Regardless of this, the worth of social harmony, good governance, leadership and political power eventually diminished following the Oromo fall under authoritarian rule such that the community apparently founding strange and unfamiliar political contexts.

It is therefore evident that, the presentation of *Gadaa* system alone indicates a huge gap in states academic, policy and political program as it alienate such a valuable institutions. It also reveals policy makers tacit acceptance of ‘cultural universalism’; that evokes forms without substance, universality without particularity and

objectivity without subjectivity. Contrary to this assumption, policy perspectives of critical social theory “engages in a form of criticism of social formations that arises precisely through the awareness of the failure of political action to bring about the changes needed in political and social formations” (Always, 1995). Since the hitherto intellectual tradition actively resisted culture study in general, prospects of critical trend certainly is decisive for salvaging Oromo indigenous institutions such as Gadaa and system of knowledge that would facilitate the transmission of cultural experiences. This perspective is decisive for uprooting authoritarian political culture; and in the long run can serve as the basis for the institutionalization of democratic political system. (Baissa, 1994).

It seems then that, the tendency to implement foreign policies and political programs

without at least engaging in dialogue with domestic realities is to assume that domestic traditions, at the very minimum, is unlikely to make any meaningful contribution to the quest for a solution to sociopolitical and economic problems (Ramosé, 2002). This practice can hardly be transformative without harnessing ‘is’ with ‘ought’: the reconciliation of facts and norms beyond established political and intellectual predicaments. It requires emancipatory politics: “politics informed by a vision of distinctness without domination, a politics of a plurality of agents, a multiplicity of actions, and a vastly expanded arena of political struggle” (Always, 1995). While, political reform in Ethiopia no longer regarded as a mere regime change :without defining and implementing principles of good governance; and unless designing research program capable of reproducing social scientific knowledge to understand

historical and existential social relation in the state, within a region and the world. This is through which erstwhile cultural colonialism, political oppression and economic exploitation is avoided once and for all.

6. Concluding remarks

One thing apparently discouraging democratization and sustainable development of most developing states of Africa and Ethiopia in particular is associated with uncritical adaptation and implementation of foreign institutional paradigms. Since this practice ignores even divorced indigenous cultures (all together) as a basis of analysis, emancipatory perspectives cannot be envisioned without at least reversing and correcting this modality. The prospect of transforming the hitherto been sociopolitical predicaments is precisely; reawaking the ignored, unfocused and overlooked socio-

cultural institutions to engage in dialogue with the conceived one. In presenting Oromo experiences and situation in Ethiopia, it is evident that consecutive regimes have been perverting facts about the people in its entirety without reservation. To end its continuity, prospects of emancipation should be drawn in line with political and academic programs; as both were, and still are, the means of perversion.

Most importantly, it is essential to integrate critical social theory, as it seeks to find out cultural and political norms to more heterogeneous societies like Ethiopia. As a matter of fact, inadvertently and ill-conceived policies for a long period under different regimes brought millions to the brink of starvation, political detentions and turmoil and long civil conflict (Bahru, 2001). The way out of these phenomenon necessitate the institution of political program informed by

indigenous knowledge capable of resisting the social epistemology of domination from its own tradition. Just like orthodox social theory (a prototype of Ethiopian scholarship) is failed in the Occident tradition then necessitate and invite dissent voices of multiculturalism, it is also irreconcilable to let indigenous knowledge of the Oromo and other ethnic groups to share a stake in state's social, economic, intellectual and political program. Irrespective of this, mere replication of foreign institution without reconciling with domestic realities (or, at least giving the local flavor) will be unauthentic, misguided and unsuccessful. Foreign policies and practices, however declared its objectivity, should tolerate cultural particularities as ingredients of interpretation, through which policies (of any) could be conceived and executed according to local standards and qualities.

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