

REPORTING BEYOND YOUR EYES

ADDIS STANDARD

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SPECIAL EDITION
IN MEMORY OF THE FALLEN

#IreechaMassacre





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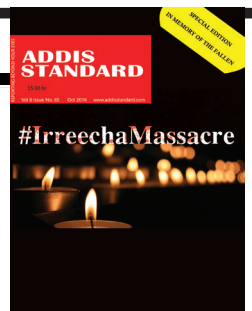
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EDITORIAL

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I keep asking myself how dare they kill on sacred grounds and on a sacred day. How dare they? All those people muddied and bloodied in their beautiful and colorful clothes. All those lives lost. Should mourning be all we do these days?

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Into the heart of Irreecha: Why is it so important to the Oromo?

An amazing part of the Irreecha ceremony is its absolute orderliness, the reigning of absolute peaceful aura, the showering of love and mutual respect, the sense of oneness and unity. In all the Irreecha ceremonies recorded over the last two decades, after its first rejuvenation, there has never been a single stampede or injury recorded

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Irreecha: A defining moment in hallowed land

In 2016, it was clear that the largest gathering of Oromos from Oromia's all corners would be a scene of expression of anger in the wake of the government's brutal crack-down of Oromo protests during the preceding ten months

*In memory of
the fallen on*

Sunday

Oct. 2, 2016

#IreechaMassacre

#IrreechaMassacre: The day that changed the game



After the Oromo Thanksgiving, *Irreecha*, turned into a death fest in which hundreds lost their lives and many more were exposed to physical as well as psychological trauma, its aftermath was felt immediately and it is likely to last long.

While many political commentators are engaged in debates as to what exactly caused the *Irreecha* Massacre, as it was dubbed, and what it entails to the country, the government, in its characteristic move, continued to downplay the numbers of casualties; it also rejected allegations that security forces triggered the stampede which caused the death of more than 678 people, according to figures from the opposition Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC); the government put the numbers at 52, but as many things in Ethiopia numbers suffer from manipulations. The government has also blamed “inside and outside forces” for instigating the protests. This is despite the fact that the Oromo, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, have been actively protesting demanding equality, justice and greater autonomy for almost a year.



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Appearing on state TV on the night of the tragedy, Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn denounced “disruptive forces” for being the perpetrators at the celebrations and praised security forces for “not having fired a single shot.” The government has declared a three day public mourning effective as of Monday Oct. 3rd.

However, witnesses who were present at the festival portray a different picture. According to these witnesses, the security forces, if anything, were the perpetrators.

One such witness is Gemechu Merara, a prominent social media commentator who is a lawyer by profession. From the very beginning, Gemechu told *Addis Standard*, he was bewildered to see “a masked soldier with a machine gun,” seemingly ready to shoot. “It looks like he was looking for a simple reason to pull that trigger, just like an athlete waiting on set for the sound of the whistle to go off,” he said. Another detail which he finds puzzling is the fact that even though the soldiers were wearing the Oromia Police uniform, many of them were speaking in Amharic “which is unusual.” Thus, he suspects that some of them might have come from other places, “probably from Federal jurisdiction,” he says. “The whole thing didn’t smell good from the beginning.” Gemechu is under no illusion that live ammunitions were used as much as rubber bullets and teargas bombs. But the shootings were not directed at the people. “I have seen live ammunition being shot towards the sky to disperse the protesters,” says Gemechu.

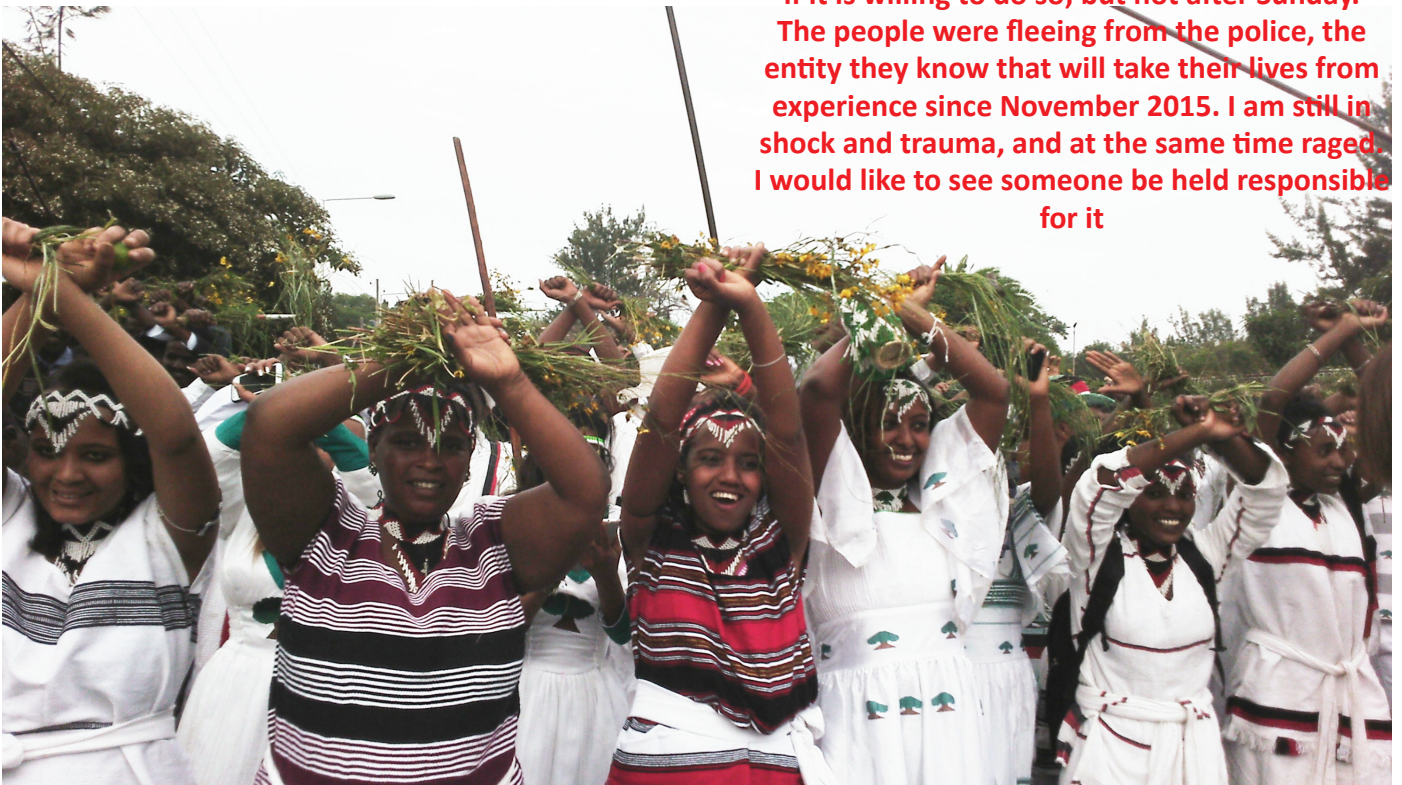
Addis Standard’s Etenesh Abera, who was at the festival, corroborates Gemechu’s account and other reports that the police were shooting but not at the people. Etenesh says protesters have crossed their hands in the X mark, which has come to be the sign of protest for the Oromo during the past eleven months. They were denouncing the incumbent EPRDF and the regional hegemon, the Oromo People’s Democratic Party (OPDO), one of the four ethnically molded parties that make up the EPRDF.

As protests intensified and chaos erupted near the stage where the main ceremony was scheduled to take place, security forces began firing tear gases and warning shots to disperse the protests. At that time, “a lot of people fell into nearby ditches. There were stampedes. It was simply mayhem,” said Etenesh who was close to *Lake Arsadi*. “There were a lot of casualties. The ambulances were not enough. Police vehicles were also taking dead bodies and injured people to hospitals,” she says.

Wakgari, another attendee who is a resident of Addis Abeba and was in Bishoftu for the festival, says the heavy presence of security forces caused the subsequent tragedy. “There were helicopters hovering; there were heavily armed cops. It was unnerving,” he said. The scene afterwards “is something that will remain imprinted in my head.” Etenesh shares Wakgari’s statement about the presence of heavily armed security officers. “I arrived at the town around 7: 30 AM. There were security checks by heavily armed men and women at the entrance of the town. But the celebrants didn’t seem to be intimidated by this as many of them were chanting protest songs and slogans,” she said.

Hoping to disperse the protesting attendants of the festival, the security forces were shooting “as far as the center of the town called “Circle”. I have seen people fall and stepped on as far as the so called Management Institute in an effort to run away from a tear gas released by the police. There was no place to hide from it,” says Gemechu. He is particularly upset by the way the tragedy was initially reported as nothing

“ I used to think, until that very day, that the government could fix things and make them right if it is willing to do so; but not after Sunday. The people were fleeing from the police, the entity they know that will take their lives from experience since November 2015. I am still in shock and trauma, and at the same time raged. I would like to see someone be held responsible for it





but a usual stampede expected from such gatherings. “It [was] never like what they said. The people were running from the police, who were shooting bullets. Who wouldn’t run away from that?” he asserts. Above anything else, he is outraged by the incompatibility of the violence from the security forces with the peacefulness of the protesters. “Of course the people, in unison, were chanting verses of freedom, singing freedom songs in Afaan Oromo. But none of the slogans chanted had a violent content or anything that leads to violence,” he tells this magazine. “In contrary, most of them were preaching unity and solidarity among different ethnic groups. The only party that has been despised by the chants was the government. I have seen people telling and physically forbidding the hot and emotional youth not to show insulting gestures to the soldiers. They were peaceful to that extent.”

“I witnessed people dumbfounded by the shock of how this sacred day has ended up,” says Etenesh. “I saw people who had fallen inside ditches and deeper pits. I saw people who had no one to pick them up. I saw people suffocated by the smoke from the teargas.”

Since she was around the lake, Etenesh says, she hadn’t seen what was going on elsewhere in the town. “But when I returned back to the center of the town, I heard from people that particularly in the place known as ‘Circle’ there were fierce confrontations between protesters and the police”. According to Etenesh, based on her discussions with other people at the scene, the police found it very difficult to control the crowd and started shooting live bullets.

“I am in an extreme shock and sadness,” says Gemechu. “There were few people among the deceased that I knew personally on different occasions. That is a heartbreaking tragedy. It was just a matter of chance that I lived to see today. It could have been me.”

Gemechu is angry at the fact that the very government body that was supposed to protect the public “from a stampede or any other cause of death created the havoc.” “I used to think, until that very day, that the government could fix things and make them right if it is willing to do so; but not after Sunday. The people were fleeing from the police, the entity they know that will take their lives from experience since November 2015. I am still in shock and trauma, and at the same time raged. I would like to see someone be held responsible for it and be hanged for what he/she did to the people, literally.” Afterwards, in the town, “there were troops everywhere, in a group of five up to ten,” according to Gemechu.

Wakgari, who is in his early twenties, relates how he was really scared “to my bones even after I came back [to Addis Abeba.] I loved Bishoftu but now I’ve seen what I’ve seen and I’ve experienced what I’ve experienced and it is not the same anymore. I am not the same anymore.” There aren’t people who died or were injured that he knows personally, “at least until now because the number of deaths and those injured is likely to grow. But it doesn’t mean that I haven’t lost a part of me.”

Gemechu says that it is not hard to analyze “the greater impact of this massacre. The murders we have seen this year have widened the base of the angered and agitated society. It is natural for people who lost their loved ones to need change, if not revenge. By causing Sunday’s tragedy, the government has sent the people the wrong message that cannot be undone. Worse, government officials at different levels have poured salt into the wounds of the grieving families by trying to play the usual blame game” because sadly, “Taking responsibility and apologizing for its own wrong is a taboo in the ruling party’s life of 25 years.”

“ [I] was really scared “to my bones even after I came back [to Addis Abeba.] I loved Bishoftu but now I’ve seen what I’ve seen and I’ve experienced what I’ve experienced and it is not the same anymore. I am not the same anymore

True to Gemechu’s words, following the tragic incident, thousands across Oromia are protesting, expressing their angers and rejection of the government by coming out on the streets. Buildings and businesses that protesters suspect as having regime ties and several other businesses were set ablaze; roads were closed; chaos has reigned once more.

The protests against the government, unlike recent times, have reached the capital as well. Several areas in the outskirts of the city have witnessed protest movements with foreign owned companies being the prime targets of the protesters’ rage. By the time *Addis Standard* went to the press, more than ten factories were reduced to ashes, by the government’s own account. And protests show no end in sight. ■

A survivor's account

Bekel Atoma Boruu



Photo Credit: ZACHARIAS ABUBEKER / AFP - Getty Images

It took me several minutes to begin this first sentence as my mind kept on running short of words to jot down what my eyes witnessed on *Irreecha* 2016, the annual Oromo Thanksgiving festival.

My colleagues and I went to Bishoftu, 45km south east of Addis Abeba, on Saturday, October 1st. We arrived there at noon; we went to record the festival for TV shows. It was a fascinating eve as there were several cultural shows on the street. Delegates from different zones of Oromia were displaying the cultural shows of their respective areas, carrying artifacts that reveal the Oromo.

The presence of the *Abbaa Gadaas* [elected elders], *Hadholii Siqqee/ Women/* and the youth accompanied by horsemen and the Oromia Marsh band made the eve of the biggest festival so colorful. The songs made by the youth were loud with lyrics containing resistance messages beautifully fitted into the traditional melody. The gestures they bring forth with the songs also speak louder. The eve brought lots of joy as we welcome five Oromo youths who travelled about 160 km from Ambo, west of Addis Abeba, all the way to Bishoftu on foot to attend the festival.

But as the sun began to set, the beautiful eve suddenly darkened when Oromia police started clearing the main road by dispersing the youth using gun shots in the air. The sound of gun shots echoed loud from different parts of the city throughout the night.

Sunday October 2 was the actual day of *Irreecha*. It took us minutes to adjust our equipment and go out to the main road from our hotel (Ye-libe Hotel) to start recording the special day. By the time we went out, the main road has already been filled with people in cultural costumes

singing cultural songs mixed with strong anti- government messages. Their messages uniformly ended with words such as “*Dinnee Dinnee Dinnee*” meaning we refused; their hands were crossed above their heads making the famous X symbol of #OromoProtests. In my estimation the number of people present on this year’s *Irreecha* festival could reach close to five million and almost everyone was showing the X symbol all the way to *Hora Arsadi*, the lake where the main festival takes place.

Members of the Oromia police were everywhere; they were deployed all the way to the lake, but unlike other times they were very tolerant. They even kept quiet when the youth chanted strong anti-government slogans in front of their temporary camp around a place known as “circle”.

“

Those who ran to save their lives from the teargas bombs and the gun shots pulled themselves and one another to the nearby 6 meters long ditch in front of the podium. The teargas bomb thrown at the mass increased the number of people running to the ditch not seeing what is in front of them; besides they were blinded by the heavy smoke from teargas

We started interviewing participants while waiting for the group of *Abbaa Gadaas*, who are in charge of leading the festival, to arrive. Here it is important to note that there were a group of fake or unelected *Abbaa Gadaas* organized by the government and led by ex- *Abbaa Gadaa of Tulama*, Nagasa Nagawo. Supported by the government this group has made it earlier to the *Irreechaa* podium. The real groups of *Abbaa Gadaas*, led by *Abba Gadaa* Beyene Sembetu, have warned against the presence of government officials to make statements on the festival. As I came to learn later on, the *Abbaa Gadaas* led by Nagasa Nagawo who travelled to the lake earlier that morning to bless and open the floor for government officials have faced strong opposition. It was what prompted the youth to take over the stage in protest. An iconic video released later on shows a young man chanting “Down Down Woyane” “Down Down TPLF”. The youth showed a fierce resistance which forced the unelected *Abbaa Gadaas* to quickly leave the podium.

Despite growing protest however, everything was going peaceful as the Oromia Police showed unprecedented tolerance. Shortly afterwards the group of *Abbaa Gadaas* led by Beyene Sembetu, with whom we were travelling, has arrived on the podium. But the youth continued shouting and chanting protest slogans again for reasons I still don’t understand. My assumption is that the youth may have mistakenly thought government officials were back at the podium. They continued shouting and protesting and have tried to take over the stage again. The Oromia police have continued preventing them not to come to the stage.

After strong confrontations between the police and the youth all of a sudden few among the youth have started throwing stones and plastic bottles towards the stage, which forced the police on the stage to flee. But other members of the Oromia Police started firing teargas bombs and live ammunition into the air to disperse the protesting crowd. When they started firing, we on the stage shouted at them in order to stop them from firing at the people, but they targeted us and fired at us. The police who saw me shout turned his gun towards me. At that time I immediately jumped from the stage and ran into the nearby bush on the right side of the tribune. They threw a teargas bomb at the *Abbaa Gadaas* on the podium too, which caused most of them including *Abbaa Gadaa* Beyene Sembetu to faint.

Those who ran to save their lives from the teargas bombs and the gun shots pulled themselves and one another to the nearby 6 meters long ditch in front of the podium. The teargas bomb thrown at the mass increased the number of people running to the ditch not seeing what is in front of them; besides they were blinded by the heavy smoke from the teargas. *Abbaa Gadaa* Beyene, who ran to the bush where I and others were hiding, fainted immediately and we helped him regain his consciousness. I heard him speak he was forced to come to the scene, despite his initial refusal fearing the likelihood of this incident.

We started shouting and crying but a commander of the Oromia Police came and warned *Abbaa Gadaa* Beyene to shut up. When the yelling and the calls for help started coming out from inside the ditches, it attracted the attention of the police. They put down their fire arms and ran towards the ditch to help. I was following all the happenings from where I hid myself. By the time I reached at the ditches, hundreds have already lost their lives and many more were still trapped in the ditch-

es, covered up by the soil. Many people, including members of the Oromia police, got into the ditch to help those trapped inside. We tied our scarves together and pulled many victims out. I myself pulled four people out but I could not confirm whether they were dead or alive.

The scene was horrific and unbearable. Many who lost their relatives and many others who saw belongings of their loved ones scattered on the field were crying and running towards the ditch.

Having said this, I would like to make a few points clear from my personal account of events. First, although the police have fired live ammunitions I didn’t see anyone shot dead either by a bullet or a bomb thrown from a helicopter. All the deaths I witnessed were caused by the stampede, which was originally triggered by the firing gun shots and teargas that blindfolded the people and forced them to jump into the ditches.

Second, the fierce opposition by the youth against the unelected *Abbaa Gadaas* was absolutely peaceful and the reaction from the police was nonviolent. But the fact that the protest continued when the elected *Abbaa Gadaas* took to the stage indicates a dirty political game that the government played to discredit the elected *Abbaa Gadaas*. Logically, it has to be the stage of the unelected *Abbaa Gadaas* that should have faced resistance, and it did. My suspicion is that the stones thrown from the few individuals onto the stage when the elected *Abbaa Gadaas* took the stage were orchestrated by government supporters to help the government accuse the elected council of *Abbaa Gadaas* led by Beyene Sembetu and use the opportunity to outlaw the council. It is important to note that the elected council of *Abbaa Gadaas* has issued a statement prior to the event in which the council has strongly advised against the possible presence of government and party official to make political statements on the festival.

Third, the government in the first place should not have organized the unelected *Abbaa Gadaas* and should have heeded the call by the elected council of *Abbaa Gadaas*. If government representatives had refrained from turning the stage into a political capital, there would have been no violence at all. As such in one way or another, the government must be held accountable for all the deaths. Besides, even if stones and bottles were thrown by few protesters, the police should have abstained from firing live ammunition and teargas in the presence of a crowd of millions.

Lastly, both the government and opposition groups must stop trying to make political gains out of this horrific incident that resulted in the massacre of our people. The opposition must stop creating fake stories and doing politics at the cost of the lives of innocent victims. The fact on the ground is more than enough to demand justice for those killed. The government must also stop blaming anti-peace elements for causing the destruction. Millions were clearly and peacefully protesting against the government; either all of them are anti-peace elements or there were no anti-peace elements at all. The government must therefore publicly take responsibility as all those killed jumping in to the ditches were blinded by a teargas bomb thrown at them by its security forces. Let’s not forget that attendants were rigorously searched by the thousands of security forces deployed at the event. It is not the first time that millions of Oromo come together to celebrate *Irreechaa* but such tragedy never happened before. ■

Irreecha is sacred!

We cannot let them take it away

Ayantü Ayana



I watched as a family of four took a break from their hike; all of them in the same colorful attire. I could not resist so I asked to photograph them

“What can I say? What is there to say? He left me saying he was going to look for the mother of his child, he did not tell me he was going to the *Irreecha* festival. He died a sudden death; they just brought me his dead body. I wish it was me instead of him. My son is gone now.” These are the agonizing words of a grieving mother who spoke to *Reuters* days after the Bishoftu massacre.

Her son, Tesfaye Tadese, is one of the more than five hundred people killed while attending *Irreecha* on Sunday October 2nd. This annual festival is an opportunity to be cleansed of and to heal from the socioeconomic, cultural and political trauma embedded in the Oromo experience in today’s Ethiopia.

“ The presence of armed soldiers, high ranking EPRDF and OPDO party officials was stifling for the spiritual leaders. All the same, some of them did not mince their words. They called for peace, specific kinds of peace. They asked for the release of political prisoners. It is almost as if the spirit was telling them of what’s to come

Irreecha is an opportunity to be healed from the pain of living in incredibly anti-Oromo cities and from the pain of existing in a state that has criminalized the very fact of being an Oromo. It is a momentary break from the literal and symbolic everyday violence Oromos live within the Ethiopian state.

The latest victims of the Ethiopian government’s brutal violence were killed on a sacred day, on sacred ground. This has pushed to the limit a people who have been mourning yearlong. In the minds of young Oromos this massacre in broad day sends a clear message: that their lives do not matter. In this vicious act of violence, the government has clearly shown Oromos yet again that they remain disposable.

For a government that has criminalized the public gathering of Oromos, the idea of millions of them gathering is a nightmare.

Oromos attending *Irreecha* have always faced harassment. Last year, I watched as men and women were turned away because the *Odaa* tree symbol on their attire was the wrong kind according to the soldiers. Every year, Oromos face potential violence as they travel with family, sometimes elders and children. They spend hours in traffic, they are searched by soldiers carrying Ak47s, and many find themselves turned back at makeshift checkpoints for no reason. Young people are particular targets of harassment at these checkpoints. Yet, none of these violent interactions with the state have dampened the rise of millions making the journey from all over the country year after year. That Oromos continue to gather for *Irreecha*, and that they gathered even in the aftermath of the continued killings throughout Oromia is a testament of the endurance and defiance of their spirit. They are saying “We are here. You cannot take this away from us.”



I keep asking myself how dare they kill on sacred grounds and on a sacred day. How dare they? All those people muddied and bloodied in their beautiful and colorful clothes. All those lives lost. Should mourning be all we do these days?

Irreecha and me

The morning of *Irreecha* 2015, a group of us set out early in the morning hoping to beat traffic. As we pulled into Dukem, a nearby city, I knew we should have booked a hotel. But hotels had been booked weeks in advance. Traffic was bumper to bumper as we inched to Bishoftu. We also had to stop periodically and exit the car so young soldiers with Ak47s could pat us down and search our cars. As we drove on, we saw droves of people in minibuses and personal cars: they waved, honked, and many of them blasting Oromo music, the colors radiating off of their beautiful dresses. There was nothing to spoil the energy and excitement in the air. The magical experience of millions making the spiritual pilgrimage towards *Lake Arsadi* in Bishoftu is indescribable. (See story on p. 20)

Picture this, thousands upon thousands of people spilling into one street, marching slowly. Women dressed in any one of the many beautiful Oromo cultural dresses of varying styles and length. Men dressed both in traditional attire and in modern suits adorned with the *Odaa* symbols. And now picture that all of these people are walking as if in a complete trance, in peaceful union. It is as if a huge blanket of peace engulfs the area and everyone within it. The complete sense of bliss and people's spirit of joy and festivity is completely intoxicating.

Last year, when I attended *Irreecha* for the first time, I was awed into silence by the beauty of the festival. I was filled with gratitude for having the privilege to experience it.

Filmmaker Amensisa Ifa's short film "*Irreecha: Color & Treasure of Oromo*" captures the sentiments evoked by the festival: newness, joy, togetherness, and connection.

In the words of a young Oromo on what the annual Oromo festival means to him: "Whenever I come for *Irreecha* I feel a special sense of Oromoness. This is because I am joined by Oromo people from all corners, from North, South, East and West. I enjoy the spectacular varieties of Oromo culture, costumes and beautiful songs." "*Irreecha* is our identity. *Irreecha* connects us. *Irreecha* is about love and togetherness. We come together and we strengthen each other," others echoed.

Almost everyone interviewed by Amensisa expressed that *Irreecha* renews and invigorates the spirit and fills one with enough joy to last a whole year.

Irreecha is a chance for visibility. It is an opportunity for Oromos from everywhere to become visible to each other. It is a time to be thankful for aliveness, it is a collective and personal affirmation that "we are here". It is a time we come home to each other.

Experiencing the *Irreecha* festival on my ancestor's soil remains the single most healing moment of my life. I watched as people greeted each other with a version of *Anaa dhufu*. Strangers hugged and talked to me, as if we were long lost friends.

I was so taken by *Irreecha* that I did not take as many photographs as I had hoped to. I breathed in the energy and stood on the side of the street and watched as people walked by. I watched as a family of four took a break from their hike; all of them in the same colorful attire. I could not resist so I asked to photograph them. Their father agreed on condition that I wrote down the names of his children. The boy is Bilisabaasi (to liberate) and his sister is Bilisomi (be free).

As I reminisce about *Irreecha* at this difficult time, I remember the outdoor concert by Abdi Nuressa and other Oromo artists. My friends and I joined a big group of young Oromos and danced in the open air. Because for that moment, we were free and no one could take that away from us; not even the armed soldiers surrounding us. This is what I choose to remember when I think of *Irreecha*.

Last year during the blessing ceremony of the *Abba Gaada's*, one of the Oromo spiritual leaders prayed: "Dear God, please let our kids be able to learn in peace. Let our teachers be able to teach in peace. Let our people experience peace." The presence of armed soldiers, high ranking EPRDF and OPDO party officials was stifling for the spiritual leaders. All the same, some of them did not mince their words. They called for peace, specific kinds of peace. They asked for the release of political prisoners. It is almost as if the spirit was telling them of what's to come.

Not on our sacred ground

It is not lost to many of us that this attack on Oromos is a strategic attempt at silencing dissent.

Hora Asadi is sacred ground. *Irreecha* is sacred. I keep asking myself how dare they kill on sacred grounds and on a sacred day. How dare they? All those people muddied and bloodied in their beautiful and colorful clothes. All those lives lost. Should mourning be all we do these days? When I talk to friends and family, they are in mourning, but even more in absolute rage. .

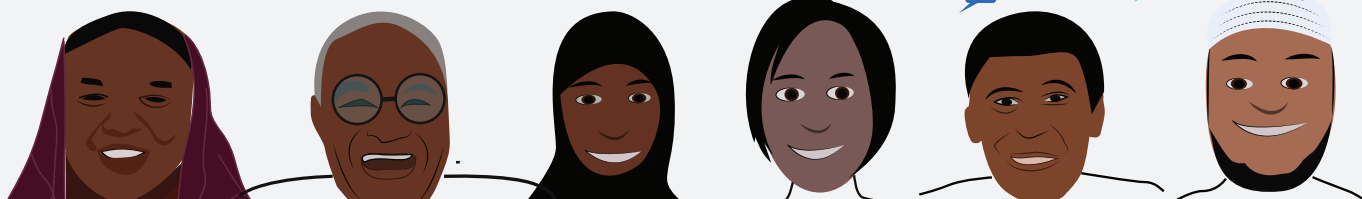
As I send condolences to all those touched by the Bishoftu massacre, I want to appeal to all, may we not forget the lives lost, but may we not let the spirit of *Irreecha* be defined by the cruelty, violence and complete disregard for human life expressed by the government in Ethiopia. *Irreecha* is ours to keep. Let them not take it away from us. Let us remember this in the spirit of all those who went out there to be visible; to celebrate their ways of being Oromo. The spirit of *Irreecha* is bigger and stronger than fear. Let us hold onto the spirit of *Irreecha*. ■

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Ed's Note: Ayantu Ayana is producer at the Odaacity Podcast, a platform dedicated to promoting critical and meaningful conversations on Ethiopia. She can be reached at theoadaacity@gmail.com and on twitter @diasporiclfe



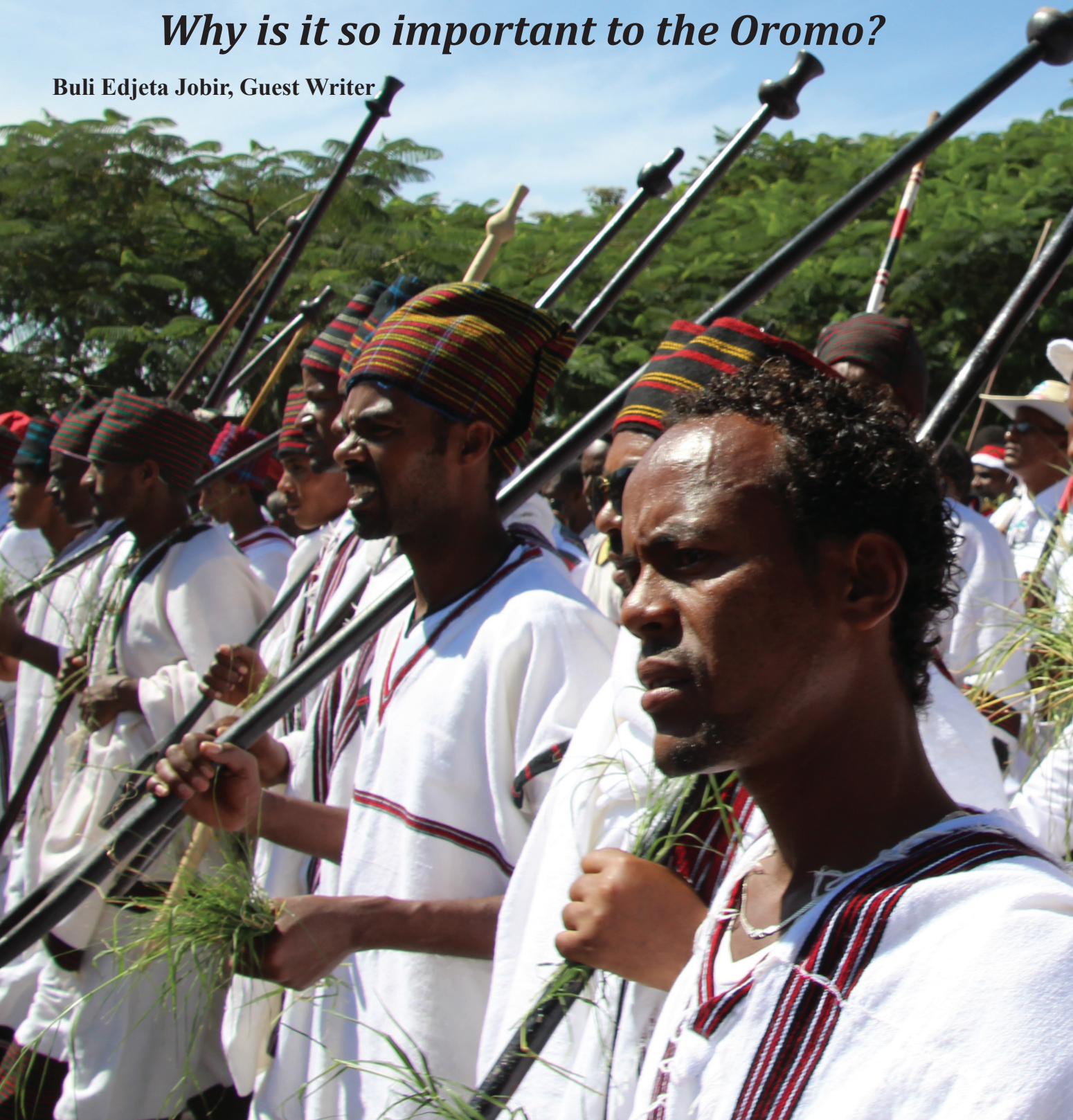
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**Make room for differing opinions
Find strength in diversity**

*Into the heart of **Irreecha**:* *Why is it so important to the Oromo?*

Buli Edjeta Jobir, Guest Writer



Every year, in the last week of September or the first week of October, *Irreecha*, a huge and colorful event, decorates the hill and valley of Bishoftu town, 45km south east of the capital Addis Abeba. It is part of an ancient culture and practice that has been going on alongside other major riverine civilizations such as the Nile, Mesopotamia, and Babylon. For its practitioners *Irreecha* is a unique event, which has been ingrained in the Oromo religious thinking and cultural practice since time immemorial; it is inseparable from the Oromo-self.

The resurgence

The practice (*irreffanaa*) had been banned by successive Ethiopian regimes before 1991. There was an underlying obsession from those Ethiopian regimes towards any 'dissenting' cultural and religious practices different from the dominant 'Orthodox Christian' culture, which the leaders claimed to be a part of. It was perceived that allowing differing practices disrupts the fictitious 'Ethiopian cultural unity'. In 1991, however, a group of cultural revolutionaries and Oromo nationalists among the OLF (Oromo Liberation Front) initiated the renewal of the *Irreecha* practices along *Hora Arsadi* of Bishoftu town. That very event kindled the flames, which has grown to magnificent proportion today. The number of *Irreecha* practitioners every year and its practices evolved since then, and it seems that it will continue for the future.

The tenets

I have been trying to understand the very nature, philosophical background and process of the *Irreecha* since its rejuvenation. I have interviewed some prominent elders and educated elites. According to elders, *Irreecha* forms part of Oromo religious and cultural thinking and signals the coming together of five important cultural and natural objects.

The first is *Oda* (Sycamore tree), a tree of cultural construct, which symbolizes the democratic social and political institution, the *Gada*, and by extension, *Oromumma* (Oromo identity). At *Hora Arsadi*, this tree graciously stands on the verge of the *hara* (the lake) and it is at the center of *Irreecha* practices. The second is the water in *Hora Arsadi*, which is created by and believed to be the expression of the wisdom of *Waaqa* (God). Water, according to the Oromo mythology, is the source of life. Human beings are the third. Human beings (the Oromo in this case) are the embodiment of all the wisdom of God. The fourth is the *Coqorsa* (type of grass), which the pilgrims (if you will) hold in their hand, rinse in the water and sprinkle on their forehead; it symbolizes Oromo clan structures which is interwoven to create a bigger body of Oromo nation. In its cultural connotation *coqorsa* is the symbol of reconciliation, blessings, wet/rain, and good luck. And the fifth is *Kello* (a flowering plant), which gives a yellow flower and is likened to the sunrise. It exemplifies the beginning of a new day, the coming to light of new season, new hope, and rejuvenation of life.

The climax of the *Irreecha* day comes when everyone who carries the *Kello* and *Coqorsa* rinses both into the water of *Hora Arsadi* and sprinkle the water over his/her forehead near the *Oda* tree. This brings in the symbolic unity of all core natural phenomena (tree, water, *coqorsa*, *kello* and human being) into one.

In the name

'*Irreecha*' is a word derived from the root word *Irree*, the upper muscle in the upper hand of a human being. It is one of the strongest and toughest muscles that help humans to lift heavy weights and perform harder duties. A man with a power who can influence others is sometimes referred to as '*irre-qabeessa*' literally, the owner of *irree*, semantically, 'the powerful' or 'the mighty'. As an extension of this, in daily language use, it signifies power, strengths, indomitability, dominance, mighty, omnipotence, and invincibility, among other meanings. Thus the practice of *Irreecha* is the honoring of the powerful, the strong, the indomitable, the omnipotent *Waaqa* (God) who created all natural manifestations (water, trees, human, *coqorsa*, *kello*) and is responsible for their rhythmic and cyclical regulations.

The orderly interactions of those phenomena are only possible by the very '*irree*' and wisdom of the *Waaqa Tokkicha* (The One God). As the chants and hymens in *Irreecha* song goes '*irreessatti godaannaa, irree kee sodaannaa yaa Waaq'*, which could roughly be translated as 'we are marching to *Irreecha*, because we fear/respect Your might, oh God!'



An amazing part of the *Irreecha* ceremony is its absolute orderliness, the reigning of absolute peaceful aura, the showering of love and mutual respect, the sense of oneness and unity. In all the *Irreecha* ceremonies recorded over the last two decades, after its first rejuvenation, there has never been a single stampede or injury recorded

The timing

There are two major *Irreecha* ceremonies among the Oromo nation. One is the *Irreecha-Tullu*, which is carried out in the month of *Arfaasa* (spring season), in one of the mountains to honor the Almighty for His benevolence over the past dry season and pray for the upcoming rainy season, which will bring both fortunes (seeds, green meadows, water, etc.) and also dangers such as flood, storm, snow and disease).

The other *Irreecha* is called *Irreecha Malkaa* (*Irreecha* on the river-side). This is the same as the one carried out on the *Hora Arsadi*. The *Malka Irreecha* or *Irreecha at Hora Arsadi* is conducted after the recession of the hard, heavy, and fearful *ji'a gannaa* (rainy season) and the beginning of *ji'a birraa* (Autumn Season), which is 'bright', 'clean', and a 'smiling' season.

The *Birra* season brings new hope. It sheds off the hard rainy season and signals the coming of a new harvest. Thus the *Irreecha-Malkaa* marks the transition from the hard past to the easy future; from the dark to the bright season. From the emic point of view it is a transition, a rite-of-passage.

During the *Irreecha-Malka* ceremony many social events such as marriages and naming (*gubbisa*) are carried out. These are all social events which symbolize a rite-of-passage.

The biggest number in the World

Over the last ten successive years, the number of people who conduct *Irreffannaa* (or those who go to celebrate *Irreecha*) has shown a marked boost. Every year an estimated three to four million people participate in the event. Last year, by the government's own estimate about five million people were estimated to have taken part in *Irreecha at Hora Arsadi*. One of the biggest world-class gatherings of people for religious purpose is the Haji Pilgrim, which is conducted every year at Mekka. The number of people who participated in Hajji last year was estimated to reach about 1.6 million, which is roughly less than half the number at *Irreecha*. This shows the relevance and acceptability of the ceremony among one of the largest nations in Africa, the Oromo.

Inclusive and broad-based

The composition of the participants is also worth mentioning. It includes all social and demographic categories regardless of age, sex, social status and other categories. The *Abba Gadas* (elected elders) holding their ceremonial stick in their graceful and authoritative prose; women having their *siinqe* (a stick carried by woman to show off their rights and power) and gracefully chanting the *Irreffanna* hymens in all compelling mood; and young folks dancing, chanting and dashing on the way to the *Hora Arsadi* is truly picturesque. This shows that *Irreecha* ceremony is inclusive of all social groupings without any discrimination. This makes it one of the most inclusive social phenomena known to human history. That, as one participant said to me, 'gives me a sense of freedom'.



Until Sunday Oct. 2, 2016, the existence of this absolute peace and tranquility has made the ever-presence of heavily armed security personals that have been persistently deployed by the government so irrelevant

Absolute peace and tranquility

An amazing part of the *Irreecha* ceremony is its absolute orderliness, the reigning of absolute peaceful aura, the showering of love and mutual respect, the sense of oneness and unity. In all the *Irreecha* ceremonies recorded over the last two decades, after its first rejuvenation, there has never been a single stampede or injury recorded. It is hard to imagine how this is possible when as many people as four million (on average) come together at one place. One can be reminded of all the stampedes that happen every year in our planet among the gatherings of people much less in number, or of stampedes that have often occurred in sports stadiums having only 40 or 50 thousand people.

Until Sunday Oct. 2, 2016, the existence of this absolute peace and tranquility has made the ever-presence of heavily armed security personals that have been persistently deployed by the government so irrelevant. Their role was totally meaningless since there was no case that calls for their involvement. People have got their own means to contain any shortfall if ever existed. The reason for such absolute peace and tranquility is mutual respect, love and obedience to the principle of peace in the Oromo social philosophy.

Mutual Respect, love and decorous

When an observer walks into the *Hora Arsadi* or conduct *Irreffanna* he/she obviously sees a huge crowd of people walking joyfully, people hugging each other and cheering, expressing emotions of love and mutual respect, exchanging best wishes, greetings, and smiling at one another with the message of happiness. People give due respect and

honor to each other; children are lovingly hugged, kissed and blessed with the implicit message that 'you are most welcome to *Irreecha*, you are the one who is responsible for the continuation of the culture'. The elderly (men and women) decorated in immaculate cultural dresses are given all the possible honor and love. They are given priorities in walking to and back from *Irreechaa*, given the prime place to sit or stand. Every one lovingly and respectfully vies to pose for photos with the elders, hugging them with emotional words and body-languages that say 'you are the fountain of this culture, and we honor you'. A decorous display and polite gestures is the order of the day. A jubilant dance and song embedded with the nationalistic rhymes gives the impression of mutual love, unity, and togetherness. The *Abba Gadas* and the *hayuus* (the enlightened, the wise and knowledgeable), displaying a majestic, decorum and leadership posture, coming from different flange of Oromia enjoy love and respect from the rest of the crowd.

There are many people who just go to *Irreecha* to partake in this happy and joyous expression of mutual respect, and there are individuals who have never missed a single *Irreecha* over the last 20 years.

Adorned

On the *Irreecha*, one of the spectacular and colorful scenes is the variety, uniqueness and originality of the cultural costumes, which give the ceremony an embellished outlook, eye catching and panoramic. The beads, the threads, the strips that come together to make a piece of cloth show the artistic and stylish weaving garbed on the tall, skinny, and model-like Oromo girls and the well-postured boys. The *siinqe* skillfully held by the girls and women, moving with the rhythm of their clothes and the *ulee* (ceremonial stick carried by Oromo men) swinging along a ceremonial walk by young boys, is something spectacular. The cultural costumes have been changing in style and fabrics from time to time. They represent every corner of Oromia. The interesting instrumentality of the costumes is that they have gone beyond their locality. Oromos coming from the furthest west corner of Wollega dress themselves with that of attires that originated in Arsi, Borena, Harar, Tulama and vise-versa. This signifies an institutionalization of *Oromumma* (being Oromo), as the attires have gone beyond anchoring themselves to a locality, rather uplifted to wider national level. Here, the message is simple: you cannot tell an Oromo from which zone he/she comes by simply looking at his/her attire.



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Expression of political ideals

Irreecha is not only a cultural expression but also a space to air political discontents. From the early days up to date, participants in one way or another have shown their dissatisfaction with successive regimes in power. Young people who dance and chant of jubilation often embed political grievances that Oromos share as a nation in general and a particular political rough that stands out at a given particular year. In September 20014 and 2015, for example, the dominant feature of this expression was the opposition to the Addis Abeba master plan designed to expand Finfinne (Addis Abeba) into neighboring localities, which was, and still is, one of the leading themes in the Oromo political discourse, in which, many peaceful Oromo protesters lost their life, were jailed or beaten.

The symbolic dress that emphasizes the original black, red and white strip, in this order from top to bottom, which was perceived by the Oromos to be the original emblem that the *Abba Gada* used as a sovereign power, is the dominant dress that everyone has. It is on the skirts, t-shirts, trousers, hats, shoes, bundles, ceremonial sticks and everything in between. Having this symbol on one's clothes or related staffs is a symbolic expression of *Oromoneess* and unity. But as much symbolic as the color is for the Oromo, it is the thing that gets the current regime in power irritated. Security personnel are often seen interrogating those who bear this color combination or symbol.

Forum for social mobilization

Irreecha has recently become one of the important forums for mobilization against some social challenges such as the spread of HIV/AIDS, pervasive poverty, the environment, gender inequality, and other forms of social issues. This was conducted in the traditional declaration of a law called *lallaba*, making it an indigenous, locally acceptable and socially sound way of banning socially undesirable practices. On *Irreecha* ceremony *Abba Gadas* from all over Oromia call up on the participants to give due attention to, for example, the promotion of gender equality, and prohibition of discrimination against women. As insignia of the promotion of women's rights, senior women were made to participate on the declaration of the law dealing with gender inequality (*lallaba*). The same holds true for several other social challenges, which are declared to be *dhorka* (prohibited practices) in the sense of an indigenous Oromo legal deliberation. ■

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Irreecha: A defining moment in hallowed land

Ezekiel Gebissa, Special to Addis Standard

Under normal circumstances, the Oromo *Irreecha* is a spiritual gathering of thanksgiving marking the passing of the darkness of the rainy season and the arrival of bright spring days. The festival occurs in mid-September at *Hora Arsadi*, located near the town of Bishoftu about 45 kms from the capital city. *Irreecha* is a very colorful celebration in which people sport elaborately decorated customs, sing a variety of traditional songs and participate in the rituals of the festival. The *Irreecha* celebrations of recent years have been vivacious, boisterous, peaceful and joyous. According to estimates, more than four million people attended the *Irreecha* festival of 2015, making it the largest cultural/spiritual gathering in the world.

In 2016, it was clear that the largest gathering of Oromos from Oromia's all corners would be a scene of expression of anger in the wake of the government's brutal crackdown of Oromo protests during the preceding ten months

But beneath the tranquil and placid proceedings, tensions simmered on all occasions. Officials always suspected the large gathering might be used for some nefarious political purposes. The 2014 *Irreecha* was held six months after students protesting the Addis Ababa Integrated Master Plan were killed, thousands arrested and many more expelled from several universities in Oromia. The prayers and blessings offered on that year's *Irreecha* was marked by expressions of grief, hunger for justice and yearning for peace. There were also manifestations of student protests against the potential eviction of Oromo farmers in the environs of the capital if the plan were to be implemented. Despite the fears, the occasion came and went without incident.

In 2016, it was clear that the largest gathering of Oromos from Oromia's all corners would be a scene of expression of anger in the wake of the government's brutal crackdown of Oromo protests during the preceding ten months. To forestall such an eventuality, the *Abba Gadaa* Council issued a statement on September 2, 2016 barring all participants from bringing to the event anything that overtly symbolizes the presence of any political organization. Reports now suggest that the Oromia government and the ruling party in the region failed to abide by the request of the *Abba Gadaa* Council. To make matters worse, the cultural/spiritual space was invaded by security forces. The unsolicited insertion of force into a gathering known for its orderliness, tranquility and placid vivacity was turned into a brutal scene of murder and mayhem. This will have serious consequences for the future.

The symbolism of *Irreecha*

In its indigenous setting, *Irreecha* was a spiritual gathering to give thanks to the creator for his bounty of nature, fertility, harvest and life itself. Elders offer prayers on behalf of the people and shower blessings on the nation. The Spring *Irreecha* takes place near a body of water, the primary substance from which all life came forth. There the congregants give thanks to *Waaqa* (God) for his provisions and to invoke his name for peace, harmony and reconciliation among humans. The Autumn *Irreecha* occurs on mountain top to signify human desire to come close to the divine and appreciate the majesty of his power, among others symbols.

Though generally non-political, the *Irreecha* was also an occasion where the Oromo prayed for peace of the political system and harmony among their political leaders. The elders bless the nation admonishing the multitude to respect the Oromo moral law (*safuu*) and legislative laws (*seera*), and pray for peace (*nagaa*) and reconciliation among themselves and with *Waaqa* as well. For life to thrive, humans must be in harmony among themselves, with all creation and with the creator. Disruption of peace amounts of disorderliness in the interconnected social, physical and cosmic universes. At *Irreecha* ceremonies, prayers emphasized invocation of *Waaqa* to maintain peace and restore it when disrupted.

Often compared with the American Thanksgiving, *Irreecha* is a signification hope. The yellow daisy which the celebrants carry symbolizes that expectation of a bright future at the end of dark days. The festival is a celebration of reunion, reconciliation and revitalization of the community.

The ubiquitous fresh grass signifies the Oromo belief that humans are custodians of the natural environment. The celebrants dip the grass and the yellow daisy in water, considered the genesis of life, and sprinkle it on their body. The ritual is an affirmation that humans are endowed with the responsibility of maintaining the harmony between humans and the environment. Overall, the fresh grass is a symbol of fertility of a human, vegetal, animal or spiritual nature. This notion of fertility constitutes one of the underlying generative principles of the Oromo culture, through which all aspects of the productive and reproductive life are cognitively structured.

Overall, *Irreecha* is an affirmation of life itself. Without peace, observance for moral law and respect for the law of nature, it is impossible to maintain life. *Irreecha* is essentially a space where Oromo regenerate and reproduce their identities as Oromo. *Irreecha* was attractive for it is about peace, supplication, hope and unity as a nation.

Cultural revival

Under the imperial Ethiopian governments, the *Irreecha* festival was banned. It was often portrayed as “pagan” or “devil” worship. The *Derg* government kept the ban claiming to liberate people from the tyranny of local traditions. It wasn't until 1992 that *Irreecha* was organized for the first time. Under the 1995 constitution whose provisions celebrated the respect of religious rights and freedom, previously marginalized ethnic and religious identities were recognized and began to be celebrated as identities. *Irreecha* became one of the religious rituals that burst into the public sphere as the identity of the Oromo nation.

In the subsequent years, *Irreecha* became transformed from an esoteric event dismissed as a “pagan and primitive” to a festival marking the end of the century-old political marginalization and cultural alienation of the Oromo. Reconstituted as a cultural revival, *Irreecha* symbolizes the triumph of an authentic Oromo cultural heritage. It is an institution that plays a significant role in the manifestation and preservation of Oromo unity and national identity.

Though recognized as a religious event, it is important to note here that the Oromo celebrate the *Irreecha* irrespective of their religious backgrounds. Christians, Muslims and *Waaqeffataas* participate in the festival without inhibition or fear of alienation. The Oromo flock in millions to Lake *Arsadi* to experience and share in an authentic Oromo culture symbolized in the festival's prayers, blessings, songs, dances, artifacts, collective practices and a shared vision.

In effect, *Irreecha* festival is the womb in which a new Oromo nation was conceived and born. To participate in the festivities is to participate in the imagination, feelings and experiences of a re-born Oromo. As an occasion and venue for the symbolic expression of Oromo history and culture, the *Irreecha* festival connects the Oromo to a common past through the activities on display in the massive parades. Through participation in the festivals, many have been able to reconnect with their genealogical history and reclaim their identities as Oromos.

Participation in *Irreecha* also connects Oromos to the ancient values and the democratic ethos of the Oromo *Gadaa* system. Men carry to the *Irreecha* carry the *bokkuu/ulee*, long sticks with ball carved out at the top, symbolizing the ancient scepter carried by the *Abba Gadaa*. Women carry the *siqqee*, long sticks without the ball, testifying to the inviolability of rights of Oromo women and affirmation of their human dignity within the *Gadaa* system. Together, these two symbols are reflections of the re-appropriation of the past to imagine and design the future.

Irreecha brings Oromos from every corner of the Oromo country to one place where the variety of customs, artifacts, cuisine, songs, dance, games and symbols at once reflect the rich tapestry of Oromo culture while reinforcing a sense of belonging to a single nation. As a national celebration, the *Irreecha* festival has become a facilitator of the emergence of national consciousness and creation of a national community.

As a cultural and religious site Lake *Arsadi* is an Oromo terra sancta. It is located in the region of *Odaa Nabee*, the seat of one of the historic *Gadaa* assemblies. The lake side is ritually significant as it is surrounded by eight mountains known locally as *Saddetan Tullu Waaqayoo* (the eight mountains of God). Mt. *Cuqqaalaa* was a site for the Autumn *Irreecha* festival for centuries. The region is dotted with many lakes

giving rise to the name *Bishoftu* (watery or wet). It is difficult to overrate the importance of this region to the Oromo psyche and to the religious and political lives of the Oromo.

In 2016, the government sought to showcase the *Irreecha* as the success of the federal system and to make it widely known in order to get it registered on the UNESCO's List of Intangible World Heritage. The goal was to mollify criticism of its brutal crackdown on the Oromo protests by presenting it to the international journalists it had assembled. It was a political strategy that went terribly awry

The stark choice

As the revived *Irreecha* grew in strength and significance, it became an arena of power contestation between the incumbent government and Oromo nationalists. The incumbent government suspected that the institution might be turned into an incubator of political dissent. Indeed in recognizing *Waaqeffata* as an official religion, it was not the intention of the government to promote and popularize *Irreecha* at the expense of other religious institutions and groups. Rather, it was a politically motivated and informed act designed to project an image of religious equality and tolerance. Not even many Oromos knew what the *Waaqeffata's* ritual of *Irreecha* would be the institution that will define what it means to be Oromo.

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The young Oromo were not ready to allow the government takeover their hallowed ground. They were not willing to surrender the last independent space of the Oromo people and the resurgent Oromo nationalism. Already agitated by the yearlong crackdown, the young Oromo defended the hallowed ground of Lake *Arsadi* and reclaimed the *Irreecha* from a hostile takeover. When its scheme faltered, the government resorted to the only response it has perfected for over two decades: shoot to kill.

This time, the government has crossed the last barrier. It has massacred people during their most sacred national event. The government has two options. The first is the exit option, which is the relatively honorable and less costly choice it can make now. The other is staying the course and continue to murder and mayhem. That is the worst option for the government and its officials. But no one can predict what the outcome will be. ■

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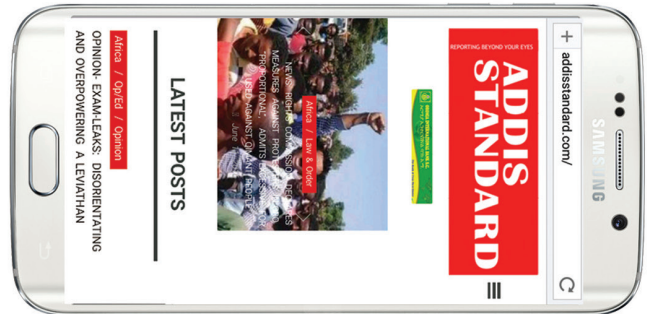
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