

# The Development of Written Afan Oromo and the Appropriateness of Qubee, Latin Script, for Afan Oromo Writing

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## Abstract

Afan Oromo is the second widely speared indigenous language in Africa south of the Sahara (Mekuria,1994; Mohammed,1994). It is one of the major indigenous African languages that is widely spoken and used in most parts of Ethiopia and some parts of the neighboring countries (Mekuria, 1994). Besides, Afan Oromo has long history of and well developed oral tradition (Feyisa, 1996). Despite of this and the size of its speakers as well as its value as widely spoken language in the Horn of Africa, it remained as unwritten language for long period of time. As Tilahun (2006:113) stated “Until recently, Afan Oromo remained an oral rather than literary language.” This article attempted to explore the development of written Afan Oromo and the appropriateness of Qubee, Latin script for Afan Oromo writing. Specifically, the article contains five major parts. The first part introduces Afan Oromo and its dialects. The second section presents the factors that delayed the development of written Afan Oromo . In the third section the early attempts to made by Oromo and foreign scholars to write in Afan Oromo is described. The contribution of Onesmosi Nasib to the development of Afan Oromo writing is presented in the fourth section. Besides, the fifth part explores the contribution of Sheik Bakri Sapalo to the development of Afan Oromo writing. The attempts made by Oromos in 1960s until 1990s to develop the Afan Oromo writing system is presented in the sixhh section. Furthermore, the adoption of Latin script, qubee, as formal orthography of Afan Oromo is described in the last part.

**Keywords:** Afan Oromo, Arabic Script, Ethiopic Script, Latin Script, Oromo People, Qubee, Roman Script, Sabeian Script

## 1. Introduction to Afan Oromo and Its Dialects

Oromiya is one of the Regional States in the current Federal Government of Ethiopia that is mainly inhabited by Oromo People. Oromo People speak their own native language known as Afan Oromo. Afan Oromo, Oromo Language, is an Afro-Asiatic language, and the most widely spoken of the Cushitic family. It is one of the major indigenous African languages that is widely spoken and used in most parts of Ethiopia and some parts of the neighboring countries (Mekuria, 1994). Afan Oromo is spoken by 40 percent of Ethiopian population (Kebede, 2009). In Ethiopia, Afan Oromo is spoken as a lingua franca by other people who are in contact with Oromo people. According to Mekuria (1994) and Feyisa (1996), Afan Oromo is used by different nationalities such as Harari, Sidama, Anuak, Gurage, Amhara, Koma, Kulo and Kaficho as a means of communication and trade with their neighboring Oromo people. In connection to this, Amanuel and Samuel (2012:32) stated that “It [Afan Oromo] is also used as a language of inter-group communication in several parts of Ethiopia.”

Besides, outside Ethiopia, Afan Oromo is spoken in Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Tanzania (Tilahun, 1993). These make Afan Oromo one of the most widely spoken languages in Africa (Bender, 1976). Afan Oromo has an officially decided writing script known as Qubee, which is based on the Latin orthography (Girma, 2001). Furthermore, it is spoken in a vast territory of Ethiopia ranging from Tigray in the North to the Central Kenya in the South, and from Wallagga in the West to Harar in the East. In these areas, it is spoken with several dialects (Ali and Zaborski, 1990).

Afan Oromo shows variations based on the geographical areas where it is spoken. Different attempts have been made by scholars to classify the dialects of Afan Oromo based on the geographical background of the speakers. However, there have been differences and inconsistencies among scholars and researchers regarding the number and categorizations of the dialects as the following examples illustrate. For instance, Cerulli (1922) made the earliest attempt to demarcate the dialects in Afan Oromo and thereby recognized two major dialect categories: the northern and the southern dialects. Cerulli further divided the northern dialect into three sub-groups: Macca, Tulama and Eastern dialects. However, he simply noted that the southern dialect as the dialects spoken by the Oromo tribes known as Bararetta and Kofiran living around the banks of the Tana River.

Another attempt made to demarcate the dialects in Afan Oromo was made by Gragg in 1976. He stated that the dialects of Afan Oromo fall into three groups: Western (including Wallagga), Eastern (especially Harar) and Southern (e.g., Borana). At about the same time as Gragg (i.e., in 1976), Bender et al., (1976), also classified Afan Oromo dialects in to 8: Western (Macca), Central (Tulama), Northern (Wallo and Raya), Eastern, Southern (Arsi, Guji and Borana). Besides, Ali and Zaborski (1990) on their part have listed that there are six dialects of Afan Oromo: Wallagga, Borana, Arsi, Guji, Raya and Tulama.

The most recent attempt made at classifying and mapping of Afan Oromo dialects is by Kebede (2009).

He conducted a detailed study on the genetic classification of Afan Oromo dialects and concluded that there are ten genetic units in Afan Oromo. Among these, six of them are the present dialect areas (i.e., Western, Central, Eastern, Wallo, Raya-spoken in Ethiopia and Waata-spoken in Kenya) and four of them (i.e., East, South-East-North, North, North-East) are historical genetic units from which the former developed.

According to Kebede(2009), the Wallo Variety is spoken in the Oromiya Zone of the Amhara region in north Eastern Ethiopia and Raya Dialect is spoken in northern Wallo and southern Tigray. The Eastern Dialect is the Barentu variety which is spoken in Arsi (the Highland area) extending to Hararge including Jigjiga area at present. The Central Dialect refers to the variety spoken in Arsi (the Rift Valley area), Guji, Borana and Orma. Besides, the Waata Dialect or the Southern Dialect is the variety spoken in the northern Kenya.

The Western Dialect is spoken in north western Ethiopia by the people who live in the areas known as Macca and Tulama. Tulama Variety is spoken in the former Shawa province, including in the surroundings of Finfinne (i.e., Addis Ababa), Salale area extending to the Abay River. The Macca Dialect continues from the Tulama area in Shawa region towards the Western regions, including Jimma, Ilu Abbabor, and Wallagga, part of the Benishangul region and Wombera in the southwest of Gojjam province in the Amhara region.

## **2. Factors that Delayed the Development of Written Afan Oromo**

Afan Oromo has long history of and well developed oral tradition (Feyisa, 1996). Despite of this and the size of its speakers as well as its value as widely spoken language in the Horn of Africa, it remained as unwritten language for long period of time. As Tilahun (2006:113) stated “Until recently, Afan Oromo remained an oral rather than literary language.” This is because of different factors.

Different interrelated factors have been forwarded by scholars for the delayed and clumsy transition of Afan Oromo from oral to written language. For example, Tilahun (2006) indicated that the transition was mainly delayed by Political factors. He further stated that rather than promoting the development of the language, the past governments of Ethiopia discouraged the use of Afan Oromo even from private conversations. Under the consecutive imperial as well as the dictatorial regimes of Ethiopia writing in other natives languages except Amharic is strictly forbidden. Supporting this, Mohammed (1994:86) stated “--- it was not permissible, to write, preach, teach and broadcast in the Oromo language in Ethiopia until the early 1970s.” Other linguistic groups are forced to read and write in Amharic by forgetting their own. Amharic was declared to be the language of instruction, court and other governmental offices.

The Ethiopian governments had neglected and actively suppressed the development of Oromo literature and other groups whose native language is not Amharic. For this reason, Afan Oromo today lacks a developed literature and has less printed materials (Mekuria, 1994: Mohammed,1994 ; Feyisa,1996). In addition to the prohibition of learning and writing in Afan Oromo by law by the past Ethiopian rulers, Feyisa (1996) mentioned different factors that impede the development of written Afan Oromo such as lack of trained linguists in the language, lack of Afan Oromo training Academy and lack of suitable scripts. Further, Tilahun (2006) argued the factors can be subsumed under political factor.

The other factor that belated the development of written Afan Oromo is related to the Oromo people way of life. In connection to this, Hayward and Mohammed (1981:554-55) said that“---it is very commonly the case that writing systems are found among peoples with a settled way of life, whose society is organized hierarchically. In such situations, written records come to replace oral ones in the realms of administration, legislation and religion. While they remained mainly a pastoral society, the Oromo simply did not need writing.” Hence, Oromo people pastoral life and lack of settled life is argued to be one of the factors that delayed the development the language.

Despite the political suppression on the development of Afan Oromo, the Oromos at home and Diaspora, and other interested individuals did not simply accept the suppression condition and look the situation as it is. Rather they made different attempts at home and abroad to overcome the condition and contribute their own share to development of written Afan Oromo (Feyisa, 1996). For example, Tilahun (1996:131) said” Since the early 1970s, Oromo nationalists and scholars have made tremendous effort to develop it as a literary language.” In addition, before a decade or more, Afan Oromo has been written for various purpose using different scripts such as Arabic, Ethiopic as well as Roman scripts (Gadaa Melbaa, 1988:Hayward and Mohammed, 1981).

The history of written Afan Oromo was started in the first part 19<sup>th</sup> century. Religion especially Christian and Muslim and Oromo scholars played a pivotal role in the development of Afan Oromo literature and writing system. With this regard, Mekuria(1994:91) noted that “Oromo religious leaders and scholars have attempted to make Afan Oromo a literate language. In1950s, an attempt was also made to develop an alphabet suitable to Oromo sounds.” The next section illustrates attempts made to develop written Afan Oromo.

### 3. Early Attempts Made by Oromo People and Foreign Scholars to Write in Afan Oromo

#### 3.1. Early Attempts Made by Oromo People to Write in Afan Oromo

The development of written Afan Oromo goes back to the beginning of 19th century. As stated above, different attempts were made by Oromos and foreigners to write Afan Oromo using different scripts. Feyisa(1996) and Tafari (1999) stated that the first attempt to write in Afan Oromo was made by Oromo themselves and the first script used was Arabic. This was come to existence through the expansion of religion, especially Musilm among the Oromos. Tafari(1999:113) stated that “After long period of Islamic education and Arabic literacy, the idea of using Arabic alphabet for Oromo language was raised.” There are different to examples to support this.

Concerning the use of Arabic script to write Afan Oromo, Feyisa(1996) illustrated that Wallo Oromo have used the Arabic Alphabet to write religious poetry in Afan Oromo. Feyisa further explained that since the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Afan Oromo was used as a correspondence among all the Oromo kings and it was language of education in five Jimma States and in Wallo. In addition, the Muslim Oromos in Arsi, Bale and Hararghe areas used Arabic script to write Afan Oromo. The Arabic alphabet was used basically to write religious poems and praise poems for the Muslim saints. With this regard, Tafari(1999) mentioned that scholars such as Sheikh Ahmed Siraji, Sheikh Mohammad Asi Haba and Sheikh Mohammed Aliy Ta’oo used Arabic script and composed religious poem and different materials in Afan Oromo. Thus, it can be said that Arabic language and Islamic education made great contribution for the development of written Afan Oromo, at less in its early beginning. But the unsuitability of the alphabet to Oromo language is believed to limit the expansion of written Afan Oromo in 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Tafari,1999).

#### 3.2. Early Attempts Made by Foreign Scholars to Write in Afan Oromo

In addition to the attempts of Oromo people, foreign scholars write Afan Oromo using different scripts. According to Feyisa(1996) Bruce, a Scottish traveler, is the first European who collected a few words and develop sentence structure in Afan Orom using Latin script. After Bruce, various European scholars, who kept in touch with Oromo in Africa and Europe and working with them, were interested to study Afan Oromo and attempted to write Afan Oromo in Latin as well as Ethiopic scripts. One of the attempts was made by a German law student, Karl Tutschek who was employed in 1838 as a tutor of four young ex-slaves, three Sudanese and an Oromo named Akkafedhee(Mekuria,1994). After his encounter with these ex-slaves, he developed an interest to study their languages. This led to the beginning of Oromo studies in Europe.

Mekuria(1994) stated Tutschek was particularly attracted by the simplicity, euphony and grammatical formation of Afan Oromo. Within a short period of time, Tutschek was able to speak Afan Oromoo with Akkafedhee and other Oromo ex-slaves who arrived in Germany around 1839-40. Based on the materials he gathered from the ex-slaves, Tutschek was able to complete his first draft of Oromo-English-German dictionary by 1843. His sudden death brought the promising work of Tutschek to an end. However, his Oromo manuscripts were organized and published by his brother in 1844.

The other attempt to write Afan Oromo was made by Ludwig Krapf. He came to Ethiopia for missionary activity and latter, he was highly interested to study and write about Afan Oromo (Krapf,1840). On his way to Shoa(around 1939), he met several Oromo’s and gathered some information on Oromo language, culture and religion(Mekuria,1994). Krapf recognized the importance of Afan Oromo for missionary purpose in NorthEastern Africa. For this reason, after he arrived at the court of the king of Shoa, he was interested to study Afan Oromo. While at the court of the Shoan king, Krapf began to study Afan Oromo with the assistance of his servant. Hence, Krapf studied Afan Oromo in its natural surroundings. Then, he published a book in 1840(Mekuria,1994). In his book, Krapf specifically focused on the script that should be used to write the language and he described the situation that exists before the beginning of his writing as follows:

*Whereas they [Oromos] are in want of letters, the choice of Alphabet for their language depends on who first begins to write it. If the writer be a native of Abyssinia, he will no doubt choose a form of letters from his own alphabet [Ethiopic or Geez]: and many Abyssinia, in fact, on seeing me occupied with the study of [Oromo] language, endeavored to persuade me to adopt the Ethiopic character (Krapf,1940:20).*

From the quotation, one can understand that Afan Oromo had no one decided script of writing and selection of the scripts depends on the first who began to write it. However, if the Abyssinia (Amhara and Tigre) starts the writing, he/she will use Ethiopic script for writing Afan Oromo. Krapf also disclosed that the Abyssinia people attempted to convince Krapf to make him use of Ethiopic Alphabet after they were aware that Krapf was interested to study Afan Oromo. This shows that the suppression on Afan Oromo was started long years ago. But Krapf(1940) reported that he did not follow the advice given to him. His Justification was that” ---because the Ethiopic Characters present great difficulty to writing as well as to memory” (Krapf, 1840: 21).

Further, Feyisa(1996:22)stated that”---he [Krapf] observed a number of problems with the use of Geez script to write in Oromiffa[Afan Oromo]. Through trial and error, Krapf discovered that Geez was unsuitable for writing Oromiffa. He noted that Geez alphabet does not include some of the major phonological distinctions in

Oromiffa and fails to express some particular sounds in it.” To solve the perceived limitation of Ethiopic alphabet, Krapf used the Roman script to write Afan Oromo. In addition to Krapf (1840) and Tutschek(1844), Europeans such as Foot(1913), Cerulli (1922), Borello(1939), Morena( 1939), Nordfeld(1947) and others wrote Afan Oromo using Roman alphabet. From this all we can say that writing in Afan Oromo was began using Arabic scripts and latter followed by the use of other scripts.

In addition to the early attempts made by the Oromo themselves and the Europeans described above, various Oromo scholars attempted to developed and adapt the script of Afan Oromo suitable for writing the language. Among these, the works of two Oromos namely Sheikh Bakri Saphalo and Onesimos Nasib, are worth mentioning. These scholars contribute their own share for and played great role in the development of written Afan Oromo. Below an attempt is made to show how they attempted to developed the writing system of Afan Oromo.

#### **4. The Contribution of Onesmosi Nasib to the Development of Afan Oromo Writing**

Onesimos Nasib was one victim of the slave trade that affected parts of NorthEastern Africa(Mekuria,1994). He was born around in the mid-1850s in Ilu Abbaa Bor, Western Oromo land. While child, he was captured by strangers and was sold into slavery. In 1870, at the age of about 16, he was bought and freed by a Swiss named Munzinger, who lived at the Red Sea port of Massawa. Munzinger given Onesirnosi to the Swedish missionaries in Massawa. Then, Onesirnosi was given an opportunity to attend his education. He was the first student at the school the missionaries in Massawa that was opened for boys. Mekuria(1994: 93) described him as “ Onesimosi was bright and studious”. For this reason, the missionaries sent him to Sweden in 1976 for further education. For five years, he studied in Sweden at the Johann Lund Missionary Institute and graduated with a teacher's and missionary work diploma in 1881 (Mekuria,1994).

After graduation, Onesimos left Sweden and was back in Massawa in October 1881. According to Mekuria(1994), Onesimos Nasib's dream had been to return one day to his native Oromo land and spread the Gospel and literacy among his people. After he returned to Africa, Onesimosi joined an expedition that attempt to enter to Oromo land. However, the first two attempts to enter to Oromo land by Swedish missionaries were not successful. In the third attempt, the attempt was successful and entered Oromo land through Djibouti in the Eastern. Onesirnosi and his companions arrived at Finfinnee (the site of present Addis Ababa) around early 1885(Mekuria,1994). However, Menelik was disappointed to see them there and ordered them to return to the coast. Then, Onesimosi go back to the Swedish missionary station near Massawa and resumed teaching around April 1886. In addition, he also continued with the translation of religious works which he had already started on his return from Sweden.

In his work, Onesimos was assisted by a team of young Oromos who liberated from slavery and sheltered at the Swedish Mission station of Geleb near Asmara. Aster Ganno was among the Afan Oromo speaking community at Geleb. She was freed in 1886 and entrusted to the Swedes. Like Onesimos, Aster was born in Ilu Abbaa Bor, during the mid-1870s and was enslaved in her childhood. Together with Onesimos, she was intended to play an important role in laying the foundations of Oromo literature. After she learned to read and write she was assigned to assist Onesimos. As Mekuria(1994) noted her major activity was compiling an Oromo dictionary.

Onesimosi translated different materials to Afan Oromo. Mekuria(1994:94) mentioned the works of Onesimos saying “Onesimos wrote and/ or translated most of them between 1885 and 1898. During those thirteen years, he translated seven books, two of them with Aster Ganno. He also compiled an Oromo-Swedish Dictionary of some 6,000 words.” However, the translation of *The Bible to Afan Oromo* was the most significant contribution made by Onesimos. According Mekuria(1994), his translation of the Scriptures is regarded by historians and linguists as a great intellectual feat and a remarkable accomplishment for a single individual. . From this all, it can be said that the work that Onesimos and his language team was the first and the significant step towards creating an Oromo literature. In addition to preaching Goespel, Onesimos actively engaged in providing education to Native Oromo using their own mother tongue specifically around Wollaga area. However, his secular and religious activities were greatly challenged by the state and clergy. In this connection, Mekuria(1994:96) wrote that:

*The Abyssinian priests jealously guarded their interests and were very negative towards any innovation in religious and educational fields which they considered their exclusive domains. Therefore, the activities of Onesimos and his colleagues were considered as unwelcome intrusions by outsiders. In addition, the popularity Onesimos and his Oromo literature had gained within such a short time was also the cause for jealousy among the semi-literate Abyssinian clergy*

To the Orthodox clergy, Onesimos represented Oromo defiance and rejection of the Amhara language and religion. He was seen as a "wrong" example and a "bad" influence upon the Oromo People(Mekuria(1994). For this reason, Onesmosi Nasib becomes the target of their persecution. Then, he was accused and taken to Finfinnee and they decide up on him to loss his all properties and to be imprisoned. However, the imprisonment

was cancelled and allowed him to return to Naqamte banning him from teaching and preaching. Feyisa(1996:22) explained the contribution of Onesimos Nasib by saying” He was a real pioneer in Oromiffa literature. His translation using the Geez alphabet with an additional glottal letter for ‘*dh*’ is still the standard work in the field, and without doubt he was a father of Oromiffa literature.” He wrote Afan Oromo in Ethiopic script.

### **5. The Contribution of Sheik Bakri Sapalo to the Development of Afan Oromo Writing**

In the above section, I tried to explain what and how the Diaspora Oromo or the ex-slave Onesimos Nasib contributed to the development of Afan Oromo writing. In addition, there was an attempt made to develop the writing system of Afan Oromo by the Oromo living in the country side. The notably one was the contribution of Sheikh Bakri Sapalo.

Sheikh Bakri Sapalo was born in 1895 from his father Garad Usman and his Mother Kadija( Hayward and Mohammed , 1981). He attended his early education at Waybar. After receiving an elementary education at this place, he went to Chercher in order to study under the locally renowned Islamic teacher, Shaykh Umar Aliyye. After finishing his education, he began to teach at his home village Saphalo. Like Onesimos, his teaching was both secular and religious issues. With this regard, Hayward and Mohammed (1981:551) said that “In addition to religious education and philosophy his teaching ranged over geography, history, mathematics, astronomy, Arabic, and the composition of writings in the Oromo language. Besides teaching all the subjects in a comprehensive Islamic education, he also began to attract considerable attention to himself as an outstanding Oromo poet--.” Thus, stating from his early teaching, he began to write in Afan Oromo.

According to Hayward and Mohammed (1981), Sheikk Bakri was a prolific writer. His works, which deal with secular as well as religious subjects, were written mainly in Arabic, although some were also written in Oromo. Although a few of them have been typed and mimeo-graphed, most of his writings were circulated in manuscript form only among his disciples, and so remained unknown to a wider public. This is because the works are written in Arabic language which is not read and understood by the majority of the people. However, he continued to capture the love of the Oromo people through his poem, which were written in their language. In addition to this, he invented an indigenous Oromo alphabet (Feyisa,1996). The development of the indigenous alphabet is said to have taken place during 1956, at the village of Haii. Hayward and Mohammed (1981:553) described his invention as”It does seem highly likely that Shaykh Bakri was the first Oromo who saw clearly the problems inherent in attempting to write the Oromo language by means of orthographic systems which had been devised primarily for other languages.” He was interested to develop an indigenous alphabet in that he had strong nationalistic aspiration and felt that possessing glorious historical traditions and a uniquely democratic society, lacking a means of writing as a great problem. Feyisa(1996:22) stated that” He devised scripts an indigenous and original system of writing as part of his attempt to overcome problems of orthography in writing Oromiffa. He devised scripts which were different in forms , but followed the symbol-sounds forming patterns of Geez system.”

Having developed the alphabet, the Sheik Sapalo taught it to all his students and to others as well. Then, people began to exchange letters in the new alphabet. In addition to letters, Sheik Bakri himself employed his alphabet for writing his poems and other works, and manuscripts of these are also reported to be in existence. It is claimed that there are still people who can use it.

After the news of the development of the scrip of Afan Oromo was spread rapidly, it encountered negative reaction from the officials of the area. Hayward and Mohammed (1981: 553) expressed the reaction of the officials saying “Reports of the popularity of Shaykh Bakri and exaggerated claims about the widespread use of his alphabet alarmed the Ethiopian authorities, who, in effect, accused him of activities which were inciting the Oromo to too great an ethnic consciousness and thus, endangering the national unity” The opposition is similar with what was faced by Onesimos in Wallagga. The oppositions clearly shows the rulers did not want to see the development of Afan Oromo being a written language. But Sheik Bakir Sapalo continued to use his own alphabet for writing. Hence, Sheik Bakir contributed his own share in the development of Afan Oromo writing by developing unique script.

### **6. The Attempts Made by Oromos in 1960s until 1990s to Develop the Afan Oromo writing System**

In addition to the contribution of the above mentioned notable Oromos, different attempts were made by Oromos, both at home and Diaspora, to develop the written Afan Oromo. One of such attempts was made by Oromo students who were living abroad. They organized themselves into groups aiming at study the Afan Oromo and develop/adopt the script of it. For example, Oromo Students Study Groups which was formed in Europe in 1998 by Oromo Students living in different parts of Europe and Soviet Union, conducted detail research on the growth and development of written Afan Oromo, different scripts used in writing Afan Oromo and specifically the merit and demerits of using Latin and Geez scripts.(Feyisa,1996). From the result of the research, the students indicated that Geez Scripts had numerous short comings to write Afan Oromo and they recommend the use of Roman alphabet instead of it. The next discussion will show how and why the Roman alphabet was adopted as

orthography of Afan Oromo writing.

### 7. The Adoption of Latin Script, Qubee, as Formal Orthography of Afan Oromo.

As described in the preceding section, Afan Oromo has been written for different purposes using different scripts by various individuals before the coming of the current government. During the previous governments, Afan Oromo was not used as a medium of instruction. However, after 1970s the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) began to use it as official language in the liberated areas (Tilahun, 1993). In addition, after 1991, it was proclaimed that the native languages can be used as medium of instruction as well as can be studied as a subject of a study. Thus, there is a need to develop one formal script that can be used by all speakers of the language uniformly.

Around 1970s both Sabeen and Latin were suggested to be the scripts of Afan Oromo. During this time, Mengistu partially lifted the ban on the use of Afan Oromo and allowed the use of Sebean script (Tilahun, 1993). Gedaa Melbaa (1988: 16) stated the weakness of these scripts saying

*“Roman, Arabic and Sabeen scripts are all foreign to Oromiffa [Afan Oromo]. None of them fit well the peculiar features of the sound (phonology), in Oromiffa. The main deficiency of the Arabic script is the problem of vowel differentiation. The Sabeen script does not differentiate germination of consonant and glottal stops. Moreover, it has seven vowels against ten for Oromiffa. Hence, the Roman script is relatively best suited for transcription of Oromiffa. --- As a result, several political, cultural groups and linguists have strongly advocated the use of the Roman script with the necessary modifications.*

In November 1991, five months after the downfall of Mengistu, OLF called Oromo scholars and intellectuals a general meeting. Tilahun (1993:36) described the objective and the participants of the meeting as “The purpose of the meeting was to adopt the Latin script that OLF had been using or suggest an alternative. Over 1000 men and women attended the historic meeting which met in the Parliament Building in Finfinnee.”

After long hours of the discussion, it was decided that the Latin script was to be adopted. There are different reasons for the adoption of Latin script. But the major ones are linguistic, pedagogical and practical reasons. The first was linguistic reason. On the meeting, Sebean script was suggested as an alternative. However, it is argued that its roughly 250 characters are too clumsy to adapt to Afan Oromo. Tilahun also indicated the weakness to adopt Sabean saying “It must also be added that the Sabean syllabary not only fails to indicate vowel length and germination, but also slows down a writer's speed since each symbol, which cannot be written cursively, must be printed.” (1993:37). Afan Oromo, excluding those sounds represented by P, V, Z, has 34 basic sounds (10 vowels and 24 consonants). Thus, for linguistic reason, it was decided that the Latin alphabet be adapted to Afan Oromo.

The second one is pedagogical reason. According to Tilahun (1993P.36-37), the 37 characters (or 34+ P, V, Z) can be learned in less than a month. In fact, only 32 symbols (minus the 5 double vowels) need to be recognized. For an Oromo learning these signs and sounds they represent, the task is even much easier. It may take a non-Oromo a little longer because producing the sounds—especially those not found in his/her language—takes time.

Practical reason is the third reason for the adoption of Latin script. Latin script was adapted to many languages of world. Thus, Qube Afan Oromo aligned itself with the so many countries of the world that use Latin script. For example, one practical advantage that is an Oromo child who has learned his own alphabet can learn the form of the English script in a relatively short period of time. Another practical reason is that its alphabetic writing's adaptability to computer technology (Tilahun, 1993). To sum up, the decision to adapt Latin Script as the writing alphabet of Afan Oromo was made by talking the above three main reasons into consideration. Subsequently, Afan Oromo was made the medium of instruction for elementary level and administration in Oromiya. (Mekuria, 1994). After the adoption, different textbooks and other useful reading materials began to be published by the new alphabet. In September 1993, school instruction was legally launched in Afan Oromo for the first time.

The ongoing discussion illustrates the attention given to develop written Afan Oromo and decide the script that should be used to write Afan Oromo.

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