



Ethiopia in crisis, closes down news

45(04): 32/35 | DOI: 10.1177/0306422016685977

As Ethiopia declares a state of emergency, **Ismail Einashe** explains some of the history to the current situation

CREDIT: Tiksa Neger/Reuters



For Oromos, Irreechaa is their most significant cultural event, and even though they are evenly split between Christians and Muslims, they all share ties to the original Oromo faith, Waaqefanna.

But at this year's festival there was a stampede and attack by the Ethiopian police. The numbers killed are disputed – the government said 52 were killed, but activists from the Oromo Federalist Congress claim 678 people died.

And since pictures of the festival goers who were killed were published internationally, the state has shut down all access to the outside world.

Behind the tragedy at Irreechaa is a long history of the Ethiopian state repressing Oromos, said Dr Awol Kassim Allo, an Ethiopian lecturer at the UK's Keele University.

“What is going on now in Oromia is a massacre in the name of emergency,

OPPOSITE:
Demonstrators
chant slogans
during the
Irreechaa festival of
the Oromo people
in Bishoftu during
October 2016,
before the police
started firing on
festival goers

What is going on now in Oromia is a massacre in the name of emergency, terrorising civilian populations

ETHIOPIA HAS BEEN in lockdown for months. There has been a state of emergency declared and there is little news coming in and out of the country. Social media and the internet have been outlawed, religious and cultural events banned, curfews imposed. Thousands of soldiers are roaming the streets.

It escalated after security services started killing people at the annual Irreechaa festival for the Oromos in Bishoftu in October 2016

This thanksgiving celebration of the Oromos is attended by millions from across Ethiopia and the diaspora. They wear traditional clothes and sing songs of resistance.

terrorising civilian populations to force them into capitulation,” he said.

He added: “The massacre at Irreechaa occurred before the state of emergency, although Ethiopia has always been under a state of emergency, the official declaration of emergency was a conclusive evidence that the state was losing control and that a large segment of the society has rejected the government's authority to govern”.

Celebrating their traditions and wearing traditional dress, as the Oromos were doing at Irreechaa, has historically been part of the resistance to the government in Ethiopia, according to Mohammed Ademo, founder and editor of OPride.com, a multimedia →

OPPOSITE:
Oromo women at
October's Irreechaa
festival where oppo-
sition activists say
678 people were
killed by security
forces

→ news site focused on Ethiopia's Oromo community, and now based in the USA.

Recently, many Oromos have begun to eschew Western attire completely and wear Oromo clothes. Oromo clothing has been more visible on the streets. This way of dressing is becoming a cornerstone of their identity and self-expression.

Traditional Oromo clothes consist of *woya* for men, which are toga-like robes, usually white, and a skirt called a *wandabo* for women. Oromo women also wear *qollo* and *sadetta*, cotton cloths traditionally hand-spun and hand-woven, and sometimes other garments are worn such as leather or animal skin robes.

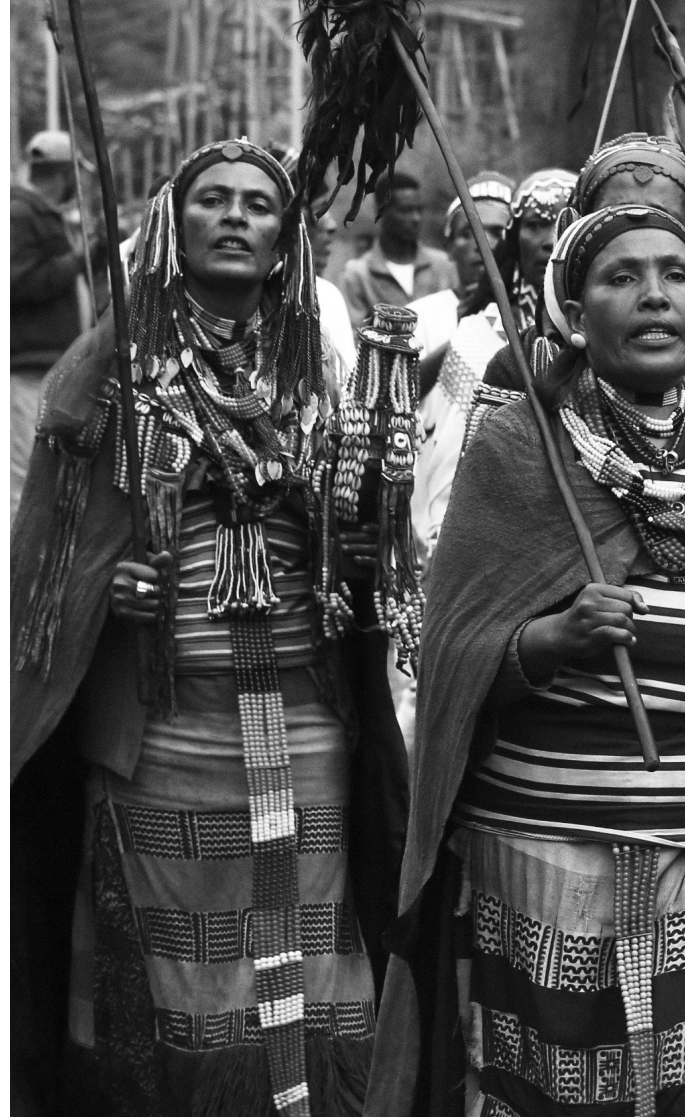
On Facebook there are numerous groups now dedicated to dissecting the latest fashion styles of Oromo dress and there are popular style blogs that enjoy a huge following. Latest pop hits by Oromo artists heavily feature Oromo clothes – along with dances.

Peri Klemm, a professor in African history of art at the University of California at San Diego and expert on Oromo dress, said: “At times when identity is threatened, dress, particularly that of Oromo women who have always been the carriers of culture, becomes a way in which the Oromo maintain a sense of who they are.”

He and his friends had to share secret codes to evade state censors. They wore red, green, yellow beads

The Oromos are one of Africa's largest ethnic groups and constitute about a third of Ethiopia's 100 million population. But, despite their numbers, they have complained about political, economic and cultural marginalisation within Ethiopia.

For the last couple of years Ethiopia has been rocked by huge anti-government protests led by the Oromos against Ethiopia's authoritarian government.



The unrest was sparked by the Addis Ababa Integrated Master Plan, a plan to transform Ethiopia's capital city. Addis Ababa is surrounded by Oromia state, one of the nine ethnically based regional states in Ethiopia. Oromos said the plans would displace farmers, and this would be an attack on Oromo identity.

Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn has admitted that as many as 500 anti-government protesters may have died in police crackdowns and stampedes since protests began, but the opposition say the true figure is much higher.

During his student days in Addis Ababa in the 2000s, Ademo recalls that whenever he wore his traditional Oromo clothes, people in the streets would stare at him with suspicious eyes. In Ethiopia, he told Index, “there is this mindset that to wear Oromo cultural clothes is a threat to the state”.

Ademo remembers that wearing Oromo clothes could be too overt. He and his friends



used beads and bracelets to share secret codes to evade state censors. They wore red-green-yellow beads to mark the colours of the Oromo Liberation Front flag, a political movement founded by Oromo nationalists in 1973. Ademo said to avoid detection by the state people wore these beads, necklaces and bracelets showing the red of the Oromo flag – which also has a sycamore tree, star and yellow stripes in the middle.

He added: “If a person is wearing a bead on their neck or a bracelet, you know they are likely Oromo.” For women who wear the traditional skirts, to show the colours on their skirts could mean arrest. “If the colours at the bottom of their skirts are the colours of the resistance, you will get arrested,” he said.

“When people have no other ways of expressing themselves, they turn to showing their resistance through clothes, without necessarily saying they are resisting,” he said. Klemm said these kind of

symbols are particularly powerful now: “In today’s struggle for land and equal governance, the image of the sycamore tree has become a vital symbol of pan-Oromo identity, during the Oromo *gadaa* system of governance, representatives of the Oromo nation gathered under *odaa* trees”.

He added: “Due to the current curfew, restrictions of movement, the outlawing of all social media, and the banning of mass gatherings of Oromo for religious, political, social, or cultural reasons, Oromo protest songs have [also] become a significant vehicle to reach and empower people.”

For Ademo watching the attack on the Irreechaa festival unfold was an “attack on Oromo identity”. Many in the diaspora have called this a massacre, and for them Irreechaa has now come to represent “a very traumatic moment in Oromo history”. ☒

Ismail Einashe is a freelance journalist based in London. He tweets @IsmailEinashe