

# CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE GOSPEL AMONG THE OROMO TRIBE OF THE EASTERN WOLLEGA REGION: THE MESERETE KRISTOS CHURCH EXPERIENCE

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since humans began to be conscious of the world around them, they began to produce culture. There are no human groups who are without culture. The Old Testament book, Genesis 11 explains to us that God wanted humans to scatter and fill the earth ruling over the fish, the birds, the livestock etc. over all earth and over all creatures that move along the ground (Gen. 1: 26-31; 11:1-9). Consequently, humans scattered and produced culture of their own, each according to their environment.

Although humans where ever they go have developed different visible cultures they are still alike. One element, which makes people alike, is their tendency to look for higher consciousness/God in order to worship him or put their allegiance to him. At any rate, they are basically God-seekers - a mark of the essential similarity in human nature.

When speaking to the Athenian philosophers, the Apostle Paul addressed this issue very well. He said: " The God who made the world and every thing in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and....from one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth, and he determined the times set for them, and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him though he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:24-28).

In Ethiopia, the Oromo tribe has existed in the country for about 430 years. This tribal group is believed to have come from southeast Africa and settled as pastoralists and later agriculturists. The people themselves claim that they were in the land for centuries. At any rate, this needs further study to reconcile the two conflicting ideas because they have become a source of conflict between the Oromos and the other tribes in the land of Ethiopia. Nonetheless, the Oromo tribal group has

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its own culture. The missionary God who exists apart from culture has been interacting with this tribal peoples group to bring his saving knowledge to them. In the culture of this people's group, one can find an attempt for making a search for God. As Kraft concurs, " God, who exists apart from culture, relates to and interacts with human beings in and in terms of the cultural waters within which humans are immersed [Kraft, 91].

How can a meaningful missiological venture be made among the Oromo tribe? To answer this well requires first, an ethnographic study in order to find out how best the Gospel can relate to the people's context. Contextualization of the Gospel is a sure way of approaching the hurdles of cultural barriers.

To this end, the Meserte Kristos Church has been making a cross-cultural work among this tribal group and in turn reaching other groups through the borderline converts in the area.

The purpose of this paper is to present the ethnography of the Oromo tribe of Eastern Wellega by identifying its world-view, and reviewing the impact and expansion of contextualized biblical Christianity through the local members of the Meserete Kristos Church (MKC).

## **II. GEOGRAPHY/DISTRIBUTION OF THE OROMO IN THE COUNTRY: ETHIOPIA**

The Oromo tribe makes up a significant portion of the population of Ethiopia. It constitutes up to 40% out of the 60 million Ethiopians [Baxter, 7]. The Oromos are of the Cushitic speaking groups of people with variations in color and physical characteristics ranging from Hamitic to Nilotic. The ethnic origin of this group is Southern part of East Africa who moved northward into Ethiopia in the 16th Century [Ambachew, 9]. They are found in almost all regions of Ethiopia, including the neighboring countries such as Kenya and Somalia.

The Oromo tribe has a common mother basic language known as Oromifa. It is related, as mentioned earlier, to the Eastern Cushitic peoples' languages. Oromifa is considered as one of the most widely spoken languages from approximately one thousand languages of Africa [Gragg, 82]. The language has

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recently begun to use the Latin alphabet, which is relatively best suited for transcription of Oromifa.

### **III. ETHNOGRAPHY**

#### **A. The Cultural Dada System and its Decline**

The Oromo people's group has a very rich culture. One highly developed self-sufficient system, which has influenced every aspect of Oromo life, is the Gada System. It is a system that organizes the Oromo people into groups or sets (about 7-11) that assumes different responsibilities in the society every eight years. This system has guided the religious, social political and economic life of the Oromos for many years. Further more, it shaped their philosophy, art, history and method of time keeping (Calendar) [Hassen, 1017].

In this system, the male members of the Oromos are classified into generations-sets and Gada grades. [Asmerom, 51 ] The set is the group of people who share the same status and who perform their rites of passage together, whereas the grades are the stages of development through which each grade passes. An individual enters the first grade at birth and leaves the last grade at Gada age of eighty. After that he is retired. The first five grades according to one source, "are the practical schools during which young men were trained militarily, politically and ritually to take over the leadership of the Oromo Society [Yilma--217-20]. Women have no place in the grading System. These grades are 'Daballe Grade' (1-8 yr.); 'Folle Grade' (8-16 yr.); 'Ondalla Grade' (16-24 yr.); 'Raba Grade' (24-32 yr.); and 'Dori Grade' (32 40 yr.) [Hassen, 11].

However, this system did not continue until today except in some pockets of remote rural areas. The main reason being, the Oromo culture underwent evolutionary processes in order to adapt to changing conditions, mainly due to the homogenization and introduction of modern governmental structures and services (Bartels, 121).

#### **B. Religious Belief and System**

Before the Ethiopian Coptic Orthodox Church began Christianizing the Oromos by coercion, the majority of them, specifically the Eastern Wollega Oromos were following their own traditional religious belief system. Even today, after massive evangelization of the area, there are pockets where the traditional belief system functions.

In this belief system, there is the idea of divinity/God, which they refer to as "Waaka" [Aimeda,1628-46]. Below Waaka, there is the spirit called "Ayyana," which is manifested in persons, which they call them "Kalus," These persons can be

males or females. The manifestation of the one "Waaka" is seen upon the Kalus. Aimedia writes: "An effective relationship is often maintained between the Oromos and "Ayyana" by the "Kalus" [Aimedia, 1946]. What then is a "Kalu?" A "Kalu" is like a Bishop in the Christian church and an Imam in the Muslim Community. He is a religious and ritual expert who has a special relationship with the "Ayyana," which possesses him/her at regular intervals. The office of the "Kalu" had been playing an effective role in the Gada System. For instance, during the fifth year of the Gada period, the Gada class in power honors the "Kalu" by taking gifts and making their pledges of reverence. There is an anointment ceremony made when one Gada grade passes to the next carried out by the "Kalu." During the public meeting of the communities, several "Kalus" will be there to open and close meetings through blessings. "Kalus" also receive and embrace new born children give them blessings, butter their heads and give them names [Knustsson, 67]

The place of worship of "Kalu" ritual house is called "Galma." Each Galma is usually located on hill top, hill side, or in a groove of large trees. (The Ethiopian Orthodox Church buildings or Mosques took up many of these sites in place). Places of worship include besides large bodies of water, by the side of big mountains, or stones.

The believers visit for worship twice a week, usually on Thursday and Saturday nights. At this time, the followers dance, sing and beat y drums to perform a ritual called 'dalaga' in order to achieve a state of ecstasy, which often culminates in possession. It is at the height of this that the possessing Ayyana speaks through the Kalu's mouth and can answer prayers and predict the future [Ambachew, 23]

Religious Oromos often make pilgrimages to some of the great "Kalu" and religious centers such as Arsi Abba Mudda (father of anointment). Among the Borona (an Oromo group in the Southern tip of Ethiopia) pilgrimages are still common. Pilgrimage is very holy and the pilgrims walk to the place (about 500 miles) of Abba Mudda (the father of anointment) with a stick in one hand and carrying myrrh (incense).

All Oromos through whose village the pilgrims pass are obliged to give them hospitality. As the Mecca Muslims are called "Haj" among the Muslims, these Mudda pilgrims are called "Jia"[Hassen, 9]

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This institution of the "Kalu" has been weakened, as mentioned earlier, because of the Ethiopian Orthodox mass Christianization by force and the Jihad of the famous Muslim warrior, by the name, Giragn Mohammed in the early 19th Century.

Still further, just before the beginning of the harvest season, every year, the Oromos have a prayer ceremony called "Irreesa." It used to take place in river meadows where now the Ethiopian Orthodox Church takes its 'holy tabot' (Tablets) for a special yearly festival called the "Timket," which is the mass baptism celebration for the adherents of the Coptic faith. The "Irreesa" then was considered as an illegal meeting during the Monarchy and Marxist period of the country. But now there is a come back to this practice among some Oromos due to the freedom of religion.

### C. Rites

There are many other practices among the Oromo peoples group besides what has been discussed so far. All are part and parcel of the religious practices/rites. To mention few of these:

(i) *Atete*: is a practice of propitiating the spirit of mothers in case of sickness, childlessness, lack of property etc. Generally only those women practice 'Atete' who believe in it. The time of 'Atete' is either a Tuesday or a Thursday evening during the sowing season. Thus, 'Atete' is often called "Faccasa"---meaning 'sowing', related to planting seeds for harvest.

The woman who practices it carries out many ceremonial preparations. Special beer is made. Thick porridge from barley is cooked. Coffee beans are roasted. A goat is killed during the night. On the eve of the 'Atete'--the woman wears a special dress (short tunic) with black and white stripes set horizontally. On her neck, she wears small beads of various colors, called 'Chelle' and a red bracelet on her arms. Her hair, neck, the 'Chelle' and her dress are buttered.

The neighbors gather and sing constantly clapping their hands. The woman who celebrates 'Atete', i.e., possessed by the spirit of the mother, starts to grunt; she turns her head round and round, moves it back and forth, right and left as she grunts rhythmically, all the time remaining seated in her place. The drummer also beats the drum as she grunts.

The goat is killed when it is believed that the spirit of the woman's mother, which causes her to grunt and move her head, says, "kill the goat for me!"

The spirit is supposed to speak through the mouth of the 'Atete' woman immediately after the order is given; the people kill the goat. The woman then puts round her neck the fatty covering of the entrails of the goat, and keeps it so for five

days; she wears the hoofs of the goat on her wrists for five days also. Now for five days, the woman must stay at home. On the fifth day, the fat is taken to the "Kalu" for interpretation of the future and the hoofs are buried in the floor under the big pots containing the 'Atete' beer. This practice is also picked up by other tribes in the country. (My mother used to practice but when she accepted the Lord as her savior she renounced it and gave the material to me to burn it).

(ii) *Propitiation by men of the spirit of the fathers*: This ceremony does not have a particular name. The propitiation of the spirit of the fathers is similar to that of the 'Atete' of the women mentioned above. The only ceremonial difference is that men do not dress in a special way, do not butter themselves, and do not grunt.

For the ceremony, two pots of light mead (a combination of water and honey) and two pots of beer are prepared. The pots are kept two on either side of the entrance of an inner apartment of the house, a young goat is killed. The man wears the hoof on his wrists and the fat on his neck. Moreover, he makes a stick from a branch of olive tree and butters it at the top. While praying, he lays the stick on the mouths of the four pots in turn. Then holding the stick with both hands, he turns to the East and kneels down between the four pots. Then he prays, "spirit of my fathers, fulfill my wishes, give me health and prosperity. By giving this feast, I have fulfilled the wishes of the spirits of my fathers." During this time of ceremony, the neighbors will be there eating and drinking and at the end bless the host saying: "let the spirit of our father fulfill your wishes!"

The man stays at home five days. Parts of the hoofs and the head of the goat are kept for five days near the pots. On the fifth day, the fat is sent to the Kalu for interpretation [Belachew, 22]

The Oromo believe that the death of an individual exists in the form of a spiral called the "Ekeraa." They do not believe in suffering after death. If one commits sin he/she is punished while still alive. The "Ekeraa" is believed to stay near the place where the person once lived. One is obliged to pray and give offering by killing an animal so often to ones parents's "Ekeraa." The offering takes place near the family or clan cemetery, which is usually in a village.

Even after the adoption of the Coptic Orthodox belief or the Islamic faith, there are still many of the Oromos who practice and retain the traditional religion.

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Bartels confirms this when he writes: "whether the Oromos became Orthodox Christians or Muslims, their traditional modes of experiencing the divine have continued almost unaffected in spite of the fact that several rituals and social institutions in which it was expressed, have been very diminished or apparently submerged in new ritual cloaks. Many still visit, the "Kalus" and pay homages" [Bartels, 83].

#### **D. Family Life**

The word family in the African context tends to show a strong bonding. As a result, Africans are person-oriented. For the Oromos, the word family includes as Endeshaw affirms, "every one: father, mother, children, cousins, uncles, nephews, nieces, grand fathers and mothers. It also includes in-laws. Even those persons who are regarded as descendants related to all others" [Endeshaw, 27]. Furthermore, like other African families, the Oromo family life gives to the members: identity, security and protection from other tribal feuds and fights. [Nida, 95]

It is in family life setting or systems where traditional religious beliefs and practices including languages are propagated. When Oslan writes about ancestral spirits, he admits that "families consider the spirits are living and regard them as part of their family members" [Olson, 43]. Not only these practices, but also the Oromo sentiments are intensified in family systems. Therefore, if from the beginning the Gospel is not contextualized and proclaimed by the Oromo believers (who know the culture) at the family unit level, the chance of winning those families for Christ becomes minimal. (This is the target level where the Meserete Kristos Church is focusing).

In the Eastern Wollega of the Oromo remote regional areas, the Oromos live the simple life of a farmer, sticking to their old customs, quietly pursuing the simple life cycle of birth, marriage and death.

##### *(1) Marriage*

There are at least four types of marriage arrangement known in the Eastern Wellega Oromo region. Some of these are:

##### *(a) Betrothal*

In the Oromifa language, it is known as 'Nakacu'. This is commonly arranged marriage, which is considered as a noble one. Usually it is done by prior arrangement made by the parents. But, the young person has to see first and accept her himself, or he has to find one and show her to his parents and the arrangement process continues. Marriage of near relatives is forbidden. According to Endeshaw, "a woman descended from an ancestor nearer than the seventh ascending generation is considered wrong. Marriage between different handcraft workers, such as potters,

blacksmiths, silversmiths or tanners is strictly forbidden for fear of evil spirit. Persons in this category are considered to have "evil eyes" [Endeshaw, 29-30]

Parents of both the boy and the girl will agree through the elders on the marriage day. But prior to that, the father of the boy, in front of selected elders of the village enumerates what he will give to the girl's parents when she is married to his son. In some areas of the Oromos, the father of the boy would give doweries early on even at the infancy stage of the daughter's family, and the rationale being for the raising of the daughter.

This usually consists of a piece of land; so many kilos of grain, so many cows, and so on. This practice is now changing among the Christians. To this end, the elders of the local churches have agreed that parents of the girls should only receive 300.00 Birr (\$31.00 USD). Whereas, among the non-Christians it is 2000.00 Birr (\$250.00 USD).

On the day of the marriage, each family prepares a feast according to its means. When the bridegroom arrives with friends he brings with him a sheep to be sacrificed at the threshold of the door. The bride holds the head of the sheep while her suitor (bridegroom) slaughters it. Eating, drinking and dancing takes place and finally the bridegroom takes her to his home. On the next morning, the friends of the bridegroom will go to the house of the bride's parents to tell the good news that their girl has been found virgin and to congratulate them for the proper up bringing of their daughter. If the girl had not been virgin, which is, a very rare case, (a characteristic in rural settings) her parents will be very humiliated.

The friends of the girl also will go to the girl's parents taking with them food and milk and pass the night there and only after this are the two families considered real relatives [Kebede--interview]

(b) Marriage by capturing/raping

This type of marriage takes place if the parents of the girl refuse to give permission upon request by the elders sent to her parents. The boy makes arrangement with his friends on the consent of the girl and takes and rapes her. Parents will then be forced to give their daughter.

(2) Children

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In the Eastern Wollega Oromo region, the main purpose of marriage is producing children. The people like to have as many children as possible. In the past, when there was no modern education. Practical schooling took place at home and outside. In this process, the aim of the parents in bring up a child was simply to produce a man or woman with the best knowledge of the customs, traditions, and skills of earning their livelihood which are to be inherited from the previous generations. It was the general tendency among the Oromos for children to follow the profession of their fathers.

Boys, after the age of three mix with other children of the neighborhood and learn ways of living through observation. At the age of seven, he becomes a shepherd and begins to take care of the calves and sheep. After two years, he will be transferred to taking care of the cows, oxen, horses and donkeys or the bigger animals. During this time he has learnt swimming, how to play games and how to ride a donkey and horses. At about fourteen, depending on the need of the parents and initiative and strength of the boy, he will begin to farm. At about this time, his father will buy him a horse. After a few years of practice the boy will be able to take part in horse racing - the most important sport among the Oromos. He learns also how to throw a spear and defend himself with a shield. He learns tribal dances and songs from his associates by attending public ceremonial occasions.

His knowledge of the religion of his people comes to him by observing what his parents and other elderly people do on such occasions. In this he is expected to know and respect "Waaka"/God, who is the supreme deity, and all the other minor priests who experience the "Ayyana," the spirit on some persons called "Kalus." He will know all the necessary ceremonies and formalities which have to be observed when praying up to God/"Waaka" as he makes sacrifices. He is expected to know how to pray and console the spirits of his parents so as to keep them always on his side. The observation of Gada of his father must be well known. Fathers who are specialized in herbal medicine will disclose their craft usually to their eldest sons. The same is true for the "Kalu" families.

Girls are expected to follow in the good steps of their mothers. The virtues which young girls should learn from their mothers are kindness, cleverness, sympathy, and ability to handle household affairs and good motherhood. It is for this reason that mothers supervise the education of the girls. Girls learn from their mothers the technique of milking cows, of keeping the house clean, of preparing the different kinds of beverages and the different kinds of food. They also learn the art of placating the spirit of their dead mothers.

#### **E. Divorce**

In the Eastern Wollega, among the Oromos, divorce was held in great

contempt. But, it was permissible in exceptionally rare cases. For example, a man may divorce his wife if he hates her so much that he can not tolerate living with her any more, or if the wife is found committing adultery. When she is divorced, she is entitled to take none of the property of the husband. She does not even take personal belongings. None of his children are allowed to go with her. But these days, there is talk within the Womens' Affairs department of the government bringing this issue for awareness and for law enforcement of protecting the right of the divorced women.

#### **F. Polygamy**

Polygamy is a custom among the Oromo tribes. In Eastern Wollega region, a man can marry up to four wives depending on his wealth. Because for each wife he has to give a heifer, a bull and cloth to the father. As well as dress (a kind of homemade blouse) to the mother. Their main reason for having many wives is to be assisted in the field. A well to do person, in fact, will have many for the sake of prestige.

One problem for the Meserete Krirstos churches arises, when members who are polygamists accept Christ. This is a cultural problem in many African churches. O'Donovan when addressing this issue writes: "from a traditional African point of view he enumerates why polygamy has strong supportive cultural arguments." To mention a few:

- "(i) To have a continuity of family name into future generation by ensuring that male generation will continue;
- (ii) In agricultural societies having several wives is a way of ensuring many children to have the necessary laborers in the farm;
- (iii) If a person has many daughters, his wealth will increase significantly through the bride price at the time of the marriage of such daughters;
- (iv) it brings/ensures care and security in old age etc."

However, from the biblical point of view he argues that "although polygamy is not presented in the Bible as great sin, it is not the will of God. It is a man made arrangement to satisfy the desires of a person with a non-Christian world-view" [O'Donovan, 279-291]

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The Meserete Kristos Church along with the local leadership, after making a careful study on this matter, did not sanction polygamy for those who are already in it. But required three things to be met: (i) Christians who are polygamist will not be in leadership position, (ii) young persons who are ready for marriage should only marry to one wife. (iii) and the local church leadership would teach the new generation to be monogamous.

#### **IV. THE IMPACT OF THE ETHIOPIAN POLITICAL, SOCIAL SYSTEM ON THE OROMO PEOPLE'S GROUP**

Generally the Oromo tribal groups in Ethiopia feel even today as strangers in the land. They have bitterness towards the Amhara tribe, whom they consider as colonizers. Their elite group advocates that since the Oromos were in the land for a thousand years, they are not new comers. Hassen when addressing this issue writes: "...it is correct because it is based on an inaccurate historical premise which seeks to establish the origin of the Oromo as outside the present boundaries of Ethiopia, thus making them "new comers" to this country. The Oromo belongs to the Eastern Cushitic language speaking group for thousand years" [Hassen, 9]. Darrel also affirms when he writes, "they are one of the indigenous peoples of Ethiopia" [Darrel, 7)

At any rate, the different leadership that went into the forging of different peoples' group into one Ethiopia had been bringing about several social and cultural changes and as a result, the Oromos too have changed through time. Even though till now the political activists from outside struggle for one Oromo nation and country, the people in the land seem to be torn apart by this ordeal between two forces.

Despite the fact that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, during the early years, has tried to Christianize the Oromos by force, in major parts of the Oromo regions there is still superficiality. That is, there is resistance to change. As Kraft in his anthropological studies has confirmed, "change in values, assumptions and behavior come only when the world-view is challenged and when if there is already the people are questioning their assumptions." This stance then "provide the primary barriers of change. These worldview barriers are in the patterning, the script that people follow. Otherwise, people tend to be quite protective of their world view and assumptions" [Kraft , 381].

When it comes to attempting to introduce the Gospel to such people who are polytheistic, there could be, as Kraft argues "a logical incompatibility problem." For now, as long as the Oromo activists do not bring the change (political and social) they envision, the Oromo people are and have been conditioned to the Christian Gospel.

The trend is exciting. At least the work of the Meserete Kristos Church so far has brought about this hope that the Oromos will experience the Reign of God in the land.

**V. WORLDVIEW OF THE EASTERN WOLLEGA: OROMO PEOPLE**

The Oromo peoples' culture, as mentioned from the outset in this paper, has been on the process of change to a larger extent due to continued pressures and influences of the following factors:

- (1) Coptic Orthodox Christianity;
- (2) the intermingling of other tribes with different cultures living in their neighborhood for centuries;
- (3) intermarriages with other tribes;
- (4) the introduction of modern education;
- (5) urbanization - most educated sons and daughters of Oromos staying and living in towns and taking back to their

parents new ideas, assumptions, etc. (6) the Marxist Ideology that had a far reaching impact on the rural areas beyond the urban settings; (7) Evangelical church activities in the area including that of the Meserete Kristos Church since 1968 etc.

What is the worldview of the Oromo people's group in this specific region today? Generally there are three categories:

- (1) there are those who are maintaining the traditional belief and practices: "Waaka", "Ayyana" and the "Kalu" as mentioned earlier;
- (2) the second group can be sub divided into two:
  - (i) those with Islamic belief but mix the traditional religion,
  - (ii) those with Coptic Orthodox Christian affiliation but maintain and practice the traditional belief system, in both cases there is what is known as syncretism.
- (3) The third group is the Evangelical Christians who have totally embraced the Christian worldview. These are Oromos who have biblically derived principles of belief and practice.

The "redemptive analogy" that is available is to relate "Waaka" with the true

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God, the creator and sustainer of the world, and “Ayanna” with the Holy Spirit, because the Oromos associate the “Ayanna” with the spirit that comes from “Waaka.” The question of who Jesus is can be bridged by the analogy of the sacrifice of a sheep/goat they make to the “Waaka” every time they want to make prayers or observe certain rites. I remember a true story that happened to me. After I preached on a Sunday, I gave an altar call. Some eight persons came forward. Then, I took them to another room to talk to every one of them in turn. One of them was an adult person, from the Oromo tribe. At the end of our discussion on the ABCs of salvation through Christ, he was touched and convicted and asked me : "what shall I do? shall I bring a sheep for a sacrifice?" (The “Kalus”, usually tell them to bring sheep or goat for sacrifice). He thought that, we too would ask him to do that. I told him, no, you don't have too, “Waaka” has already given the Lamb (sheep) of the world to be sacrificed for you. His blood on the Cross was shed for you. You do not have to bring sheep. (I read him from the Bible several texts on this point) I saw a change on his face. He has happy and went saved. and changed on that day. Therefore, one can easily relate the Gospel to these people using this "redemptive analogy." Besides, when the Oromos see the signs of liberation from evil powers, and change in their lives, they can easily accept because of the manifestation of greater power than their “Kalus” exercise. Most of the time, they also see the “Kalus” themselves being liberated from the powers of the evil spirits and giving a powerful testimony to their followers.

The above schematic diagram represents the relationship of the belief system of the Oromos with the Christian belief. One can relate easily “Waaka” with God, and “Ayaana” with the Holy Spirit, but should bring the idea of sacrifice to relate it with Jesus Christ when addressing the Gospel for the first time. Once the Oromos see the power of the Holy Spirit, they can come to understand about Jesus.

I think the Missionary God has already paved the way for the Oromos to be visited by him through their cultural religious beliefs and practices. I also think, that because of the fear of "Waaka" that they have in their worldview, many of them have become Christians. One can say from statistics that the majority of Evangelical Christians are from the Oromos when compared to other tribes in Ethiopia.

In the Oromo region as a whole, there has been a long time missionary effort by the Lutherans and the Presbyterians, which began in 1918 and by the Sudan Interior Mission beginning in 1928 [Hege, 37] Later, other National Evangelical churches moved into areas where missionaries have not penetrated. Meserete Kristos Church began in 1968 to work among the Oromos in the eastern part of Wellega and as a result, many churches have been planted.

## **VI. BIBLICAL CHRISTIANITY, EVANGELISM AND ITS IMPACT**

As a result of missionary and national church evangelism effort, many Oromos have come to be Christians. This paper will only deal briefly with how the Meserete Kristos church began work in the eastern Oromo region of Wellega and to consider its impact, expansion and later also consider the need of contextualization of the Gospel.

In the past, effort was made by missionaries to evangelize the Eastern Oromo region. As Hege argues, "it had ended in failure." One reason being, the Gospel was never contextualized. But, 1968, two Christian nationals, who were government elementary school teachers, were assigned to teach in schools of the Oromo region. These two brothers had from the beginning a connection with the Meserete Kristos Church. Because of their effort to witness to the students many became Christians. Out of this effort, a young student who had accepted the Lord received a call from the Lord and started to evangelize traveling with the two teachers during the vacation times.

As revival broke out in many villages, they began to baptize, and as a result, persecution followed. All of them were imprisoned for four months, accused of defiling the faith of the Orthodox Church [Hege, 222].

The young boy was disciplined by those teachers during those four months they were in prison. After they were released, the young boy left his education and went and continued to evangelize to the Oromos in his area who were followers of the traditional religion and other nominal Coptic Orthodox Church followers. Many came to the Lord and also suffered persecution from their communities. Others seeing the miracles of healing, liberation from evil powers, like in the Bible days (Acts) were attracted to embrace Jesus who had set believers free from the fear of evil spirits and would do the same for them.

Within a period of six months, thousands came to the Lord. The young person then felt the need to relate to a larger national church and applied for membership. The leadership of the Meserete Kristos Church, in 1986, after having discussed and prayed, received the Eastern Oromo Wellega region church with about 2,500 members during the period of its underground life [Hege, 225].

The Meserete Kristos church took responsibility of administering, teaching

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the leaders by going to their places and continued to make its impact especially upon

Eastern Oromo Wellega MKC Statistical Data, August 1998

S.No.	Regional Conference	Total Faith Community	Baptized Members	Under Instruction	Children	Local Churches	Church Plant	Fulltime Workers	1 Year Service
1	Sombo	12,217	5,671	1,820	4,726	22	9	12	13
2	Degam	20,145	8,453	5,379	6,313	21	3	4	16
3	Dengeb	3,276	1,514	301	1,461	5	1	3	3
4	Shambu	956	536	593	231	4	0	3	3
	TOTAL	36,594	16,174	8,063	12,731	52	13	22	35

the leadership. Church structure was put in place. Constitutionally elected elders and deacons began functioning and as result of concerted effort the church in Eastern Wollega grew and expanded to different areas in its own proximity - east, west, south and northwards. Up until August 1998, there were four regional conferences, 52 local churches; 13 church planting centers; one Bible school. All together, there were 16,594 baptized members; 8,036 unbaptized but under instruction; 13,093 children. As to the number of full time workers (Pastors, evangelists, One year for Christ workers, Regional conference secretaries) there were 35. See the table below:

This phenomenal growth has been going on since 1986 till now. The percentage of growth from a membership of about 2,500 in 1986 to 36,594 in 1998 is 144.2% The secret for such growth is giving freedom to the churches of the regions to evangelize their own people because they know the language, the culture and the behavior of the region. One could have been successful like them if some one from another tribe enters a region different from his. These four regions are now preparing themselves to cross over to other tribes who in are their neighborhood. The strategy they use is to train people of the border area and send them to their own people. The strategy works in the following way.

In the diagram below, if we assume that there are four different tribes (A-D), living side by side with different languages and differing cultures, usually the boarder-line people living in A and B come from both sides; B and C from both sides; C and D from both sides and will know much better the language and cultures of one another than those who are living far away from the borders. This is because of blood relationships, intermarriages, and common use of market places, etc. Therefore, if we take for example, an Evangelical church in A can inch into B by reaching persons in A who are within in the border of B. To this end, first, it has to train those in A who are in the borderline of B. Those who are in the borderline of B then can reach the whole people in the B region. Churches in B also can reach those people in the C borderline. This strategy will allow then in the final analysis to reach people who are in D region. In other words, those who are in the borderlines when

they try to evangelize to their neighbors they are doing it by crossing their culture. Henceforth, a cross cultural mission.

The Eastern Oromo Wellega churches, using this strategy have stretched themselves by reaching the borderline peoples group in their neighborhood. Till now, they have gone into two peoples groups, which are different from them. These people groups are the Shinasha and Shankilla. The Shinasha peoples group occupies the border of the Sudan. There is a wider chance for the movement to cross the border of Ethiopia into the Sudan.

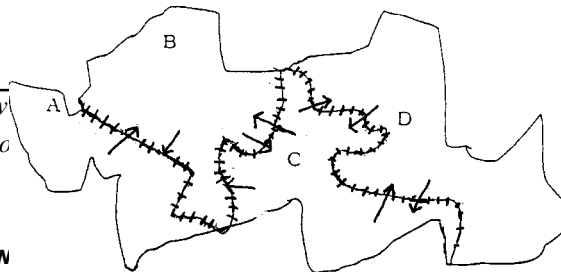
One may think that this is mission at turtle speed. But in countries where many things are limiting, this strategy is a sure and proven way of reaching other people who have a different culture. We have seen the Gospel going like wild fire especially when it is accompanied with signs and wonders. This has happened in many areas of the country. The Meserete Kirstos Church has this experience and will continue to use this approach.

I think one of the secrets for the evangelization of the different people groups is allowing the people to use their own language for evangelism, teaching, preaching purposes. The Education and Evangelism Department of MKC works on this principle. The strategy is to take evangelists and pastors of the different people groups and give them training in order to equip them for the work. To this end, the church looks for educated persons of different localities who are able to translate the materials to the languages of their own people and go to their own locality and train the leaders of the area in their own languages. These trained leaders will then take it to the grass roots level. This state of affairs, no doubt, empowers the local people and ensures trust and accountability being built in their local leadership.

This approach is an anthropological one. The rationale being, those people who live on this side of their neighbors know the language, the culture and symbols of their neighbors. Kraft, when addressing the need of communicating the Gospel by cross-cultural workers in understandable way writes: “when we come to understand the people in their culture, then we are in a better position to communicate the Gospel in such a way that they will not misunderstand it. We hope understanding will bring acceptance of the Gospel” [Kraft, 10]. Newbiggin

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confirms this model of using the language of the receptor in communicating the Gospel. He writes: “in the communication of the gospel across a culture frontier, (1) the communication has to be in the language of the receptor culture. It has to be such that it accepts, at least provisionally, the way of understanding things that is embodied in that language; if it does not do so, it may simply be an unmeaning sound that cannot change anything; (2) however, if it is truly the communication of the gospel, it will call radically into question the way of understanding embodied in the language it uses. If it is truly revelation, it will involve contradiction, and call for conversion, for a radical *metanoia*, a U-turn of the mind: (3) finally, this radical conversion can never be the achievement of any human persuasion, however eloquent. It can only be the work of God, a kind of miracle - not natural but supernatural” [Newbigin, 5-61].

MKC has learned this lesson early on, that even when planning to reach other peoples groups, what it will be doing is to look for would be leaders who know the language and culture of the peoples group targeted, and give discipleship training and send them to their own native people. I also do think that, in America there are many ethnic groups representing different cultures. These people have come due to many reasons and need to hear the Gospel. How can American churches reach them? For Americans, it would be difficult to cross their cultures and bring a meaningful interaction. I think, the best strategy would be to look for able leaders of the different ethnic groups, give them training and support them as they try to reach their own people in the language they understand. And possibly send some back to their own countries as missionaries later. This means, Chinese can be sent to Chinese people here in the USA, and even to China. Or a Nigerian can be sent to Nigerians her in the USA and even to Nigeria to his/her homeland: each to his/her own people and land provided that they have the Call.

## **VII CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE GOSPEL AND ITS IMPACT IN THE OROMO LAND OF EASTERN WELLEGA**

Since MKC continued to work with this people's group the following changes have been observed:

1. the worldview of the people continued to be challenged through the intentional teaching and as a result began to embrace Christian belief and practices;
2. the community took the challenge of carrying the Gospel to its own people and to the neighboring regions;
3. Christian local songs composed by the indigenous persons in the church mushroomed;
4. the giving to the church in the form of tithing is growing;

5. family life improved, ways of living changed, the faces of the people begun to shine and their children began to go to schools;
6. live-stock increased (disease was rampant before);
7. The people are experiencing prosperity when compared to others in their area;
8. The communities have impacted the non-Christians living among them, as a result many are coming to the Lord;
9. Marriages, funerals, dowries have shown tremendous change and others are following suit;
10. The vision for evangelism has increased, as a result they have opened their own Bible school, a center of its own kind to train their own full time workers with their own resources. (Usually the leaders pray and fast every week for the expansion of the Kingdom of God to other Oromo lands in distant places of the country).
11. Their impact on the MKC leadership:
  - a) have encouraged to do the same with other peoples group in the land;
  - b) work close with the leadership of these peoples group through visits for giving and receiving care and encouragement;
  - c) pick up leaders and give them continued training/education;
  - d) go along with their pace and bring them to the desired level,
  - e) recruit future leaders to other areas of the Oromo in the land.
  - f) empower the regional leadership to do the work.

### VIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Eastern Oromo Wellega Christian brothers and sisters in their own previous life were sincerely looking for God. A reflection of the worldview they had and their religious practices are indicators of this. On the appointed time, the Missionary God prepared these people to receive the Gospel when preached in their own language that they can understand. As a result, their allegiance has shifted more to the things of God significantly. Kraft writes that this is an indication of a cultural change both on the surface and at a deeper level. [Kraft, 11] What we have described above is precisely this reality.

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From their previous cultural predisposition, these people's group had suffered from the captivity of the evil powers. When the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ was preached they became free indeed. Now, their vision is to take this liberating message to others. In the near future, the Bible school they have will no doubt produce future leaders: evangelists and pastors who would go out to reach others. I, myself, am a witness. I have been among these people. I have seen the movement of the Holy Spirit. God is preparing a big army to labor for his Reign among the oppressed Oromos under the evil powers that make up 40% of the population of the land of Ethiopia.

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