

Onesimos Nasib's Pioneering Contributions to Oromo Writing*

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INTRODUCTION

Linguists tell us that the Oromo¹ language also referred to as *afaan Oromoo* or *Oromiffaa* with its more than 20 million speakers² is the second most widely spread indigenous language in Africa. More than two-thirds of the speakers of the Cushitic languages are Oromo or speak *afaan Oromoo*, which is also the third largest Afro-Asiatic language in the world (Gragg 1982). In spite of its importance as a vernacular widely spoken in the Horn of Africa *afaan Oromoo* lacks today a developed literature. Both the cultural history of the Oromo people and the language policy of the Ethiopian government were suggested to be responsible for this state of affairs.

In this paper I maintain that, although some basic literature existed in *afaan Oromoo* for the last 100 years, as the Oromo were colonized, they were (and still are) not given the chance to build on the literary foundations that were laid down during the last two decades of the 19th century.

To illustrate my argument, I describe Onesimos Nasib's contribution to Oromo literature, and the efforts he made to spread literacy and modern education in Oromoland at the beginning of this century. I discuss also, albeit briefly, the reactions that the works of Onesimos aroused among the Abyssinian nobility and clergy and the resultant language policy that suppressed development of literacy in *afaan Oromoo* and the other Cushitic and Omotic languages. The approach in this paper is socio-historical as well as socio-linguistic.

It is perhaps easier to appreciate the contributions made by Onesimos if we look at them in relation to his life and the numerous events that influenced or affected him and his work in one way or another. Therefore, I present in this section a short biography of Onesimos Nasib.

¹ In the pre-1974 literature the Oromo are called often Galla. But the Oromo do not call themselves by that name. Since the term *galla* is pejorative it is now abandoned.

² Different writers put the Oromo at between 40% and 50% of the total population in Ethiopia estimated to be about 50 million in 1990 (1984 census projection; see Kloos and Adugnawol 1989: 33-51).

A Biographical Note

Onesimos, whose birth name was Hiikaa, was born sometime in the middle of the 1850s in the region of Ilu Abba Bor in the western part of Oromoland. In his writings Onesimos refers to himself consistently as *nama biyya Oromoo*³ or "a man from the country of the Oromo". When he was about four years old he was kidnapped and separated from his widowed mother by slave-traffickers. He was freed from slavery by Werner Munzinger, a Swiss scholar and adventurer who worked as a consular agent of the French, British and Egyptians at the Red Sea port of Massawa.

Before that Onesimos was sold four times and given the name Nasib by one of the persons who bought and sold him. Since Munzinger bought slaves to set them free, he handed Onesimos over to the Swedish missionary station in Massawa in 1870. Then Onesimos was about 16 years old. In Massawa he started as a servant with one of the missionaries. He was the first Oromo to be converted to the protestant Christian religion. Onesimos was his baptismal name.⁴

The aim of the Swedish Evangelical Mission when it arrived in 1865 in Northeast Africa was to convert the Oromo people to Christianity. However, as the way to the Oromo country was closed in the north by Abyssinian kings and warlords, the Swedish missionaries stayed at Massawa waiting for the opportunity to penetrate the interior and reach the Oromo country. Meanwhile the missionaries were gathering, educating and converting Oromos who came to Massawa as victims of the slaved-trade that plagued Northeast Africa at that time. Onesimos was the first pupil at the school opened by the Swedish Evangelical Mission for that purpose (Dahlberg 1932: 16).

From the very beginning Onesimos showed an insatiable thirst for knowledge. At the school Onesimos studied religion, history, geography, arithmetic and languages.⁵ Soon after he completed his education at the Massawa school the missionaries who were impressed by his capacity and interest to learn sent him to the Johannelund Missionary Training Institute in Stockholm. Onesimos left Massawa for Europe in June 1876 (Dahlberg 1932: 18). He studied at the Johannelund Institute for the next five years and graduated with a teacher's diploma in 1881. He was also commissioned as a missionary (Dahlberg 1932).

³ In *afaan Oromoo* a country often referred to as the land of so and such people: e.g. *biyya Inglizi*, England, *Biyya Germani*, Germany, etc. In current Oromo writings Oromoland is referred to as Oromia (Orombiyya). It is a simplified combination of the two words Oromo (the people) and *biyya* (land).

⁴ Onesimos was known mainly as Abbaa Gammachiis in Wallaga.

⁵ Idoosa Gammachiis, *Ye Onesimos Nasib Achir Yehiywat Tariik*, (A Short Biography of Onesimos Nasib), n.d. Idoosa (ibid. p 4) wrote that Onesimos spoke Amharic, Tigrinya, Swedish, Arabic, English, Latin and Italian.

Immediately after his graduation he left Sweden and came back to Massawa in October 1881. Back in Africa he started to teach at his former school which was moved to Munkullo outside of Massawa town while he was in Sweden. At that time preparation for an expedition to Oromoland was underway at the mission station. Onesimos joined the expedition to realize his greatest wish and dream of returning to his native land to teach his people what he had learnt.

Since a previous attempt to reach Oromoland through Abyssinia had proved unsuccessful, the 1881 attempt or the so-called second Oromo expedition was made through the Sudan to Wallaga. The expedition set off from Massawa in November that year and reached the borders of the Oromo country after a journey that took two months on the Red Sea, through the Nubian Desert and on the River Nile. On their arrival at the frontier of Oromoland, Onesimos and his colleagues were misinformed about the security situation on the road to the Oromo country and were persuaded to go back by a European called Marno Bey who was an agent of the Egyptian *Khedive* at the Sudanese border post of Famaka (Dahlberg 1932: 29; Aren 1977: 252-254).

The return journey was arduous and disastrous. Two members of the expedition, G.E. Arrhenius, a Swedish missionary and leader of the expedition, and a young Oromo named Filipos, died and were buried on the way (Dahlberg 1932: 30-31).⁶ Mighty sandstorms, lack of water and several attacks of fever had to be endured in the Nubian Desert. Onesimos and the rest of the expedition returned to Munkullo in the middle of 1882 after about eight months of a gruelling journey (Dahlberg 1932: 31).

Back in Munkullo Onesimos resumed his teaching duties. In addition he also "*set about the most important part of his life-work: that of creating an Oromo literature*" (emphasis added, Aren 1977: 262). Onesimos started his literary work as a translator of short religious books. The first two religious works he translated were John Bunyan's *Man's Heart* and a book of religious songs. In 1883, Onesimos had to stop his translation work to once again join another expedition, the third Oromo expedition, to his native land. The missionaries had through correspondence managed to get permission from Menelik, the then king of Shoa, to pass through his country to the Oromo kingdom of Jimma. According to the information that the missionaries had received through traders coming from his land, Abba Jifaar II (1861-1932), the young *Mooti* (king) of Jimma, was eager to introduce modern education to his people and was interested in receiving missionaries as teachers (Aren 1977: 259).

The third Oromo expedition consisting of Onesimos, his wife Mihret, a young Oromo named Petros and the two Swedish evangelists Pahlman and Bergman left Massawa during the latter part of 1884 and arrived in Shoa via Tajoura (Djibouti) and Harar early in April the same year. On their arrival at Entoto,⁷ the new seat of

⁶ After the death of Arrhenius, Onesimos assumed responsibility for the expedition.

⁷ The same as the range of mountains on the northern outskirts of Addis Ababa.

Menelik in an Oromo territory conquered about a decade earlier, the Shoan King denied that he promised them passage through his land and ordered them to immediately return to the coast. Onesimos commented about this incident in a letter dated 23 June, 1886:

It is saddening that even this time we had to be chased away as if we were instigators of rebellion. ... We hoped and enjoyed to come to our land which we missed for such a long time (Dahlberg 1932: 34).

Menelik's behavior towards Onesimos and his colleagues was related by some observers with the *awaj* (decrees) of his suzerain, Emperor Yohannes IV who ruled Abyssinia from Tigray, regarding religion and missionary activities in his empire.⁸ However, the reason behind Menelik's refusal to allow the expedition to the interior of Oromoland seems to be more than that.

To begin with, it is doubtful whether Menelik who was in the middle of his conquest of Oromoland was happy to have in that territory educated and conscious Oromos like Onesimos who aspired to teach the Oromo people in their own language. It was also unlikely that Europeans who showed interest mainly in the Oromo, as the Swedish missionaries did at that time, were tolerated by his court.⁹ In order to prevent European weapons from reaching them, Menelik, in fact, was trying to isolate from the outside world the numerically superior Oromo he was conquering or was planning to conquer. And he was successful in doing so.

ONESIMOS NASIB'S OROMO LITERATURE

Having failed to reach its destination, the third Oromo expedition returned to Massawa in April 1886. Onesimos started once again to teach and translate. Meanwhile the number of Oromo slaves reaching Massawa and other coastal towns was increasing partly because of Menelik's conquest of Oromoland and, as the life-histories of some of the slaves freed and brought to the mission station show, his direct involvement in the slave trade.¹⁰ However, the Italians who were in the

⁸ This refers to the Boru Meda edict of 1878 issued by Emperor Yohannes IV of Abyssinia in the presence of his two vassals, King Menelik of Shoa and Ras Adal of Gojjam. The edict dictated religious homogeneity in the Abyssinian Empire then in the making. The Oromo, Moslems and pagans were to be converted to the Abyssinian creed by force. Those who resisted were to be confiscated of their property and driven out of the Empire or even killed. Gustav Aren (1977: 266) wrote that Menelik was "so powerful that he could ignore the edict of Boru Meda if it suited his aims, although he normally made the Orthodox Church an instrument of his colonial policy".

⁹ J.L. Krapf was apparently thrown out of Shoa in 1842 because of his interest solely in the Oromo (c.f. Pankhurst 1976: 171-206).

¹⁰ This was one such life history: "Aman...male 12 years, from...Gallaland captured with many others during a fight between Abyssinians and Gallas by the chief of Gojjam, Adal Tessema

process of colonising the Red Sea littoral of what was later to be named Eritrea combated, with some vigour, the freight of slaves across the sea to Arabia. This meant that more and more Oromo youth of both sexes (most slaves reaching the Red Sea coast were between the ages of 13 and 15) were liberated and sent to the Swedish Mission for support and education.

In addition to translating the Scriptures, which he now considered as the mission of his life, Onesimos found much joy in teaching these boys and girls. Together with him, these victims of the slave trade were, as will be discussed latter on, destined to play important roles in the laying the foundations of Oromo literature and the introduction of modern education and missionary work in the western parts of Oromoland.

Onesimos Nasib's literary works were both religious and secular. He wrote and/or translated most of them between 1885 and 1898. During those thirteen intensively active years he translated seven books, two of them with Aster Ganno, one of the young girls liberated and brought to the missionaries in 1886. Some of the books were short volumes. He wrote an Oromo-Swedish Dictionary of some 6000 words (Nordfelt 1947: 1). As the leader of an Oromo language team, to be discussed in a latter section of this paper, he also contributed to other linguistic works.

The first work (translation) by Onesimos was *Galata Waaqayoo Gofta Maccaa*. This was a small book of religious songs published in 1886 at the mission's printing press in Munkullo. The book was revised and published in 1894. Several editions of *Galata Waaqayoo Gofta Maccaa* have appeared since then and it is still in use today. The next work translated by Onesimos was *The New Testament* or *Kaku Haaraa* which was completed and published in 1893. Together with Aster Ganno he completed and published *Jalqaba Barsiisaa* or the *Oromo Reader* in 1894. The 174 pages long reader contains a collection of 3600 words and 79 short stories most of which were collected from Oromo oral literature.

Onesimos Nasib's most significant contribution was the complete translation of *The Holy Bible* or *Macafa Qulqulluu* which was printed in 1899 at St. Chrischona in Switzerland. Onesimos travelled to Europe and stayed about nine months in Switzerland to assist with proof-reading and personally supervise the printing. He made also his second and last visit to Sweden while printing was in progress. Onesimos' translation of the Bible has been described by historians and linguists as a great intellectual feat.¹¹ Dr. Gustav Aren wrote that "the Oromo version of the Holy Scripture is a remarkable achievement, it was to all intents the fruit of the

(Ras). When Menelik, the King of Shoa, attacked him (Adal) he took his captives and property, among them Aman. Aman was taken to Shoa and lived there for a year. He was taken (sold) to Tigre and then Massawa" (**Missions-Tidning**, no. 5A, 1893: 34).

¹¹ Dahlberg (1932: 46) wrote that Dr. A.W. Schleider, an authority on linguistic research in those days had examined Onesimos's translation of the Bible before publication and appreciated it very much.

dedicated labour of one man, Onesimos Nesib" (Aren 1977: 385). Onesimos was quite happy about the result of his labour. Although he

foresaw that scholars in Europe would criticize him for having not used the Greek and Hebrew texts, ... he was not worried about their censure. He was confident that his translation represented pure and idiomatic Oromo. He remarked that it would take trained philologists many years to produce a better version (Aren 1977: 385).

Indeed, ninety years have passed since Onesimos translated the Scriptures and no new translation of the complete Oromo Bible has yet been made primarily due to the ban imposed upon the Oromo language during this period by the Ethiopian Government.¹²

In the same year as the complete Oromo Bible came out, two other works translated by Onesimos, *Katekismos* which is the Oromo version of Luther's *Catechism* and John Bunyan's *Mans Heart* bearing the Oromo title *Garaan Namaa Mana Waaqayo yookiis Iddo Bultii Seetana*, were published. The translation of Birth's *Bible Stories* entitled *Si'a Lama Oduu Shantami-Lama* by Aster Ganno and Onesimos was printed at the same time.

THE OROMO LANGUAGE TEAM: A MINIATURE OROMO ACADEMY IN EXILE

Onesimos was assisted by a team of Oromos liberated from slavery and sheltered at the Swedish Mission station of Geleb in the highland of Mensa in Eritrea. Dr. Fride Hylander wrote about the team that,

As the interior of the country seemed to be closed, the pioneers in Eritrea made themselves ready for a future advance by gathering a group of intelligent and promising Gallas¹³ and giving some a refuge at Geleb, in the province of Mensa. Here they were engaged in education and translation and formed a "Galla-speaking colony", the leader of which was Onesimos (Hylander 1969: 83).

The Oromo language team which was organized about 1890 consisted 15 to 20 members. However, besides Onesimos and Aster, Lidia Dimbo,¹⁴ Stefanos Bonaya who was originally from Lamu in present day Kenya, Natnael, and Roro were among the active members of the team. Nils Hylander, a Swede and close friend of

¹² A team of experts have been working on a new translation since the early 1970s. So far only the *New Testament* has been completed and published.

¹³ See Footnote 1.

¹⁴ Onesimos married Lidia after his first wife Mihret died in labour in 1888.

Onesimos from his school days in Stockholm, joined them in 1891. The available sources indicate that Hylander had a very genuine affection for the Oromo and their language about which he wrote to his colleagues in Sweden in this enthusiastic manner:

The beauty of the Galla language cannot be exaggerated. Italian and Galla are...the most beautiful languages in the world. It is a pleasure to read and study them.¹⁵

He learnt it very quickly and contributed to the work of the team enormously.¹⁶ However, Hylander and Stefanos Bonaya left the team in 1893 to go to Lamu, Zeila and Harar to once again try to reach the Oromo country from that direction. The attempt was in vain. Natnael died of tuberculosis the same year. The rest continued the work with zeal and dedication.

The members of the team contributed in different ways in the preparation of the background literature for the educational and missionary work to be launched in Oromoland. A vocabulary of about 15000¹⁷ words were collected with the aim of compiling a dictionary, facilitating the translation of the Scriptures, and preparation of educational literature. Aster Ganno, linguistically the most gifted member of the team, wrote down from memory a collection of five hundred Oromo songs, fables and stories. Some of the stories were included in the *Oromo Reader* mentioned above.¹⁸ A comprehensive grammar of the Oromo language was also prepared. These works were left unpublished.

The work that Onesimos and his language team had accomplished at Geleb can, without doubt, be seen as the first and so far the only significant step towards creating an Oromo literature. These men and women, freed from the cruel grips of Abyssinian and Arab slave-traders by the humanitarian acts of individuals and ironically Italian colonialists and supported by the Swedish missionaries, toiled in a foreign land to make *afaan Oromoo* a written language with the hope of returning one day to their native land and spread literacy among their people. These hopes were only partially fulfilled.

When the members of the Oromo language team finally returned home, they found conditions in their country radically and negatively changed. Oromoland was conquered and colonised by the Amhara between 1875 and 1900 and the Oromo

¹⁵ Hylander to Swedish Mission (Stockholm) on Jan. 28, 1893 and published in **Missions-Tidning**, no. 5A (1893: 35).

¹⁶ The work of the Oromo Grammar mentioned was attributed mainly to him.

¹⁷ I found only about 13000 words both in main and sub-entries. The manuscript is deposited at the main library of the University of Uppsala.

¹⁸ The collection is in the possession of Nils Hylander's grandchildren. I did not get the opportunity to examine it. I am grateful to Hervor Hylander who allowed me to use her father's and grandfather's collections.

had lost their freedom. The conquerors were in the process of imposing their own language, Amharic, and their version of Christianity on the Oromo. Therefore, the efforts that these pioneers made to develop Oromo literature and teach the Oromo to read and write in their own language were frustrated by the Imperial Ethiopian government and its partner the Coptic Church.

The ban that the Ethiopian rulers placed on *afaan Oromoo* during the past 90 years made further development of the work started by them virtually impossible. Nevertheless, the efforts of Onesimos and his colleagues in the area of Oromo literacy were not fruitless. As will be discussed further on, they had, and continue to have, influence on Oromo consciousness and education.

SOME LINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF THE WORKS OF ONESIMOS

The points raised in this section focus primarily on Onesimos's method of drawing upon existing Oromo concepts, his creativity in coining new words and use of loan words to express ideas or explain objects found in the literature he translated. His choice and use of the Ge'ez, or so-called Sabeian script, to transcribe *afaan Oromo* will also be discussed briefly. Some remarks will be made about the contents of the *Oromo Reader* and its role in promoting literacy among the Oromo. I am not a linguist. Hence, I am not in a position to make deep linguistic analysis of the literary contributions of Onesimos and his colleagues. The comments that I make in this section are, therefore, not much more than the comments of a layman who has *afaan Oromoo* as a mother tongue.

Before starting with the comments a few words should be said about those aspects of the Oromo culture and Oromo oral literature that seem to have facilitated Onesimos's translation, particularly that of the Scriptures to *afaan Oromoo*. As has been noted by linguists and social anthropologists, *afaan Oromoo* is rich in many senses. Professor Gene Gragg, for example, observed that "the Oromo are a very "verbal" and word-oriented people with a vast, rich and at times densely lyrical oral literature" (Gragg 1982: vi). Customs pertaining to love, marriage, childcare, animal husbandry, beliefs about death and supernatural beings, and warfare and important events in Oromo history are quite elaborately narrated and preserved in Oromo oral literature.

Afaan Oromoo is also full of religious concepts denoting the notions of the superhuman, holiness, divinity, and creation. Myths, rites and rituals abound in Oromo culture and oral literature. The *Chambers Encyclopedia* notes that "the Oromo communal prayers are regarded as the most magnificent oral religious literature known" (*Chambers Encyclopedia* 1967: 142).

Moreover, the concept of God in Oromo traditional religion has close similarities with that of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Oromo have, throughout their known history, believed in one God they call *Waaqa* or *Waaqayo*. *Waaqa* is also sometimes referred to as *Aabba* (the most high) and *Waaqa Tokkicha* (the Supreme

God). Onesimos drew intelligently upon the religious culture and oral literature of the Oromo in his translation of the Bible. He did not hesitate to use directly *Waaqa* and many other Oromo religious concepts and notions in his works.

As was noted by Lambert Bartels, Onesimos was an "indefatigable searcher for the right word" (Bartels 1983: 168-9). Where the Oromo language lacked the necessary concepts, Onesimos coined new terms by compounding existing Oromo words and using them with great success. Such hybrid or group-words as *hafuura-Waaqayoo* (the Holy Spirit), *qalma-galataa* or *aarsa* (sacrifice), *mana-kadhannaa* (house of prayer or church), *qalbi-jjirachuu* (repentance), *luboota* (the high priests of the Jews) and *cuuphaa* (baptism) are examples of the numerous Oromo religious terminologies that were developed and used by Onesimos.

Regarding expressions for objects unknown to the Oromo, Onesimos did not find his task very easy. He admitted that finding proper or corresponding words for objects often caused him much "suffering and sweating" (Hylander 1969: 87). Sometimes he was compelled to keep foreign names. Such difficulties arose mainly with the translation of the Old Testament.

Nevertheless, there are instances where, instead of borrowing words from foreign languages, Onesimos could have used existing ideas and notions in *afaan Oromoo*. He could have also coined the Oromo equivalents of some of the vocabulary he had borrowed. This concerns particularly legal concepts and terminology pertaining to landholding and public administration (Digga 1973: 19). However, these minor gaps in Onesimos' use of Oromo vocabulary can by no means minimize the great contributions he had made to Oromo writing. He had not only laid the foundations of an Oromo literature but to a certain extent also enriched the Oromo language.

GE'EZ ORTHOGRAPHY AND OROMO WRITING

Onesimos used the Ge'ez or Ethiopic orthography to transcribe *afaan Oromoo*. Although Onesimos was not a trained linguist he was innovative in his adaptation of the Ge'ez syllabary to Oromo writing. Nevertheless, some very crucial problems remained unresolved as the Ge'ez characters are hardly suitable to transcribe Oromo phonetics (see for example Gemta 1986: 131-137). Although the Geez alphabet is short by only one consonant to satisfy the sounds in *afaan Oromoo* as compared to six less in the Latin alphabet, as the Ge'ez script has no separate characters to represent vowels, it is often impossible to indicate the short and long vowel sounds that abound in *afaan Oromoo*. In *afaan Oromoo*, length is lexically distinctive both with vowels and consonants. But gemination is impossible in both cases when the Ge'ez alphabet is employed.

The inadequacy of the Ge'ez characters for phonemic transcription of the Oromo language meant that words with entirely different meanings were spelt exactly the

same. Observe, for example, that these pairs of words are spelt the same when Ethiopic orthography is used.

- | | | |
|-----|---------------------|------------|
| (1) | <i>dhufe</i> _____ | he came |
| | <i>dhuufe</i> _____ | he farted |
| (2) | late _____ | is budding |
| | laate _____ | is giving |
| (3) | boba'e _____ | burnt |
| | bobba'e _____ | deployed |
| (4) | oolaa _____ | sheep |
| | ollaa _____ | neighbour. |

Consequently, one who reads Oromo literature in the adapted Ge'ez characters has to determine the pronunciation and hence the meanings of numerous words only by following the context¹⁹. This often makes reading Oromo literature using these characters a very laborious task. As it is being increasingly demonstrated by the growing literature produced by the Oromo Liberation Front, Oromo intellectuals in exile and foreign scholars, it seems to be quite easy to surmount these problems if the Latin alphabet is used to transcribed *afaan Oromoo*.²⁰

Onesimos tried to overcome the serious shortcomings of the Geez alphabet in two ways. He created a letter (dh) to transcribe a retroflex sound peculiar to *afaan Oromoo* and produced by retracting the tip of the tongue to the hard palate.

He employed also a spelling system to minimize the problem with vowel length. Onesimos tried to adapt the seven signs in Ge'ez orthography that are used to indicate vowel phonemes to *afaan Oromoo* which has ten vowel orders: five short and five long ones. He used the first and sixth signs or as they are often called vowel 'orders' to represent the short 'a' and 'i' sounds and the third and fourth orders to indicate the long ('i' and 'a') ones. However, it was not possible to do the same with the rest. Therefore, the second, ('u'), the fifth ('e') and the seventh ('o') orders

¹⁹ Gemta 1986: 132; The Italian Orientalist Enrico Cerulli had in his *The Folk-Literature of the Galla of Southern Ethiopia* (Harvard 1922) pointed out that the Ethiopic alphabet "expresses very imperfectly even the sounds of the Ethiopian language" and that reading *afaan Oromo* transcribed with it is "like deciphering a secret writing". A study made on the language policy and adult literacy programme of the present regime had reached also at a similar conclusion (see McNab 1987).

²⁰ The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the Oromo Relief Association (ORA) and the Oromo Students, Workers and Women associations in exile have produced a substantial body of literature and developed literacy in *afaan Oromoo* using the Latin Alphabet. Examples of such literature are *Oromia* (Finfinnee 1980) which is a guide to Oromo history and culture and published under the pseudonym of Gadaa Melba, and ORA's primary school texts and readers used in the schools it runs for refugee children and adult education in the neighbouring countries and in Oromo areas under the control of the OLF inside Ethiopia.

were made to represent both short and long vowel phonemes. Consequently, the result was not quite successful. Furthermore, he was not able to do anything about the shortcomings of the Geez alphabet concerning consonant gemination.

Therefore, there are some difficulties, more often for a beginner, to read Onesimos's books smoothly and quickly. Onesimos's tendency to collapse two or more words to one is another problem that obstructs fluent reading.

It is suggested that Onesimos's selection of the Ge'ez orthography was voluntary. It was also maintained that Onesimos chose it because he was convinced that the Ge'ez characters expressed Oromo sounds better than the Latin ones.²¹ These suggestions, however, are not well founded. Onesimos did not mention, as far as I know, why he used the Ge'ez characters. His views about the use of the Latin alphabet to transcribe *afaan Oromoo* was not clear. The only time he said anything about alphabets was when he was asked his opinion about translation works done by other people. On that occasion he did not at all emphasize the advantage of the Ge'ez orthography over the Latin one. He criticized one of the translators for not indicating the right pronunciation particularly of the letters used to transcribe those sounds in *afaan Oromoo* that are difficult to write with the Latin characters. Concerning the work of another translator his comment was:

I know only that it was transcribed with the Latin Alphabet. It could be good. But it will be very long before the opportunity to provide the people with a book written with these characters could arise; at least I think that it is limited.²²

His assessment was almost prophetic. It was about a century ago that Onesimos made that statement but still today the use of the Latin alphabet for Oromo writing is not allowed in Ethiopia. Although Onesimos did not specify why he made such an assessment, it is not difficult to conceive that he was hinting at the attitude of Abyssinian authorities towards the Oromo language in general and its transcription in the Latin orthography in particular. The reaction of the Abyssinian clergy in this regard was already noted by Dr. J.L. Krapf who in 1840 reported from the Kingdom of Shoa that

I know that in using foreign characters I shall be opposed by the Abyssinian priests, who wish nothing but the Ethiopic to be circulated (Isenberg and Krapf 1843: 161, 170; quoted in Pankhurst 1976).

In Germany in 1881 Onesimos had met Krapf who knew about this problem very well (Dahlberg 1932: 26). Furthermore, that the Oromo were being conquered and were in the process of losing their independence to the Abyssinians while Onesimos worked on his translations was known to the missionary community in Geleb and

²¹ Digga (1973: 22), and Nordfelt (1947: 2) are of the same opinion.

²² Onesimos to Swedish Evangelical Mission on January 22, 1892, published in *Missions-Tidning* 1892, pp. 58-59.

other stations around Massawa. This must have been clear at least after Onesimos returned from Shoa in 1886.

To me it seems that these were the main factors rather than cultural and linguistic considerations which made Onesimos use the Ge'ez characters. Whatever the motive may have been the decision was pragmatic. Otherwise Onesimos would not have had any chance to reach his people with his books, and their educational and cultural contributions could have remained unrealized. Notwithstanding the problems caused by the use of the Ge'ez alphabet, the works of Onesimos and his colleague, Aster Ganno, were enthusiastically received and were widely read by the Oromo particularly in Wallaga. The influence of these works became quite strong and durable in spite of the restriction, and subsequently the ban that was placed by the imperial Ethiopian government upon the use of the Oromo language to write, teach, preach and even for administrative purposes. Two factors account for Onesimos Nasib's success in Wallaga: his own qualities as an educator and the enthusiastic reception and support of the Oromo people of Wallaga and their leaders for his work. These will be discussed briefly in the following section.

ONESIMOS RETURNS TO OROMOLAND

After he came back in 1899 from his second trip to Europe, Onesimos settled for a while in Asmera, Eritrea, and worked as a teacher and evangelist among its Oromo residents and visitors who numbered about 500 souls at that time (Aren 1977: 413). Sometime in 1903 Onesimos got permission to return to his native country. He left Eritrea in early December and finally came home in April 1904 after 35 years in exile. Preceded by fame as a great man whose labours has brought fame to himself and lustre to *afaan Oromoo* he was received with great honour by Dajazmatch Kumsa Moroda, the Oromo Governor of Wallaga (Dahlberg 1932: 54; Idoosa Gammachiis, n.d., p. 6.).

The spontaneous interest that the Oromo people showed for his books and teaching was more than what Onesimos had ever expected or dreamt about. The following observation casts some light on the enthusiastic reception that Onesimos's literature was accorded by the Oromo people.

Gebre-Ewosteos now produced...books in Oromo, read some portions of the New Testament and sang some hymns, ... Dibaba (Governor of Bojji and son of Bakare, the *Mooti* of Leeqaa Naqamte) marvelled. He had never imagined that it would be possible to use his own native language for sacred scriptures and Christian poetry. Excited, he gave the priest...instant employment. Dejazmatch Gebre-Egziabher (his Oromo name was Kumsa Moroda) consented, remarking that the clergy from Gojjam would never permit the Oromo Holy Scriptures to be read in Naqamte Mariam. In Boji Mariam it would be possible... (Aren 1977: 395-396).

As will be discussed further on, it did not take long for the Abyssinian clergy to react. Nevertheless, since Dibaba's excitement was shared by the Oromo, including his nephew Kumsa Moroda, the Governor of Wallaga himself, the work of Onesimos and his colleagues started immediately to take root and came to leave permanent imprints in the consciousness of the people.

THE BEGINNING OF OROMO LITERACY

When Onesimos returned home, Kumsa lived at Najjo. He invited Onesimos and built him a house and a school near his own residence. He gave him a place of honour and made him sit by his side on public occasions and at banquets. Kumsa gave his own children and servants to Onesimos to teach and persuaded his people to do the same (Digga 1973; Aren 1977: 419).²³ Concerning his reception in Oromoland Onesimos wrote to his friends in Sweden:

We have nothing to fear from this side of the people. The land is open to us. The master comes with his servant, the father with his son, brothers with brothers and friends with their friends and insist and beg us to teach them (Lundgren, n.d., p. 140).

Received with open arms by the Oromo leadership and people, Onesimos set about his work immediately and four months after his arrival he had already started a school in Najjo and enrolled twenty students. Thus, Onesimos and his colleagues started to sow the seeds of modern education in Oromoland. By May 1905, a year after they came home, Onesimos and Aster Ganno had sixty eight students at their school (Digga 1973: 32) and a basic foundation for formal education in *afaan Oromoo* has been laid down.

In addition, Aster Ganno and Feben Hirphee, another Oromo who as a young girl was "captured at Jiren in Jimma during Menelik's campaigns in 1881/82" (Aren 1977: 295) and sold into slavery but was freed and educated by the Swedish missionaries in Eritrea, regularly visited the wives of the notables and taught them home and child care, and the alphabet (Digga 1973: 32). Onesimos wrote to his missionary friends in Eritrea that the Oromo interest in education was so big that he would have several hundred students if he only had teachers and classrooms; practically all parents implored him to receive their children (Aren 1977: 420).

What makes this rather humble, and by international standards belated, start quite remarkable is that it occurred several years before the first public school was opened elsewhere in the Ethiopian Empire, even in Addis Ababa, its capital city.²⁴

²³ Idoosa Gammachiis noted that Kumsa gave 30-50 youngsters to Onesimos to teach.

²⁴ The first proclamation on public education was issued in 1906 by Menelik, and the first government school in the Ethiopian Empire, Ecole Menelik II opened in Addis Ababa in 1908 (See McNab 1989: 62).

Secondly, this pioneering educational work was performed entirely by the indigenous people themselves. The Swedish missionaries came to Wallaga in the first half of the 1920s.

It should be mentioned also that Onesimos's school in Najjo was, in fact, not the first such school in Wallaga. Equipped with the literature produced by Onesimos and Aster Ganno, two former colleagues of Onesimos at Munkullo, Gebre-Ewostatewos, an Eritrean, and Daniel, an Oromo, had come to Boojji in 1898 and started literacy classes under the protection of an important Oromo leader and uncle of the governor of Wallaga, Fitawrari Dibaba Bakare. When Onesimos came home they were even training village-school teachers and some of their trainees had already returned to their home districts and started their own schools with the support and protection of leading Oromo families (Digga 1973: 25; see also Aren 1977, Chapter XIV).

Oromo leaders opened schools and asked Onesimos and his colleagues to send them teachers. The literature and education provided by them appealed to the feelings of the people for various reasons. Primarily both the Oromo leaders and people showed a remarkable eagerness to get modern education. Secondly, Oromo literature and Evangelical Christianity were seen as convenient means to counteract the influence of the Amhara culture and language that the Coptic priests, who came to this part of Oromoland following the conquest were trying to impose on them with force.

It is also important to note that the Amhara had very little to offer the Oromo in terms of literature or education since most of whatever secular or religious education their Coptic Church was able to provide was in Ge'ez, an obsolete language which even the majority of its priests hardly comprehended. Kumsa and the other Oromo leaders who apparently felt that their dignity was somewhat restored by the Oromo literature from the slight of the conquest and particularly the cultural subordination to the Amhara exhorted Onesimos to teach and preach diligently in *afaan Oromoo* (Aren 1977: 424).

In addition to the above mentioned factors, the pioneering dedication and energy of Onesimos and his colleagues seem to have played a great role. For Onesimos, not only preaching religion but providing education to the Oromo in their own vernacular was a passionate subject. After all, he was trained as a teacher. In one of the numerous letters he wrote to the Swedish Evangelical Mission in Sweden while he was still in Munkullo he remarked that: "I labour with delight and happiness together with our newly arrived Galla (Oromo) girls... What a joy to teach them in our mother tongue" (Aren 1977: 302). In his small book *Onesimos: Från Slav till Bibel Översättare (Onesimos: From Slave to Bible Translator)*, Nils Dahlberg had this to say about the importance that Onesimos gave to Oromo literacy.

After he came back to Africa, and up to his death, Onesimos did everything to make the Oromo interested in their own language. Whenever he met young people he did not wait to raise the subject and to persuade them to learn the alphabet and read books in the language of their forefathers. The question he asked the youth every time he met them was: 'Can you read and write?' When

the answer was in the negative he enquired: 'But is it not useful to be able to read and write?' Thus he convinced many to read and write (Dahlberg 1932: 47).

Onesimos started literary classes even for prisoners in Naqamte. He advised and encouraged them to use their time in confinement to learn to read and write. He distributed to them copies of the *Oromo Reader* free of charge.²⁵

The *Oromo Reader* was the main tool used to spread literacy. What Onesimos and Aster Ganno had in mind when they prepared the reader was not the compiling of a religious document but providing the Oromo with a book that dealt with things that were familiar and near to them. The main aim was to help them cultivate the habit of reading. Onesimos made this intention clear in one of his letters to missionaries in Sweden. He wrote, "*my aim is to introduce the Bible only after my students have learnt to read and write with the help of the reader*" (Onesimos, **Missions-Tidning**, no. 19, 1893: 149). Thus, literacy as well as evangelization were equally important to Onesimos. Concerning the contents of the *Oromo Reader* Onesimos wrote that,

The stories, with the exception of a couple of martyr stories, are short and funny, and the subjects vary in order to attract. When writing this book we have been very anxious to achieve a fluent Galla (Oromo) language, and I believe we have succeeded (ibid., see also Hylander 1969: 82-83).

Having read the *Oromo Reader* this is also my conclusion. They were successful. In the preparation of the reader Onesimos followed the *Swedish Reader for Public Schools (Folkskolans läsebok)*. Some of the stories used in the *Oromo Reader* were taken from the Swedish reader and translated by Onesimos (Onesimos, **Missions-Tidning**, no. 19, 1893).

ONESIMOS BECOMES TARGET FOR PERSECUTION

The popularity that Onesimos and his Oromo literature gained within such a short time started to cause great jealousy among the semi-literate Abyssinian clergy in Wallaga. When Kumsa moved his residence back to Naqamte he took Onesimos with him partly to protect him from the intrigues of the Abyssinian clergy in Najjo. In Naqamte Onesimos started a small school in his own backyard and began to teach. However, it did not take long before he found that it was not possible to teach and preach in *afaan Oromoo* anywhere in the Ethiopian Empire. He became the target for persecution because his mere presence in Wallaga was reported to

²⁵ Onesimos encouraged handicraft and also visited the socially submerged groups like blacksmiths, tanners, weavers etc. and advised them to be proud of their trades and improve their skills (See Digga 1973: 45).

have threatened not only the priests but also the entire *naftanya* (the Abyssinian armed settlers in the south) community in the province.

Onesimos was everything that the Amharas did not expect or wanted their Oromo subjects to be. He was better educated, more informed and travelled than any of the Abyssinians then in Wallaga. To them he represented Oromo defiance and rejection of the Amhara language and religion. He was seen as a 'wrong' example and a 'bad' influence to the subjects.²⁶ That his books were so popular seems to have been a cause for much alarm. Nevertheless, Kumsa believed in their educational value for his people and wanted more and more of them in his province. Hence, donkey-load after donkey-load of these books kept arriving in Wallaga. Almost every trader coming from Addis Ababa delivered some copies as an extra load on each mule or donkey free of charge (Digga 1973: 32). The books were popular not only among leading families of the province but also the ordinary people.

The books of Onesimos were the first eye-openers for the Oromo in Wallaga. They were almost always the first books to be possessed. They were read aloud in all places where people were gathered together. Those who could not read listened. They were the basis of the earliest educational flowering in Wallaga (Digga 1973: 49).

ONESIMOS ON TRIAL

The priests whose position was affected more adversely by the activities of Onesimos and his colleagues sounded the first alarm and sought assistance from the rest of the *naftanya* colonists. Prompt assistance came from Arjo, an adjacent province to Naqamte and at that time with the largest *naftanya* concentration in western Oromoland. As Gustav Aren has rightly noted,

It was evident that government officials in alliance with the clergy formed a powerful pressure group, which tried to enforce Orthodoxy as a means of securing Amhara culture and combat Oromo consciousness, which seems to have found an outlet in the evangelical movement (Aren 1977: 427-428).

The priests went to Ras Demise Nasibu, the highest Abyssinian official in the region and the governor of Arjo, who was also the leader of the *naftanya* forces in Wallaga, and the Emperor's 'eye and ear' concerning the activities of semi-autonomous Oromo leaders and their people. The first accusation against Onesimos was, therefore, filed at his court. Onesimos was forced to appear before him and trial took place in December 1905.

²⁶ Dahlberg, (1932: 59) notes that "The priests were furious because of Kumsa's support to Onesimos. They said: "he (Onesimos) is not like us. He is like a European. He cannot be a good man. He is not an Abyssinian (Coptic) Christian."

The accusation against Onesimos was naturally presented in a religious tone. He was accused of being a 'heretic' and a 'trouble maker'. But the source of the Amhara anger against Onesimos was not only his religious teaching but also his literary contributions. However, the literary aspect was not articulated in the accusation. Although it was quite obvious that the Amhara colony, including the governor of Arjo considered Onesimos's Oromo literature and his use of the Oromo language to teach and preach as factors that would awaken and sustain Oromo consciousness and hence constitute serious obstacles to the introduction of the Amhara culture and language in the province, it seems that they were not sure whether to consider them as illegal. Therefore, when the governor found that the religious case brought against him was not enough to indite Onesimos as a criminal he let him return to Naqamte.

Nonetheless, he sent a letter to Kumsa informing him that "the Bible is the destruction of his people", and that "the Bible must not be given ordinary people; it would lead to disaster" (Digga 1973: 34; Aren 1977: 425). As it may be clear to anyone who knows the so-called *säm enna wäraq* or ambiguity of message in the Amhara mode of conversation and written communication, it was not, in fact, the Bible *per se* that was considered destructive but that it was in the Oromo language. He was obviously threatening Kumsa because of the support he gave Onesimos and for allowing him to distribute such literature. Thus it was clear from the incident at the Arjo court that it was not only Onesimos the religious preacher but, as we shall see further on, also his Oromo literature that was on trial.

The trial in Arjo was just the beginning of series of harassments Onesimos had to face for several years to come. Ras Demise, the Amhara governor of Arjo reported Onesimos as a trouble maker to authorities in Addis Ababa. His adversaries, the Abyssinian clergy in Wallaga, did not rest either. They brought the matter in June 1906 to Abuna Mateos, the Archbishop of the Coptic Church. Onesimos was summoned to Addis Ababa at short notice and stood trial.

The Archbishop who also had joined the accusers, cursed and ex-communicated Onesimos from the Abyssinian church. Since he did not belong to that church the ex-communication could have been harmless and meaningless. However, it was an extremely dangerous pronouncement which was meant to expose Onesimos to all forms of harassment in public including name-calling, stone throwing or even to more serious violence from the clergy and their followers.²⁷ Onesimos was also sentenced to loss of all his property and imprisonment in heavy chains. The same punishment was meted out to his adherents and supporters including Kumsa Moroda (Aren 1977: 426).

The Emperor, did not, however, confirm the verdict in its entirety. He cancelled the imprisonment and Onesimos was allowed to return to Naqamte. It was suggested that Menelik had changed the verdict after Karl Cederquist, a Swedish

²⁷ Dahlberg (1932: 59) noted that Onesimos suffered various types of harassment due to the trial. Idoosa Gammachiis (n.d., p. 7) wrote that the harassment went as far as burning down of his house in Naqamte.

missionary stationed in Addis Ababa, intervened on Onesimos's behalf. Cederquist wrote,

My main duty has been and still is to act as a protector. The natives (Oromo) dread the punishments of the Abyssinians. Even Onesimos expected nothing but imprisonment, confiscation and exile. And God knows what would have happened to him had I not been able to offer him refuge in my hut (Cited in Dahlberg 1932: 58).

ONESIMOS NASIB'S EDUCATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS WORKS BANNED

Menelik allowed Onesimos to go free but forbade him to continue with his teaching and told him to support himself as a farmer or a trader (Aren 1977: 427). Onesimos was not even allowed to teach his own children. The verdict affected him and his work immensely.

Kumsa, who was at that time struggling to maintain the little autonomy he had from the centre, felt threatened. He had sufficient cause to be on his guard. The Amhara nobility coveted the substantial revenues from his prosperous province and were looking for justifications to request the Emperor to remove Kumsa and appoint them instead.²⁸ Continued open support to Onesimos who was accused of heresy and labelled as a creator of religious disharmony by the highest authorities of the Empire would have meant playing into the hands of those cunning and greedy Amhara nobility.

Confronted thus not only with the threat of the loss of his autonomy but even of his inherited post, Kumsa started to distance himself from Onesimos. He was even forced to order the collection, from their owners, of all the copies of the *Oromo Reader* he permitted to be distributed in his province (Digga 1973: 37).

Although he was seemingly ambivalent towards Onesimos he did not abandon him. The sources indicate, in fact, that it was the diplomacy and tact played by Kumsa in support of him that finally saved Onesimos and his work. The Oromo people and nobility continued to support Onesimos (Digga 1973: 42) although some of them were also accused and threatened by the Abyssinian priests for reading the *Oromo Bible* (Aren 1977: 428).

Following the trial, the educational work he and his colleagues started in Naqamte, Najjo and Boojji was stopped. However, in the countryside where the Coptic clergy and the Abyssinian rulers had not yet set their foot the educational and evangelical work continued unhindered and expanded. Onesimos did not get

²⁸ About Kumsa Moroda's tug-of-war with the Amhara nobility and government to maintain his position see Professor Alessandro Triulzi, "Nekemte and Addis Ababa: dilemmas of Provincial rule" in *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia. Essays in History and Anthropology* (1986).

peace for a long time. The priests in Naqamte continued to spy on him and harass him. Several attempts were made to silence Onesimos but he refused to give up.²⁹

When in 1916 Lij Iyassu gave the missionaries permission for evangelical work it also became possible to run schools. Besides Onesimos's school for boys, Aster and Lidia opened a school for girls in Naqamte. The boys' schools in Naqamte and Najjo were revived and enlarged. As the restriction on the use of *afaan Oromoo* for missionary educational and religious work was somewhat relaxed, Onesimos' books became once again quite widely distributed and used in Wallaga.

THE SHORT LIVED EXPANSION OF OROMO LITERACY

During the two decades following the death of Menelik, the Amhara aristocracy was engaged in a power struggle over succession to the throne and it seems that they were less concerned about the languages used by their subjects in the provinces. Consequently the Oromo educational and evangelical pioneers got some respite to work. Elementary education expanded and was given in *afaan Oromoo*.

The Phelps-Stokes Commission who toured Eastern Africa in 1924 reported that in some of the missionary schools in Wallaga *afaan Oromoo* was the only medium of instruction and that Amharic was not even yet included in the curriculum. *Afaan Oromoo* continued to enjoy the same status right up to the beginning of the 1940s. During the Italian occupation (1936-1941) it was made the medium of instruction throughout Oromoland including Addis Ababa (McNab 1989: 78). Regarding the influence of Onesimos Nasib's work on Oromo literacy, Professor Gene Gragg had rightly noted:

Given the adverse circumstances, a surprisingly high degree of Oromo literacy existed there (Wallaga) since the early part of this century, owing in large part to the widespread use of Onesimos Nasib's Oromo Bible translation...and the existence of mission-supported elementary education in Oromo. This was suppressed in favour of government-decreed Amharization in the post-World War II period (Gragg 1982: xvi).

After his return Onesimos did not produce anything for publication. It seems that he was occupied by teaching and spreading the gospel. Above all his energy and time was taxed by the accusations and harassment against him. He died in the second week of June 1931 at the ripe age of about seventy-five years. He was described by those who knew him as "hardworking, lover of justice and a man of his faith, body

²⁹ In 1912 Onesimos was banished from Naqamte to Addis Ababa for about half a year. It was the decision of the Archbishop Mateos. Idoosa Gammachiis (n.d., p. 7) wrote that Kumsa accepted the decision with the intention of saving Onesimos from danger that might occur to him if he stayed in Naqamte.

and soul". In spite of the numerous adversities³⁰ that he had to face his long life had been very fruitful. He was active until his death.

DECREE TO TURN AFAAN OROMOO INTO A NON-LITERATE LANGUAGE

After the restoration, the Haile Selassie regime tolerated literacy no more in *afaan Oromoo* and the use of Oromo literature for educational or religious purposes was once again forbidden.

The restriction was strengthened with the implementation of the Imperial Decree No. 3 of 1944 which regulated the work of missionaries. Amharic was declared to be the language of instruction throughout the Ethiopian Empire and the missionaries were expected to learn it (Art. 13). They were allowed to use *afaan Oromoo* only for ordinary oral communication with the local population (Art. 14), but not for preaching the Gospel (*Negarit Gazeta* 1944).

Faced with the threat of losing permission to work in the Empire the missionaries compromised (with the conditions dictated by the decree) and stayed. The compromise marked the end of literacy and education in *afaan Oromoo* and the other Cushitic and Oomotic languages of the subject peoples of the Ethiopian Empire. Thus the decree turned the Oromo language into a non-literary vernacular for more than three decades; and formal education in *afaan Oromoo* is still not allowed after fifty years.

The Oromo people obviously had no say in the decisions and compromises made about them by their conquerors and the missionary organizations. Wallaga had lost its partial autonomy and its leadership with the restoration of Haile Selassie's regime in 1941. Therefore the Oromo could make only passive resistance to the Amharization of their educational and religious institutions and the suppression of their language.

In a report concerning the emphasis laid by the Ethiopian government on the necessity for missionaries to learn Amharic, the British diplomatic representative³¹ at that time wrote to London suggesting that "*the Ethiopian government might use the missionaries as a minor instrument of Amhara imperialism in the Oromo and other colonial lands*" (emphasis added). This was a correct perception of the situation since missionaries, some of them perhaps unwittingly, became instruments of the government policy of Amharization and de-Oromization.

The policy of Amharization is an attempt at linguistic homogenisation of the Empire and was guided by the imperialist principle of *cuius regio, eius lingua*.

³⁰ Besides 12 years of slavery Onesimos suffered many adversities in his life. His first wife died in childbirth. His first two children with Lidia Dimbo died while he was away in Europe in 1889. His health condition had not been always good.

³¹ R.G. Howe to A. Eden, Addis Ababa 18.3. 1943, FO 371, vol. 35642, 1877 cited in Norberg (1977: 77).

According to this principle the subject peoples are not merely expected to hand over the economic surplus and show obedience to their rulers but are also required to abandon their own cultures, languages and religions and adopt that of their rulers, in this case the Abyssinian culture, Amharic and Coptic Christianity.

This policy was actively pursued throughout the 1950s, 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, particularly concerning language. A National Academy of the Amharic Language was founded in 1972 "to foster the growth of the Amharic language and to encourage the development of Amharic literature" (*Negarit Gazeta*, 1972). An educational mass media centre was established with "among its foremost priorities the promotion and wide scale teaching and propagation of the National Language".³² Thus Amharic is not merely considered an official language but *the national language* with capital letters. The promotion of Amharic was funded mainly with revenues collected from the Oromo peasants. Meanwhile, *afaan Oromoo* was excluded from the mass media although foreign languages such as English and Arabic spoken by a very small minority in the country were used in radio broadcasts and newspapers.

The military regime which replaced the Haile Selassie government after the 1974 revolution has followed much the same language policy as its predecessors: promoting Amharic as the national language. Although there is now an embryonic press, and radio programme sponsored by the military regime, and an alphabetization campaign was staged in *afaan Oromoo*, these efforts are found to be not much more than window dressing. Amharic continues to be the medium of instruction for primary education and the only Ethiopian language to be taught in the school system. It is still the language of administration and law. Given these circumstances the possibilities for *afaan Oromoo* is far from encouraging. As Christine MacNab's recent study has proved, "the major share of resources for corpus development and dissemination of language norms goes to Amharic" (McNab 1989: 186).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The persecution of Onesimos and the restriction placed on the use of *afaan Oromoo* prevented the development of Oromo literature. Onesimos was unable to continue his translation work. It was impossible for his students and the generations after them to build upon the literary foundation that was laid by Onesimos and his language team at Geleb. Some of the works like the Oromo grammar and dictionary compiled by the team have remained unpublished and unused.

The total ban placed on Oromo and the other non-Semitic languages from the mid-40's to 1974 by Haile Selassie's government obscured the works of these pioneers to the extent that it was believed even by intellectuals and university

³² Ministry of Education and Fine Arts (MEFA) quoted in McNab (1989: 81).

students, including many Oromos, that *afaan Oromoo* was not only a non-literate language but also non-transcribable.

Onesimos had, however, left indelible marks in the fields of literature, education and religion in Oromoland. The literature produced and supplied by him and Aster Ganno not only introduced literacy to western Oromoland but also popularized modern education in the region. Even after Oromo literature was banned, the initial interest and enthusiasm that the people of that region showed in education survived. Parents not only continued to send their children to school but voluntarily built schools, equipped them and employed teachers with their own money whenever the government failed to supply them. Hence it can be concluded that the relatively high literacy rate in Wallaga is the fruit of the seeds sown by Onesimos and his colleagues.

Most of the village-schools started by these pioneers have now grown into large elementary and secondary schools with thousands of pupils. The idea of building their own school introduced to the Oromo in Wallaga by evangelical pioneers at the turn of the century became such a great tradition that most of the schools in this part of Oromoland are still today built with initiatives and material contributions of its population. This tradition is so developed that between 1968 and 1970 committees were formed both in Addis Ababa and in Wallaga to collect funds towards a university to be built in the province. Pledges were, indeed, made by individuals and organisations both at home and abroad. However, the project did not materialize since Haile Selassie's government refused permission.

* This paper was first presented at the Second International Symposium on Cushitic and Omotic Languages held at the University of Turin, Italy, on November 16-18, 1989. A version of the paper was also read on the Conference on the Oromo Nation held at York University, Toronto, Canada, on August 4-5, 1990 and published in its proceedings edited by B. Fayissa et al. under the same title.

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