

# OROMO

## LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Oromo is one of the Cushitic languages, which form a branch of the Afro-Asiatic family. In the Bible, Cush was the son of Ham, the son of Noah, and the name became the biblical word for Ethiopia. The Kingdom of Kush was a major rival of Egypt in the 2nd millennium B.C. There are three main varieties of Oromo: Borana-Arsi-Guji, Eastern, and West-Central. Major related languages include Afar, Dirasha, Gedeo, Hadiyya, Kambaata, Komsa, Sidamo, Somali, and Xamtanga. Under the autocratic rule of Emperor Haile Selassie, who belonged to the Amhara ethnic group, the Oromo language was banned and its speakers were ridiculed. In the early 1970s, the Oromo Liberation Front, which helped to overthrow Selassie's government, chose the Latin alphabet as the official writing systems for Oromo, but between 1974 and 1991, under the Mengistu regime, the writing of Oromo in any script was forbidden. Today, the Oromo people are allowed to use their own language, and Oromo is the medium of instruction in the Oromo State, but there is increasing pressure from the government not to use the language in urban centers, which include Finfinnee (Addis Ababa) and Dire Dawa.

An important linguistic characteristic of Oromo involves causatives, in which an additional participant is specified in a sentence, specifically the participant who is responsible for causing the given situation. For this, Oromo uses a verbal affix. The traditional greeting used by Oromo men and women is called "salamatta." They grasp each other's hand and kiss the top of the other person's hand. If they are related, they will usually kiss each other. "Good morning" is "akkam bultan." "Good afternoon" is "akkam ooltan." In social exchanges, the Oromo language tends to be more formal than English. Women are greeted as "aaddee." "Good morning" would be "akkam bulte aaddee!" If the woman has children, she will be called "haadha" plus her oldest child's name: "haadha Rooba." Civilian men are greeted as "obbo." Military men are greeted as "jaalle." If a man has a child, he will be called "abba" plus the name of the child: "abba Bunna."

With the adoption of a writing system, a lot of what was originally Oromo oral literature is now in print and available to students studying the language. Much of the material available to students who are interested in studying the language is in English. Three important links are:

<http://ethnomed.org/ethnomed/cultures/oromo/alphabet.html>

<http://www.voicefororomiyaa.com>

<http://www.abysiniacybergateway.net.fidel/ShaykhBakriSapalo/>

## STUDYING OROMO IN THE U.S.

Below is a partial list of some of the universities in the United States that currently offer Oromo. For more information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center or visit the NALRC website at: <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu/>

Cameron University  
Michigan State University



NATIONAL AFRICAN  
LANGUAGE RESOURCE  
CENTER (NALRC)

Room 3075, Hamilton Lugar  
School of Global and International Studies  
355 N. Eagleson Ave., Indiana University  
Bloomington, IN 47405  
Phone: (812) 856-4199 | Email: [nalrc@iu.edu](mailto:nalrc@iu.edu)  
Website: <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu>



OROMO WOMAN IN TRADITIONAL OUTFIT

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE  
RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

## WHY STUDY OROMO?

The Oromo make up the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, accounting for more than forty percent of the population. Their language, also known as Afaan Oromoo or Oromiffa, is spoken by over 30 million people worldwide. Oromo speakers are found in every province in Ethiopia, except Gondar, and in the neighboring countries of Egypt, Kenya, and Somalia. Programs in Oromo are broadcast over the Voice of Revolutionary Ethiopia, and there is a weekly newspaper, Berisa, in Oromo. When other nations of the world began accepting Oromo political refugees in the late 1970s, many Oromo immigrated to the United States. Today, there are large communities of Oromo speakers in Seattle, Washington; Washington, D.C. and several cities in Minnesota.

There has been a steadily increasing interest in the study of the Oromo language, not only for people to communicate more easily with their new neighbors, but also to learn about the rich Oromo culture. Because the Horn of Africa has begun to play an important role in international affairs, Oromo had been classified by some nations as a critical language, which means that governments promote the study of it in their colleges and universities. The knowledge of the Oromo language is crucial to anyone in linguistics, anthropology, history, and folklore who wants to study in the countries which make up the Horn of Africa. Individuals working for international organizations will also find that they can accomplish their day-to-day tasks more easily if they can speak Oromo. Tourists, too, will soon discover that the knowledge of the Oromo language will allow them to enjoy their holiday more if they can communicate with the local residents.

## WHO SPEAKS OROMO?

### PEOPLE AND HISTORY

The Oromo have been in the eastern part of Africa for over two thousand years - at least. Pillars which the Oromo used in the invention of their calendar system, discovered in northern Kenya, date to 300 B.C. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Oromo were colonized by the rulers of Abyssinia, what is today Ethiopia, and between 1870 and 1900 the Oromo population was reduced from ten to five million. This systematic attempt to destroy Oromo culture continued throughout the twentieth century, most notably under the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie, but with the dawn of the twenty-first century and with the availability of the Internet as a means of communicating their plight to the rest of the world, the Oromo have begun what many hope is the first step toward independence.

According to tradition, the Oromo people are descended from the two wives of Oromo, Borana and Barenttuma, and all of the current clans and sub-clans have come from this union. The Oromo have a very rich culture. One very important aspect of Oromo life is the Gadaa system which organizes Oromo society into groups that assume different responsibilities in the society every eight years. The Gadaa system has always guided the religious, social, political, and economic life of the Oromo. Time is a very important concept in Gadaa, and Gadaa itself can be narrowly defined as a given set of time in which groups of individual perform specific duties in a society. Although some Oromo practice Islam or Christianity, many still adhere to the traditional Oromo religion called Waaqayoo.



Oromo girl



Oromo women and children



Oromo girls