The “Ayyaantuu”, are a body of persons within Ethiopia’s Oromo people, whose life’s work is calculating time using a complex system of numerology and astronomy to predict everything from weather patterns for the use of agricultural planning, to moments of societal upheaval.

It is being slowly discovered that they maintained, in their antiquity, a series of astral observatories all along the length of the eastern Rift Valley, through which they had mapped the visible universe, named stars and planets, and developed a calendar system that recycles itself every three hundred and sixty-five years.

Their other tools were a forked sighting staff, still carried by Oromo herdsman today, and the string of a series of lakes along the length of the valley floor that curiously, lie in the pattern of a star system above them.

Perhaps the last of these observatories has been finally acknowledged as such at Namoratunga in northern Kenya, with most of the star-aligned stone pillars still intact.

They had observed a comet, and calculated that it was set to return every seventy-five years.

In 1682, the astronomer Edmond Halley (1656-1742) using Newtonian laws of motion to compute its
overall trajectory of the same comet even after it has departed, came to the same conclusion. The comet is now named after him, except in Oromo, where it is called “Gaalessa”.

Gems like this were part of a veritable avalanche of hitherto lesser-documented information that came flooding out during the thirty-third conference of the Oromo Studies Association (OSA) and after. The gathering, held between 26th and 27th July, was historic in many ways. It was the first time the OSA had ever been able to hold a conference on Ethiopian soil.

Out of over 100 papers submitted, there were some fifty-six presentations covering topics ranging from ecological management, history, constitutionalism, culture and economics.

OSA was founded by a group of exiled activists in 1986 in response to a crackdown that had driven those campaigning for greater recognition of the Oromo people and their culture murdered, tortured, jailed or driven out of the country.

There is a long and short background to this.

As a people, The Oromo number over thirty-five million in all directions from Addis Ababa, which also was Oromo territory before the founding of the modern Ethiopian state. They consist of a solid whole third of the country’s overall population.

Ethiopia has travelled its own uncolonized journey in the quest to build a modern, unified African country. Nevertheless, this quest has run into many of the same problems experienced by the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, namely what to do with those sections of the population that still defined themselves as other things, other nations even, predating the idea of the new state?

The Oromo number over 35 million in all directions from Addis Ababa, which also was Oromo territory before the founding of the modern Ethiopian state. They consist of a solid whole third of the country’s total population.

In post-European Africa, the story was quite straightforward. Those Africans argued that Africa must re-embrace its indigenous customs and institutions, and set aside the legacies derived from the long European colonial occupation.

The Ethiopian story allowed for the side-stepping of that question, for a while at least. The official argument has always been that the Ethiopian state is an independently-founded African institution, and that therefore those arguments do not apply.

The periods of Emperor Haile Selassie (1930-1974) and Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam (1974-1991) saw a fealty to the concept ideal firmly established by Selassie’s predecessor Emperor Menelik (1889-1911): that all of Ethiopia was to be assimilated into one Amharic-speaking Orthodox Christian culture.

The politics of the wars of resistance to Mengistu’s brutal Dergue rule, led to the ascension of a government obliged to make specific statutory recognition of the country’s ethnic landscape, despite the numerous schemes by the new strongman the late Meles Zenawi (1991-2012) to undermine this game-changing arrangement.

The April 2018 resignation of Meles’ successor Prime Minister Desalegn was a direct result of mass protests triggered by the government attempt to expand the boundaries of the already disputed city further into Oromo federal territory.
A reality now exists: a people mobilised in a political context where their previously hidden identities are now constitutionally recognised.

This is the political inheritance Desalegn’s own successor, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed is currently grappling with.

From its founding, OSA has functioned as a de facto think tank, policy forum and perhaps virtual parliament for the aspired-for Oromiya nation-state.

Finally, with this homecoming conference, the enforced diaspora was able to meet and encounter those who had never left home, and many in between.

The Oromo point of view is very straightforward: they say they are the largest colony in the Empire set in motion by Emperor Sahle Selassie in the 1840s, and massively militarily expanded by Emperor Menelik II, and then consolidated through a series of recognition treaties with the European powers. Assimilation, and cultural erasure were the particularly emphasized aspects of this process. The Oromo point to a long-standing need for effective decolonization. At the very least, they argue, this should mean the actual implementation of the full meaning of the 1995 Constitution that for the first-time recognized Ethiopia’s separate nations. At the most, it could mean secession (an option also provided for in the same constitution).

Within Ethiopian political discourse (and even beyond), this stance provokes a whole spectrum of reactions, from the deeply considered, to the nakedly visceral. It has been the primary driver of the culture of political intolerance in Ethiopia.

The Oromo point of view is very straightforward: they say they are the largest colony in the Empire set in motion by Emperor Sahle Selassie in the 1840s, and massively militarily expanded by Emperor Menelik II, and then consolidated through a series of recognition treaties with European powers.

Take the case of Ruda Kura, a Sayyoo clan elder, who lived between 1870 and 1974. He endured monstrous deprivations, including being chained to a tree in a public square for three years, and being publicly flogged due to his refusal to pay taxes to, or otherwise endorse the imposed Menelik state structures.

Much of such history is not widely known, not just in wider Ethiopia, but even among the current younger generations of Oromos themselves. And where it is known, there are often numerous academicized and historicized apologia seeking to explain it away.

This is where OSA’s relevance came in.

The first goal was to set the historical record straight, whatever the potential outcomes. This included the possibility of a consensus being arrived at that, despite the long-standing historical injustices, perhaps Ethiopia should just struggle on as a unitary, monolingual state.

But it is simply not possible to have a productive discussion on a way forward, if “half the story has never been told” as Bob Marley aptly put it.

And it is simply not possible to tell that half of the story if it has never been documented, and those carrying it in the hearts and memories are dismissed as unreliable, inauthentic sources, because they do not speak the language of academia.
This was a mission to re-define knowledge, and have it recognized as such.

It is a story with which many other native populations would be familiar. However, in the Ethiopia/Oromo case there was also a very longstanding, vigilant and meticulous system of censorship and policing within academia to prevent this other knowledge being produced in the first place.

OSA was established to carry out an “engaged scholarship” aimed at telling the full Oromo story, recovering and conserving the embattled indigenous knowledge, and researching the continued effects of what they see as a sustained colonial occupation aimed at erasing them.

The significance of the conference revealed itself only slowly, in many public and private moments. The appointed interim President of the Oromo federal unit he opening, and listened to some of the early presentations after making a short speech. This was followed by the mayor of Addis Ababa attending the opening of the last day, and giving his own speech. Neither had been on the programme, and never had Oromo natives holding office in the capital spoken so freely to an independent Oromo native gathering critical of the Ethiopian state. It was also a homecoming for many members after four-decade separations, such as among the Jalata family, whose member, the activist Professor Asafa Jalata, had been exiled in the United States.

It was triply significant for the American researcher, activist and academic Bonnie Holcomb, author of the 1991 book: The Invention of Ethiopia: The Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa, whose had been arrested and eventually banned from the country altogether back in the 1970s, for documenting the Oromo experience that informed the work.

She was able to finally return through this conference. In her time, she has seen the culture move from being essentially banned and demonised to nominally statutorily recognised, and the organisation she co-founded finally make its way home, to discover and connect with two generations of home-based activism.

A second major OSA goal was to generate reflection on what contemporary thinking on “Development” means for the Oromo people. This is partly because Oromo areas of Ethiopia constitute the breadbasket of the country, and as such, any objections to further development (read “eviction” and environmental destruction) projects were deemed as the thoughts of a backward people. Many native peoples can learn from this.

A new approach is needed to get beyond the crisis that five hundred or more years of dominant Western thought has now imposed upon the planet. The planet has reached a point where it may no longer be able to sustain human, and possibly other forms of especially mammalian life. Western thought’s underlying Abrahamic exhortation to “…multiply…fill the earth and subdue it…” (Genesis: 1:28) is about to kill us all.

Key to this new approach will be resetting humanity’s relationship with the rest of nature. For that to happen, humanity will have to reach deep into those areas of human knowledge hitherto marginalised and downgraded by the great White experiment, for answers. Only those peoples who, despite colonialisms and attempted genocides, still held on to their pre-Abrahamic knowledge systems or have the means of reconstructing them, can help.

The Oromo are a prime example of this.

Through their book: Sacred Knowledge Traditions of the Oromo of the Horn of Africa, essentially researched over a period of three decades, Dr Gemetchu Megerssa and Dr Aneesa Kassam have finally managed to capture the detailed outline of this thought system, aspects of which have been
recognized by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) as part the intangible human cultural heritage.

Apart from astronomy and numerology, the Oromo offer much to learn regarding autonomous governance, democratic governance and the management of power (political authority is handed to a new age-set through elections every eight years), organic agriculture (the world-renowned Boran bull species is a product of the indigenous breeding knowledge of the Booran branch of Oromo) and spiritual care.

This is a classic case of the re-definition of knowledge. The primary source for this great study was a series of initiation sessions that Gemetchu was inducted into as a young man, in search of a deeper understanding of the Oromo system. His key teacher was Bulee Gayoo. He agreed to pass on the teaching upon establishing that in fact, Gemetchu was Ruda Kura’s paternal grandson.

Among his people, Bulee Gayyoo was an *ilmam korma*, a first son born when his own father was forty years old. This meant he was “born within time”, and aligned with the Oromo *Gadaa* time system, giving him special responsibilities as a custodian of its knowledge.

In Kenya, he presented first as a night watchman, and then a cattle-labourer in Kariobangi market and lived in the slums of Mathare Valley, where the teaching sessions took place. He passed on in 2003. Now he lives on in the form of a deeply researched book. How much of the knowledge held by people such as him, never made this journey? How much is lost to the vanities and stricture of Western-inspired academia?

But there is more: the recovered Oromo story also offers the foundation for a greater study of the black Kushite civilizational system that gave rise to the black civilization of Khemet, better known as Ancient Egypt.

With Oromo, OSA may have found the place where the proper historical reconstruction of the actual African story may begin.

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