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# Stones, Slabs, and Stelae: The Origins and Symbolism of Contemporary Oromo Burial Practice and Grave Art

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The Origins and Symbolism of Contemporary Oromo Burial Practice and Grave Art

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## Table of Contents

***Abstract***

This study addresses many of the issues relative to the study of contemporary Oromo society and tradition. While the primary focus is the study of contemporary Oromo burial traditions and grave art, there is also insight into the ways in which Oromo history and cultural tradition have been dispossessed among the Oromo today. There is an attempt to understand Oromo burial practices and grave art within a larger African burial tradition that extends across East Africa and far into ancient and prehistoric times. Traditional Oromo burial practices have been identified and documented at the extent to which they are practiced today. Furthermore, there is an attempt at identifying common themes in Oromo memorial grave art and other forms of ancient and contemporary East African grave art. These attempts demonstrate a clear relationship between Oromo burial practices and those of greater African traditions. I.S.P. Topic Codes: Art History: 103, Archaeology: 503, Cultural Anthropology 504.

***Introduction***

The Oromo people of the Horn of Africa have played a critical role in the formation of modern-day Ethiopia. Interestingly, few aspects of Oromo culture have received the academic attention they deserve. Their creativity and artistic traditions have been undermined by a de-emphasis on Oromo cultural innovation and art, as well as a tendency to place Oromo art within the greater context of "Ethiopian" art. Although the minimal recognition of Oromo art practices by scholars is recognizable, the significant contributions of the Oromo to this broad category of "Ethiopian" cultural practice or art are not fully appreciated when evaluated in a historical context of Christian hegemony and political oppression. This realization calls for an analysis of Oromo art and practice within its own regional and historical contexts. In such an analysis, both regionally internal and external factors, as well as the evolution and innovation of Oromo cultural practices, may be realized.

Among the many contemporary Oromo practices that have received little scholarly attention, is Oromo burial practice and memorial grave art. Although Oromo memorial grave art has been documented to some extent, the current practice remains surprisingly undocumented and uninterpreted. While this paper has attempted to analyze Oromo grave practices in general,

the previous scholarship has inevitably led to a bias towards the elaborate forms of memorial grave art recognizably produced by the Oromo throughout the last century. The origins of this Oromo practice are an area of serious academic question and debate. There lies within a web of religious, historical, and archaeological sources from which numerous theories may abound. There is also a concern for methodology in Oromo artistic traditions. The styles and techniques incorporated in these practices are capable of dispelling information about the deep meaning and symbolism embodied in these artistic traditions.

Although the tradition of Oromo grave art was recorded in the late 1980s, these studies were purely descriptive and in some ways speculative, with no analytical work published since that time. This project therefore aims to address the current state of this artistic practice, as well as to document the associated techniques and cultural customs. Perhaps the most significant goal of this project lies in the potential understanding of the Oromo perception of grave art symbolism. This understanding has previously been unafforded to scholars.

Oromo grave art has the potential to provide interesting insight into Oromo artistic and social values. Additionally, it is important to anthropologically address contemporary art practices to promote a full appreciation for tradition and innovation in Oromo cultural practices. The undocumented nature of burial traditions currently practiced among the Oromo also warrants the concern that many Oromo practices may be threatened by extinction. The dispossession of Oromo history is an area of serious academic concern. This paper is meant to serve as a contribution to the dearth of scholarship on Oromo art practices that will hopefully become a growing enterprise in the near future.

***Methodology***

A literary review of the scholarship on Oromo burial practices and grave art was a necessary element to this project. The previous academic attention attributed to these Oromo practices has been minimal and necessitates further study. The foundation for this project was a series of preliminary, primarily descriptive articles by Rita Pankhurst and Paul Henze that addressed the state of Oromo memorial grave art practices.

To better understand traditional African grave makers and Oromo positioning therein, I turned to archaeological sources that interpreted grave markers and rock art across Southern Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. Extensive research was performed with the intention of deciphering "traditionally African" practices from those associated with culture groups that have greatly influenced Africa throughout its history, notably Christianity and Islam. Although Ethiopia has been an important focal point for physical anthropologists and paleontologists alike, the availability of data produced by archaeological excavation and interpretation was disappointing at best. It would appear that archaeology in Ethiopia is definitely in its infancy.

While the initial focus of this paper was based primarily on the practice of contemporary "memorial-style" grave art practices among the Oromo, relevant research revealed the immediate need to document Oromo grave practices in general. While time constraints did not allow for a thorough historical overview of Oromo grave practices, this project attempts to document traditional practices to the greatest extent possible.

The course of research called for fieldwork in the Arsi Oromo regions just south of Addis Ababa. A project was designed in order to evaluate the extent and nature of the current memorial grave practice among the Arsi today, and visits were made to both cemeteries and

individual gravesites in both Ziway and the highways leading from Meki to Bulbula and Langano. Discussion with grave artists in attempt to document technique, tradition, and symbolic perception was a research initiative that did not fabricate in the project's circumstances. Accordingly, the unavailability of the artists revealed unforeseen realities that may hold highly politicized implications for those involved in the practice.

The modern existence of the practice was confirmed and a number of memorials and grave markers were documented and photographed. Informants associated with various cemeteries and gravesites were instrumental in drawing useful data from many of the sites. They were also important providers of information regarding the practice in general. Additionally, discussions with residents of Ziway in the immediate area surrounding the Batu Cemetery were particularly helpful. The visits to the gravesites revealed yet another important aspect of contemporary Oromo grave practices that was previously unnoticed and in immediate need of recognition. Remnants of ceremonial practices at specific gravesites indicated the need to provide further insight into Oromo burial ritual and tradition.

Further research demonstrated the absence of burial practices and perceptions of death within Oromo scholarship. This project then aimed to examine traditional Oromo burial practice as still surviving today. Additionally, those "external" factors and the extent to which they influence contemporary Oromo burial practices were identified. The politicization of burial practices was also recognized and addressed accordingly. The nature of death and funerary practice did not allow for participant observation given the unfortunate time constraints. Discussion with Oromo specialist Dr. Gemechu however, was very successful in at least documenting Oromo burial practices, if only superficially.

Following the collection of data on the contemporary practice, analysis of themes associated with all recognized eras of the current practice and those of ancient culture groups was made possible. The comparative analysis made interesting connections between Oromo practices and those of other East African groups.

### *The Oromo*

The Oromo are a Cushitic-speaking people located in the Horn of Africa. Their existence across several modern political boundaries, particularly the southern Ethiopia-northern Kenya border, has raised concerns for the Oromo similar to those of other African ethnic groups suffering from displacement as a result of European colonialism. The Oromo practice a variety of economic life ways but primarily engage in agro-pastoralism and in some areas practice what is known as "pure pastoralism." Oromo society is based on the Gada system, an age-ordering system that is deeply embedded within Oromo religious ideology. The Oromo are recognized for their appropriation, and often forced adoption of both Christianity and Islam across Ethiopia.

### *Oromo Burial Practices*

Oromo burial practices have received little to no attention by scholars interested in the cultural practices of Southern Ethiopia. One of the few studies focusing on Oromo grave practices is an archaeological project conducted by Dr. I.M. Lewis. This study examines the differences between "Galla" and Somali grave practices over the past few centuries in Northern Somaliland. Many of the stone tumuli featured in this article are similar to those that occur across East Africa (Lewis 1961).

For those concerned with the Oromo, this study demonstrates the similarities in "cairn-making" practices among both the Oromo and the Somali (Lewis 1961). The necessity of using bioarchaeological methods to determine the culture group responsible for the burials in question is an excellent indication of both the difficulty in dating, and the degree of anonymity embodied in traditional Oromo burial practices. The result is that the use of mere folklore has been a justification for the countless number of stone tumuli, grave markers, and even stelae across South Ethiopia. In more recent times, the practice of Oromo memorial grave art, which is the primary focus of this paper, has made any academic discussion of Oromo burial practices a long-sought reality. Nevertheless, a full understanding of Oromo burial practices remains a concern that has no resolution in the near future. As a result, a thorough examination of East African burial practices and grave markers is required in order to bring about a full understanding of the historical traditions that have been embraced by the Oromo and their culture.

***The Origins of Contemporary Oromo Grave Art***

In the most recent works on Oromo memorial grave art, the origins of this cultural practice are recognized as a concern deserving further inquiry (Henze, 1993, Pankhurst, 1993). It appears the problem in deciphering these origins lies in a tendency towards artistic and chronological categories as opposed to regionally thematic and culturally symbolic similarities. Interestingly, in his article entitled “Oromo Tomb Art and Architecture,” Henze dismisses “any obvious relationship” to the monolithic pillars of Soddo and Sidamo, while recognizing the possibility that contemporary Oromo grave practices may share a connection to other “stone-slab monuments” in Southern Ethiopia such as those at Tiya (Henze, 1993).

This assessment utilizes inferences based in the assumption that African burial practices and grave markers may be simply and individually categorized on artistic complexity or easily recognizable cultural affinity. It must be considered however, that contemporary Oromo grave art practices are a component of the greater African burial traditions throughout Southern Ethiopia and across parts of East Africa as a whole. This placement will allow for an accurate emphasis on Oromo innovation and cultural adaptation, as opposed to surface interpretation and categorization. An identification of utilitarian value as opposed to mere artistic styles is of extreme importance.

*The Southern Ethiopian Burial Tradition*

Explorers in Ethiopia have long-acknowledged the existence of seemingly "mysterious" and "prehistoric" megalithic monuments and stone structures. Although the more famous "Ethiopian" monoliths are those belonging to the pre-Christian Axumite cultures of the Northern Highlands, the stelae of Southern Ethiopia are invariably greater in number and in many instances do possess prehistoric origins, unlike many of their northern counterparts. When creating Ethiopian history, many early European explorers laid claim to the "discovery" of many of these sites (Anfray 1982). Such bold statements are aimed at mythologizing the Ethiopian experience and undermining local oral and cultural traditions that pertain to these monoliths. It is also interesting in this respect that scholars have tried to incorporate the pre-Christian Axumite stelae tradition into Southern Ethiopian discourse by proposing a Northern influence over the people of the South (Anfray 1982). Although these theories cloud perceptions of Ethiopian monolithic culture, there is a pan-African phenomenon of burial traditions that can be found throughout Ethiopia and Southern Ethiopia in particular.

Archaeologists have unearthed the reality that many of the monolithic and stone formations across Africa represent burial sites ranging from numerous regions, time periods, and culture groups. French archaeologists have primarily conducted archaeological excavations in Southern Ethiopia, which gained popularity in the first decade of the twentieth century. A majority of these sites exist in the Soddo and Sidamo regions of Southern Ethiopia. Tiya, as it is known in French, may be the most famous of such archaeological sites. Père Azaïs first explored the site at the beginning of the twentieth century, only to gain greater popularity with excavation and detailed analysis performed by Roger Joussaume later in the twentieth century (Anfray 1976).

The Tiya site is comprised of about 45 stelae with varying patterns of carved symbols and designs. Closer analysis revealed that these stelae not only demonstrated some degree of uniformity in their engravings, but also in fact represented mass graves of both male and female burials (Joussaume 1985). Researchers were later led to assign a date sometime between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries C.E. to this site (Joussaume 1985).

Among the other 10,000 estimated stelae of Southern Ethiopia, there have been several projects confirming the stelae as grave markers. Tutu fela and Tututi are two other important sites that have led archaeologists to many of the academically accepted theories concerning the southern stelae. One of the most interesting theories outlined by archaeologists is that which places the stelae at Tiya in a time period far later than those in the surrounding areas (Joussaume 1985). Scientific dating suggests that the majority of southern stelae predate those at Tiya by as much as five hundred years. The earliest accepted date for the southern stelae, excluding those at Tiya, falls somewhere around the beginning of the ninth century C.E (Joussaume 1985).

*Contemporary Oromo Grave Art*

In *Galla Süd Äthiopiens,* Haberland definitively states that the "megalithic culture" is absent among the Galla[1] people, with the exception of the Arsi and Borana groups (Haberland, 1963). While Haberland's assertions have yet to receive confirmation, there is definitely limited exposure of "megalithic" art practices outside these two groups. Overall, there has been very little work of an academic nature on Oromo grave art. The studies of Oromo grave art have continuously placed this practice throughout the Rift Valley. The graves and monuments in question are placed along major highways leaving Addis Ababa heading south. The road that has received the majority of academic focus is the Addis Ababa-Shashamene highway.

The most recent and comprehensive examinations of this Oromo art practice are of a highly descriptive nature. As previously stated, Henze suggests a possible connection with the Tiya stelae and those carved monolithic grave markers that he has recognized as belonging to the earlier phases of the contemporary practice (Henze 1993). The early studies of Paul B. Henze and Rita Pankhurst have been instrumental in academically exposing Oromo grave art, in addition to outlining the locations and nature of the graves themselves (Henze & Pankhurst, 1993). Alternatively, these studies are of low analytical nature and their assumptions are questionably within the framework of what might be considered academia in a "purely-Western" sense. Perhaps one of the greatest concerns raised by these studies is the absence of Oromo perception and sensitivity to Oromo cultural tradition.

Although their recognition of Oromo artistic practices is commendable in a purely descriptive sense, the earlier works on Oromo grave art are fraught with inadequacies and inabilities. In these works, the grave markers of the contemporary practice are systematically

[1] Galla is term that was used by early Europeans in their descriptions of the Oromo people. The term has fallen out of colloquial speech and now possesses derogatory connotation.

categorized chronologically to generalize and aid in their physical description (Henze & Pankhurst, 1993). Whether this chronological categorization reflects Western ideals of time, and therefore effectively represents Oromo trends, is an issue that deserves further attention. Regardless, the assignment of Western or Ethiopian concepts of time to the Oromo must be one that receives critical consideration given the complexities of Oromo perceptions of time.

Henze's article describes the "oldest and simplest" graves as those marked by one or more large stones, surrounded by standing slabs, and states that there was a noticeable increase in the practice of Oromo memorial grave art following the Revolution (Henze 1993). While Henze attributes this increase to a rise in Oromo nationalism following the end of the Solomonic Dynasty, he does not directly account for changes in political policy. There is a great deal of interest in the fact that the constitution under Haile Sellassie placed strict prohibitions on Oromo burial practices. Although the conditions under which Oromo grave art was practiced is of little concern to either Henze or Pankhurst, these circumstances may be critical in understanding the trends of Oromo burial traditions in the twentieth and twenty first centuries.

Although the descriptions of the initial grave markers are limited, Henze does note that these stones often feature elaborate carvings of humans and animals (Henze 1993). The extent to which the primary phases of the contemporary practice are acknowledged by both Henze and Pankhurst is extremely limited. This is unfortunate given that both authors state a need for discerning the dates of the first markers of this established practice (Henze & Pankhurst, 1993). The primary focus of both studies is an understanding of the techniques and symbolic meaning embodied by the practice at the time of research.

In each study the current artistic traditions of Oromo grave art are neatly explained in terms of the grave markers and monuments' physical natures. Both Henze and Pankhurst

carefully provide detailed descriptions of the themes and colors used in Oromo grave art. Throughout their works, evolutionary changes in styles, paints, and modes of production are noted (Henze & Pankhurst, 1993). Additionally, the current form of Oromo grave art, as multi-tiered monoliths of cement construction, is emphasized (Pankhurst 1993). Ultimately however, each study ends with formal descriptions of the research that remains necessary to a full understanding of the meaning embodied in contemporary Oromo grave art. While there is an emphasis on the evolutionary nature of the artistic practice, it is interesting that there is no real attempt by either author at connecting these artistic practices with those of earlier archaeological and historical contexts.

It is possible that the high degree of reluctance to connect grave markers of the contemporary practice with those of a more typically African nature is based merely on the absence of dates or the dramatic artistic differences in media and style. Whether or not utilitarian value is effective enough to demonstrate that contemporary Oromo grave art practices are simply an adaptation of long-established African burial traditions is beyond the scope of this paper. Alternatively, the ways in which scholars have derived meaning from contemporary Oromo grave art, as well as other forms of Eastern African burial art, may help to understand how external influence has been used as a substitution in explaining away innovation and creativity in the artistic practices of the Oromo, and Africans in general.

***Symbolism in Contemporary Oromo Grave Art***

The greatest weakness of the aforementioned scholarship is its inability to speak directly to Oromo meaning in contemporary burial practice and artistic tradition. It appears that one of the greatest risks in Western scholarship is the potential for applications of Western-biased

artistic standards and religious ideals to non-Western practices. This has ultimately been a problem in many interpretations of African grave markers and burial traditions. While Western scholarship must be acknowledged for its ability to document dying practices and aid in conservation efforts, an examination of the ways in which Western-biases have been attributed to African practice is important. This is done in attempt to distinguish interpretations that emphasize the influences of much larger (often Western) culture groups such as Christianity, as opposed to those that consider internal Oromo tradition and innovation.

Although archaeological and anthropological examination of African and Ethiopian grave markers has left a great need for further research, the identification of cultural themes and symbolic interpretation has revealed affinities between contemporary Oromo practices and those of other East African culture groups, both ancient and modern. While the universal nature of grave markers may prove many similarities to be merely superficial, the ways in which symbolic themes have been read and interpreted by scholars may provide insight into methodologies that may be suitable to discerning African and foreign elements in contemporary Oromo grave practices.

*Archaeological Interpretation*

The stelae of Southern Ethiopia, although not thoroughly explored by means of excavation, have received a considerable degree of academic interpretation. Work on the Tiya stelae has been an important piece in the archaeological puzzle of Southern Ethiopia. According to Joussaume, there is a "zone" in which there are three different types of stelae (Joussaume). Although much about the stelae's contemporaneous occupants remains unknown, this "zone" is currently inhabited by the Oromo.

Archaeological interpretation of the highly stylized and elaborately engraved stelae at Tiya has provided the foundation for the formulation of a certain "monde souterrain," "monde terrestre," and "monde d'en haut" theory of high complexity. While a general understanding of this theory is seemingly ambiguous, its complexity speaks to the great extent at which archaeologists have sought meaning from these stelae (Anfray 1982). The Tiya stelae are noted for their possession of distinguishable and recurrent patterns (Joussaume). The various symbols incorporated in these patterns is predominated by plain circles and mystifying "vegetal motifs" (Anfray 1982). An equally important image among the stelae has been interpreted as the representation of weaponry, most likely a sword. The stelae possessing these "swords" are understood to represent burials of warriors, or soldiers (Anfray 1982). Additionally, the number of swords is said to possibly represent the number of individuals killed in battle by the buried warrior (Anfray 1982).

Additional analysis of the symbols at Tiya has led researchers to suggest that certain symbols such as the plain circle may specifically indicate the presence of female burials (Anfray 1982). There has also been a great deal of speculation regarding the "twin-leaf" motif so common on many of the southern stelae (Anfray 1982). It has been suggested that these leaves may be representative of the enset plant, a staple crop in Southern Ethiopia. It has been also suggested that their presence may be meant to serve as a symbol indicative of peaceful resting, as has been similarly noted on wooden headrests throughout Southern Ethiopia.

Unfortunately the older stelae of Southern Ethiopia have received less detailed analysis than those at Tiya and they remain somewhat enigmatic. This is interesting given the extreme documentation that has been a primary focus of many of the initial European explorers and archaeologists (Anfray 1982).

Archaeologists have also had success in their attempts at deciphering meaning from ancient rock art. Brandt & Carder's study "Pastoral Rock art in the Horn of Africa," speaks directly to artistic themes also seen in Oromo grave art from the modern era. Although there is admittedly little knowledge about the purpose of many of the rock shelters and painted surfaces used in the study, Brandt & Carder believe they can demonstrate the meaningful relationship between rock art and human behavior (Brandt & Carder 1987). The 'Ethio-Arabian' style of rock art studied in the Horn is dominated by "pastoral themes," which are more than often focused primarily on cattle (Brandt & Carder 1987). Their analysis suggests what they term as a "cultural ecological model of cattle pastoralism (Brandt & Carder 1987). Given the importance of similar cattle themes to Oromo art, as well as the pastoralist-nature of Oromo society, studies such as these may be instrumental to a better understanding of Oromo art.

*The Anthropology of African Grave Markers*

While the use of marking burial places is a universal phenomenon, there are East African societies in which similarities with Oromo grave practices are present. A non-Ethiopian example of such societies is found among the Miji Kenda of Northwestern Bantu Kenya (Brown 1980). Interestingly, the leading clans of this society are noted for having arrived at the Kenyan coast after "having been driven by the Galla from their traditional homeland" in Somalia (Brown 1980). While contact with the Oromo is seemingly evident, apparently the constant threat of Oromo attack led to the restructuring of some elements of Miji Kenda society. In addition to experiencing heavy contact with Islam, the Miji Kenda are recognized for the age-set organization that orders their politico-religious structure (Brown 1980). These similarities, along with the practice of erecting memorial gravestones, or grave posts, are a few of the traditions shared by both the Miji Kenda and the Oromo.

While the wooden grave posts used by the Miji Kenda are both morphologically and presumably etiologically different than those of the Oromo practice, they do share the fact that both engage in some degree of human portrayal and geometric patterning. Interestingly, Jean Lucas Brown identifies these geometric patterns in the Miji Kenda practice as a product of the Islamic influence visible throughout East Africa (Brown 1980). Although Brown does identify the similarity between Miji Kenda and Oromo grave markers, he claims that the closest analogy to the Miji Kenda practice today is found among the Konso people of southwestern Ethiopia (Brown 1980).

The Konso, like the Oromo are also a Cushitic-speaking people whose society is structured around a generation grading system (Hallpike 1972). The Konso partake in the construction of grave markers formally known as *wagas*. Like those of the Oromo, these grave markers, or *wagas,* are often placed on important paths leading to town, and serve to represent specific individuals and their achievements (Hallpike 1972). *Wagas* have been interpreted as symbols of personal achievement and Hallpike explains their dual significance as "stones of manhood" that attest to the bravery of long-dead warriors (Hallpike 1972).

The *wagas* have been subject to heavy analysis, perhaps based on their popularity as souvenirs in antiquities shops across Addis Ababa. Similar to both the themes of the ancient southern stelae and contemporary Oromo grave art, *wagas* represent the deceased, presumably a warrior, along with his immediate family members (Hallpike 1972). In addition the number of enemies killed in battle is also represented. *Wagas* also commonly incorporate animals themes; the presence of a lion or leopard is particularly widespread.

Unfortunately the beauty of Konso craftsmanship and symbolism has led to the disappearance of this practice among the Konso today. The Ministry of Culture has even been

forced to interfere in the sale of material culture in attempt to avoid the eradication of Konso grave markers as a result of their popularity among foreign tourists.

*Oromo Memorial Grave Art*

Based on the sources outlined here, many of the themes embodied in traditional Oromo grave art are not particularly unique to Oromo society. Interestingly, there has been little association with the common themes that seemingly occur throughout East Africa. Although both Pankhurst and Henze identify the need to discover the meaning deeply invested in contemporary Oromo memorial grave art, their attempts at interpretation fail to account for both Oromo social ideology as well as the greater East African grave memorial tradition.

The fundamental characteristic of Oromo memorial grave art is described as the recognition of great accomplishments and is based on the supposition that the deceased for whom the practice is carried out, inherently maintain a certain level of wealth (Henze & Pankhurst 1993). Perhaps the most fundamental artistic representation on Oromo memorial grave art is the stylized figure of the deceased, often mounted on a white horse (Henze & Pankhurst 1993). The presence of a bull, and often a lion, is also seen as significant to the symbolism of Oromo grave art. The bull in particular is understood to represent the wealth of the individual (Pankhurst 1993). Although each monument is roughly similar in physical construction and color usage, Pankhurst suggests that no two monuments share identical designs (Pankhurst 1993). An interesting and widely noted artistic quality of the monuments is the colorful zigzag-geometric designs that usually adorn the lower-tiers of the monuments (Henze 1993).

While Pankhurst is particularly successful in noting the "evolution" of the contemporary practice, in both thematic and constructional terms, she does suggest that these pieces may be heavily influenced by traditional Ethiopian popular art (Pankhurst 1993). Henze too, whose

article claims identifiable Islamic influence on the evolution of Oromo tomb architecture, appears to be in the tendency of seeking out the impact of larger culture groups on the art practices of the Oromo. Henze does state however that an informant was able to assign meaning to the geometric designs on Oromo grave memorials. This informant claimed that the patterns represented the size of a man's family, his accomplishments in war, wealth, and the number of wild animals killed by the deceased (Henze 1993). He also states that this symbolic system may have "atrophied with literacy" (Henze 1993).

Fundamentally, the available sources were of a highly descriptive nature and merely allude to meaning in Oromo art. A better understanding of such artistic traditions can only be fully reached when examined within the larger context of East African symbolism and historical cultural tradition.

***Traditional Oromo Burial Practices***

The following information was gathered during a personal interview with Oromo specialist Dr. Gemechu. While this information was gathered as objectively as possible, the high complexity of Oromo religion and social structure are indicators of the unease with which Oromo cultural practices are conceived by outsiders. Additionally however, the necessity to document traditions appears immediate in the face of domination and cultural assimilation by larger religious institutions, namely Christianity and Islam. It is important to note that the existence of these burial practices is not widespread across all Oromo groups in Ethiopia today. There are Oromo groups however, particularly the Borana Oromo, which have been noted for their high degree of resistance to modernization and great respect of cultural tradition.

It must be understood that contemporary Oromo burial practices in many cases may be no different than those historically practiced by Ethiopian Christians and Muslims. This phenomenon has warranted the documentation of traditional Oromo burial practices, despite the fact than a thorough examination of the practices requires a highly invested understanding of Oromo social ideology.

As a result of the heavy impact of Islam and Christianity on Oromo tradition, traditional burial practices are performed by approximately fifty percent of the Oromo today. Additionally, these traditional practices are more likely to be found among the Arsi or Borana Oromo, as a result of the high resistance to cultural change present in these groups. Traditional Oromo burial practices are extremely complex and involve differing degrees of treatment for individuals of different age, sex, and social affiliation.

The importance of "stone culture" to the Oromo is quite clear in traditional burial practices, but the significance of stones in Oromo culture in general cannot be undermined. The physical layout of the traditional Oromo house, or the *mana*, and the importance of stones within the home provide great insight into familial structure and value. These so-called "hearthstones," which are often placed near the fireplace or the *mana*'s main support poles, are highly symbolic. One stone, which is fixed in the ground, symbolizes permanence. The first born of the family is also represented here among the hearthstones. The symbolic significance of these stones ultimately provokes interest in the meaning embodied in other cultural practices involving stones, such as burial practice.

Given Oromo egalitarianism, contemporary burial practices reveal some surprising details about Oromo social perception and ideology. The death of an infant, for example, is treated dramatically different that of an adult. When an infant dies, it is placed within a large clay

jar and buried within the house, usually near the central pillar. The Oromo concept of *ayanaa* is particularly important in understanding the differential treatment of infant deaths. According to Oromo social ideology, the traditional Oromo grave is viewed as a home of sorts for the deceased. This serves the individual's *ayanaa,* which does not die with the deceased's physical death. The *ayanaa*, which is the primary concern for the reverence of the deceased, is not of concern to infants. The Gada system employed by the Oromo does not affiliate adolescents younger than the first Gada cycle with the possession of an *ayanaa.* This renders a more substantial burial for infants unnecessary.

Whether male or female, when an individual dies he/she is thoroughly washed and tied in the fetal position. Additionally, the deceased is then wrapped in perfumed plants. A sort of mat made of palm tree leaves is often used to wrap the individual before burial. Spiritual leaders, and those with higher standing in the Gada system, receive a different physical preparation before burial. They are also washed in a similar manner to the standard burial practice, but the individuals responsible for preparing these elite civilians receive specialized training. The details of this training and the burial practice are rather ambiguous, as they are traditionally kept secretive. The burial of these elite individuals is meant to be invisible to the public, in accordance with Oromo traditional belief that does not assign them to physical mortality. The cleansing process for these burials is much more thorough, and the individual's intestines are removed.

Traditional Oromo burial practices incorporate various methods of grave construction. The physical, underground burial element can either be a straight pit, or a sort of chamber that is dug out following the initial dig downwards. Each method is symbolic of a specific individual's social status. The standard pit depth of Oromo burials is around two to two and a half meters.

Additionally, when an individual dies, the corpse is covered by a pile of stones. This modest stone covering is accompanied by an outlying circle of stones, placed symbolically and successively by each of the deceased's children. The result is a circle of stones that represents the number of children possessed by the deceased. In the case of higher status individuals, the burial is often placed in a highly visible or public space. The primary stone pile is continuously renewed as individuals pass by and pay their respects by placing an additional stone upon the deceased. The size of the deceased's stone pile is an indication of the man's importance and social position.

Burial practices are highly symbolic of an individual's social position. If an individual dies without having been married, they are placed closer to the homestead. A large tree is buried in the individual's memory. A married individual however, will receive the more traditional stone-pile burial. When an individual dies, there are a variety of traditional practices in Oromo society that pertain to the practice of mourning loss. A white thread is often worn around the neck to serve as a symbol of remembrance. Members of the deceased's immediate family will also shave their heads to demonstrate the fact that they are in mourning.

### ***Contemporary Oromo Memorial Grave Practices***

*Batu Cemetery, Ziway*

The Oromo memorial gravestones attributed to the modern era in this cemetery are interesting based merely on their location. The Batu Cemetery is noted as one of the most unique cemeteries in Ethiopia. It has a rich history of burials in both the Christian and Islamic traditions but also includes "traditional" Oromo burials as well. In a country with a deep history of

religious and ethnic tension, the placement of different religious burials within extreme proximity appears as highly unusual.

There are six Oromo memorial-style graves present at Batu, along with several of the more traditional Oromo graves. The recognizable traditional graves are not in any particularly close proximity to the more contemporary pieces, and due to the nature of traditional Oromo grave practices, there is no way to place these stone graves chronologically. This said, there is no reason to avoid the possibility of chronological affiliation with the more modern forms of grave practice. However, it admittedly doubtful that this relationship would be able to provide any information aside from whether or not contemporary memorial graves are constructed alongside the traditional grave for any given individual.

All memorial grave markers are of the standard form described in the available academic sources. They are all of cement construction and feature bas-relief with portrayals of the deceased mounted on white horses. Each figure is holding a rifle, most commonly in the right hand. Although dating is not possible for all six graves at Batu, there are various schematic and color themes. None of the graves demonstrate identical color usage however a sea green is the base color of several of the memorials. Whether or not this is a faded remnant of the bright sky blue that has most commonly been associated with these memorial graves is indiscernible. All graves possessed the frontal image of the deceased upon a horse, with the engraved image of the bull on the reverse. All bulls and horses represented on the grave markers are of similar style and color.

There are several outstanding characteristics among the memorial grave markers at Batu. There is an interesting use in color diversity, with greens, blues, and bright yellows comprising the principle base colors. The use of an orange-yellow base color for one of the grave markers is

particularly interesting as it would appear to be a diversion from the commonly used blue and green bases. Another particularly unusual piece featured two bulls, one customarily portrayed on the reverse, but another also painted on the frontal surface of the lower-tier. This may be an isolated occurrence of this double portrayal.

Another interesting aspect of several of these graves is the visibility of Christian symbology that has been incorporated into not only the painted themes, but also the physical construction of the graves as well. It appears that on several of these graves, crosses have been incorporated as elements in both the principal frontal and reversal reliefs and engravings. Some of the memorial slabs actually have three-dimensional crosses molded to the top surface of the piece. These perpendicularly placed crosses create an image that can only be properly viewed from the grave's side profile. The details of these innovations and their constructions are poorly understood.

Given their physical placement and the size of most of these memorial graves, visibility and space are key elements in understanding ideology and practice associated with these graves. As a result, a surface survey revealed details of ritual activity undoubtedly connected to these graves. Bones and bone fragments from a large mammal, what appears to be cattle, can be found in close proximity to the memorial grave markers at Batu. This discovery is what provided the need for further research of Oromo burial practice and ritual. The abundance of animal bones around the graves in this cemetery suggests the importance of ritual in the Oromo reverence of the deceased. A large proportion of the graves, about five of the six present at Batu, can be said to possess remnants of ritualized activity in the immediate area of the graves. There was no notice of additional bone material in any non-Oromo context within the cemetery.

Within Batu there are several traditional Oromo burials. These are comprised of a centralized pile of stones, surrounded by individual stones. The fact that these stones cannot be dated raises concerns as to their contribution of information regarding contemporary Oromo grave practices. This said, it is important to note that there is a cemetery in which both traditional, and more modern Oromo grave practices exist simultaneously alongside side those of contemporary Christian and Muslim burials. Although most of the graves cannot be dated due to their deterioration, there are graves that can be definitively placed within the late 1990s.

An informant at the cemetery alluded to the differences between Oromo memorial graves placed in cemeteries and those that are placed along the major highways south of the capital. The physical construction and artistic styles employed by the memorial graves at Batu however, do not suggest any dramatic differences from those noted elsewhere. This informant also suggested that the memorial graves erected alongside roads are meant to attest to personal achievement, and made no mention of wealth or social status. He was however, interested in describing one particular memorial grave marker located near Ziway that features a Coca Cola bottle. He informed us that the deceased had been hit and killed by a large Coca Cola distribution truck. This raises interesting questions about the symbolic significance of popular images in contemporary Oromo memorial grave art.

*The Road from Ziway to Bulbula*

The existence of memorial graves along the main roads south of Addis Ababa is far less surprising than those at Batu, although their recent construction may be of greater significance. The widespread and hidden nature of these memorial grave markers makes their notice and documentation more difficult that those that are clustered together in one place. Interestingly,

there are great deals of these memorial graves that do exist in small groupings, these occur mainly along the road from Bulbula to Langano.

The Ziway-Bulbula highway provided one particularly interesting example of contemporary Oromo memorial grave art. When viewed from a distance, the piece is unusually unique because of an unnaturally occurring accumulation of brush surrounding the memorial. This brush was apparently gathered and placed in a designated circular pattern around the memorial, for exact reasons unknown. This piece is of a smaller construction than the majority of the memorial grave markers.

The piece was dated to 1998, although whether this date corresponds to the Ethiopian or Gregorian calendar is unknown. The fact that the only writing present is dictated in Oromifa suggests that the Western calendar was used here. The vibrancy and state of the paints used on this piece however suggest that this may have actually been constructed sometime in the past few years. This would support a construction date falling between 2005 and 2006 in the Western calendar.

In addition to these distinguishing features, the piece possesses particularly unique and highly stylized workings. The man portrayed on the face of the memorial is dressed as a teacher, holding what appears to be a notebook. His left foot is resting upon a soccer ball. The outline of the man's figure extends out from the monument in relief, as does the surrounding border. This relief border, which is purely unique to this piece, is shaped around the contours of the man's head and also exists on the reverse. The reverse border is interrupted by the horns of the bull, which also appears in relief. This bull is highly stylized and although the species is presumably identical to that portrayed on other pieces. The bull featured on this piece is engaged in particularly a different stance than those seen elsewhere.

The presence of the zigzag-geometric designs seems to be of far less importance to this piece. Additionally, the side surfaces of this memorial are adorned by highly stylized “swirls.” These are extremely unique to this piece. The inscription, which is entirely in Oromifa, is unusually long.

A nearby informant identified himself as the deceased's son. He claimed that his father was a teacher and that he had been killed in a car accident. This is interesting given the memorial's proximity to the road, as well as to the informant's house. The informant was able to identify the artist as an individual living and working in Bulbula, although informants there suggested that this artist was actually living somewhere in the countryside.

*Road from Bulbula to Langano*

The general nature of the graves along the road heading south from Bulbula is highly diversified and demonstrates visible elements of both Christianity and Islam. Interestingly, many of the visible memorial graves along this route occur in small groups. This would appear as unusual given their nature as memorials. Nearby informants were able to clarify in one instance, that two of three grouped memorials were in fact relatives. The father died sometime in the late 1980s while the son had died much more recently. Both of these memorial graves existed alongside a more traditional Islamic-style burial.

It is also interesting to note that there exists a rather large grouping of (three to four) Oromo memorial grave markers within an extremely close proximity to a far more traditional Oromo cemetery along this route. This cemetery features various forms of Oromo burials. There are no visible elements of an Islamic or Christian presence in the traditional cemetery. In addition to the several stone-pile/circle burials, there is also an elaborately carved stone grave marker from what are presumably the prototypical phases of Oromo memorial graves in their

contemporary form. This grave marker features the carved figure of a man on one side, with the other side left blank. Its date, along with that of the other burials, is unknown.

Located nearby are memorial grave markers of several time periods. The production of one can definitively be assigned to the late 1970s, while the dates of the others remain unreadable. One example is particularly interesting in its apparently unfinished state. While it demonstrates highly skilled engraving, there is no trace of paint. Whether or not this piece was intended to be unpainted remains unknown, although it is seems highly unlikely. This piece is also interesting for the three-dimensional stars that project from the upper-portion of the memorial. These stars are strikingly similar to the crosses protruding from several of the memorial graves at Batu Cemetery. These images are highly indicative of Islam, although this relationship cannot be verified.

The neighboring monuments do not appear to have familial relations to each other, and they are crafted rather typically. There is some evidence of possible ritualized activity on one of the larger memorial graves. A broken pot is wedged in between the supports of one of the memorial slabs supporting tiers, and appears to have served as an incense burner at one time.

Across the road, there is a single and brightly colored memorial grave. This piece exhibits a style very different from those across the road and along the highway route in general. While it maintains some conformity to the traditional physical structure of Oromo memorial graves, the colors utilized in its production are seemingly different and a bright fluorescent yellow is used as the base color of this piece. No zigzag-geometric design, an extremely common feature of Oromo memorial grave art, is present on this piece. In place of such a design, is a sort of patchwork-pattern of perfectly aligned squares, each painted a different color. This design also replaces the traditional zigzag-geometric motif on another memorial across the road.

The inscription on this piece states that the individual was born in 1965, and died sometime in the past few years. The themes portrayed on this memorial grave are very unique. On the frontal surface of the larger lower-platform of the monument, there is a painting of the famous Lion of Judah. Interestingly, the flag held by the lion is not the traditional Ethiopian flag, but is none other than the flag of the Oromo people. This flag features the sycamore tree, an important element of traditional Oromo religious beliefs. On another side-surface of the bottom platform, is a portrayal of the deceased holding a trowel. The presence of a modern, Western-style house in the same scene suggests that this individual was a housing carpenter during life.

An additional element of this complex piece that deserves critical attention is the inclusion of the star and crescent in several locations on both the front and reverse of the memorial. These symbols suggest the obvious fact that this individual was Muslim, but also raises questions into the Oromo religious ideology invested in the memorial grave practice.

As noted by these examples, the diversity in theme and color is extremely varied for this group of graves. Another interesting element to the memorial graves along the road from Bulbula may be observed in the various animals represented on the monuments. One monument is particularly suited to addressing the range of animals visible in Oromo memorial grave art.

This piece is dated to 1999 (Gregorian calendar) and features writing in both Amharic and Oromifa. The marker displays several distinguishing features indicative of the current practice. Like the memorial just mentioned, the front of the memorial is a very modern portrayal of the deceased. In this case the traditional image of the deceased upon a horse is located on the reverse, the standard place for the image of the bull. In addition to this innovation, there are three surfaces on the lower platform that feature animals. A lion, a bull, and what appears to be a cheetah are presented in relief form. Like many other memorials that feature a lion, the lion is

placed on the frontal surface of the lower-platform. The reverse lower-platform surface reveals a traditional Oromo drinking practice.

*Adjacent Road to Lake Langano*

The Oromo grave memorials observed along the road to Langano were not easily dated, but in most cases their construction conforms to the earlier phases of the contemporary practice. One of the memorial graves displays an individual sitting at a school desk, dressed in a school uniform. This memorial, like the others along the route from Ziway, is an excellent indication of the direction in which Oromo grave themes are headed.

As noted by Rita Pankhurst, these memorial graves really do reflect a practice in which "traditional values are maintained, while the means of expression pertain to the contemporary world" (Pankhurst 1993).

***Discussion***

Contemporary traditional burial practices share interesting affinities with ancient Southern Ethiopian burial traditions. Details revealed by archaeologists have provided a basic standard by which most of the stelae-related traditions can be described. In this respect, there are also patterns that allow for ease in generalization and a more fundamental understanding of Oromo burial practice.

Close examination of the practice demonstrates that the Oromo bury both male and female individuals after tying them in the fetal position. The fetal position is a fundamental characteristic of all burials excavated at Tiya. The fact that the Oromo bury individuals facing a specific direction (west) also brings attention to parallels discovered by archaeologists in Southern Ethiopia, as well as contemporary burial practices associated with Islam.

The fact that Muslims are buried facing towards Mecca has serious religious implications. Accordingly, the Oromo practice must be reviewed within the context of Oromo religious ideology. The fact that the entrance of the traditional Oromo house must always face west is probably accountable for the physical placement of the deceased within their graves. These practices reinforce the notion of cultural respect and adherence to traditional belief and practice among the Oromo.

The fetal positioning in Oromo burials is also reminiscent of the Oromo-Somali tradition explored by Dr. I.M. Lewis in his 1960's study. There is clear continuity in the contemporary traditional Oromo burial practices and those carried out by the Oromo of the past few centuries.

The impact of Islam and Christianity on the Oromo cannot be undermined. Although there may be political agendas and histories that speak directly to changes in contemporary traditional Oromo burial practices, the fact that traditional practices may be declining with advances by larger religious culture groups provides concern and confusion about the intended role of traditional burial practice. One Muslim informant described a relationship in which many Oromo people upheld the institutionalized idea of Islam, while they continued to practice traditional beliefs at home. There is an obvious necessity to try and understand Oromo perception and the degree to which Islamic or traditional beliefs are prevalent in the progression of general burial practices among the Oromo.

It is also important to note that many of the elements embodied in contemporary practices are highly symbolic of traditional religious beliefs. When an individual dies, the fact that white is worn, as sign of mourning is indicative of the color symbology possessed by the Oromo. White is a color relative to ashes, and therefore the concept of death. The fact that individuals wear a

white thread necklace following someone's death is also embedded in this tradition. The shaving of heads within the immediate family is meant to represent great loss.

An interesting element of Oromo burial practice that was recognized during this project is the ritualized activity at Batu Cemetery. Although there is little to associate with the practice, it can be assumed that there is a relationship between ritual occurrence and the Gada cycle. Additionally, it is likely that the bone remnants observed were from a ceremony at the initial erection of the grave memorial.

The presence of traditional belief within contemporary Oromo burial practices is very clear. These elements represent a strong adherence to continuity and traditional belief among the Oromo today. Additionally, Oromo grave construction and grave art is also capable of speaking to this cultural continuity found among the Oromo. While there are serious obstacles in the political elements and undatable nature of most Oromo graves, there is much to be learned from Oromo artistic themes and styles.

Examination of the themes commonly documented for Oromo grave art practices, there is an overwhelming wealth of similarities with other African grave traditions, ancient and modern. While the similarity in physical Oromo positioning of the deceased within their graves to those of the stelae-burials is interesting, commonalities in thematic and symbolic interpretation are even more suggestive of African tradition within Oromo practice.

The importance of cattle to pastoralist societies is particularly important given the prevalence of the bull theme on Oromo grave markers. The bull would almost appear as a requisite for the general practice. The interpretation of the bull as a symbol of wealth is feasible with a clear understanding of the importance of cattle to Oromo economic practices. This would also be reinforced by the fact that other practices incorporate images of animals specifically

intended to demonstrate wealth. This is reportedly the symbolic purpose of the lion in Miji Kenda grave post art. Interestingly however, there is absence in understanding of whether or not Oromo memorial graves are specifically intended to serve the memory of great personal achievements, or if they are the direct product of an individual's wealth.

The practice today is relatively quite expensive however the fact that whether or not these graves are arranged prior to death, and who arranges for such graves remain ambiguous does not clarify the specific intent embodied in the practice. Further information regarding the monetary element of Oromo grave practices may be better attuned to speaking to recognition of social status within Oromo society.

The representation of the deceased upon a horse however, is also suggestive of wealth. The occurrence of this image however, is probably more an attempt at portraying the deceased as a warrior. This warrior/soldier theme has also been suggested for many of the stelae at Tiya and is also a key element of both Miji Kenda and Konso grave post practices as well. Whether or not the existence of this theme exists today in order to demonstrate the literal state of being a warrior or soldier is probably unlikely. It would appear that the common characteristics attributed to warriors, such as courage and bravery, are now metaphorically and symbolically invoked by the warrior image.

It may mean that by portraying an individual on a horse with some sort of weaponry, the respected attributes of a soldier or warrior will undoubtedly be associated with the deceased. This would most likely reinforce an interpretation of contemporary Oromo memorial grave practices as a means for revering the great accomplishments achieved in one's lifetime.

Another common theme of both Oromo and East African grave art that runs parallel to the image of the warrior, is the account of those killed by the deceased during life. The "swords"

at Tiya are reportedly symbolic of this number, as are a variety of the symbols that have appeared on Oromo grave art during the last century. This theme is also an element of both Miji Kenda and Konso grave art interpretation.

There is an interesting pattern in the representation of such accomplishments within East African grave art. The number of wild animals killed by the deceased, another highly prolific statement about the honor and bravery of the individual, is an extremely common theme that has definitively continued into the modern era. Again whether or not the representation of animals in East African grave art today is meant to be literal of a specific number of animals killed is unknown. It may be that these are merely suggestive of the honored personal traits of great individuals.

The Oromo practice of constructing memorial graves appears to be fare more diverse and widespread than previously studied academically. In addition to extreme diversity in both physical style and artistic theme, there is also great variability in the location of Oromo memorial graves. There are also ritual practices deeply rooted in social ideologies that can be verifiably associated with these grave practices. While all these elements are capable of providing insight into the significance of Oromo memorial graves, the actual practice and the artists engaged in their production are capable of addressing the relationship between the Ethiopian government and the Oromo in their pursuit of traditional cultural practices.

The location of the initial Oromo memorial graves examined in this study was placed within a unique cemetery among other Christian and Islamic burials. This is in stark contrast to the descriptions in previous academic studies, which have placed the practice solely along the major highways in Arsi territory south of Addis Ababa. This may have extremely important implications for the intended meaning of many of these memorials. The fact that the graves

within the cemetery also exhibited evidence of ritualized animal sacrifice may also suggest differences between those memorials within cemeteries and those along highways. As previously stated, an informant at the cemetery suggested some ambiguous degree of difference between those in the cemetery and those along the highway.

The memorial grave in the ultra-modern style located near Ziway is particularly interesting in addressing the diversity intended in Oromo memorial grave practice. The fact that the individual had been killed in a car accident, and his memorial was subsequently placed in extreme proximity to the road, raises questions about the significance of this maneuver. Perhaps the memorial's proximity to the road was meant to suggest a relationship with the deceased's death that would provoke sympathy and an understanding of the way in which he died. This is a common practice in the United States where a cross is often erected near the place of car accident in which an individual is killed. This may suggest that some of these memorial graves are meant to attest to an individual's great accomplishments or untimely death, while others are simply elaborate grave markers.

This theory would be supported by the fact that many of the clustered Oromo memorial graves were in fact placed among other burials along the highway. As stated, one group of memorials was placed in very close proximity to a traditional Oromo cemetery. This provides a clear image of continuity in Oromo tradition. Additionally however, it may attest to fact that these are not meant to represent particularly important individuals, but serve as elaborate headstones, perhaps similar to burial practice in many Western countries.

The disappearance of important themes in Oromo memorial grave art can definitively be viewed within the contemporary practice. The evolution of Oromo grave themes is rather evident in the current practice. While there are themes that remain critical, such as the bull and animal

theme, others like the zigzag-geometric patterning previously stated as a fundamental element of the practice, is seemingly of less importance today. There are some graves that do not exhibit any trace of such a pattern. Other memorial graves represent serious derivations from this theme. Most noticeable were the swirls and cubist designs on several of the monuments along the highways.

This may suggest a change in the symbolism or meaning of this traditional pattern. While it has been suggested by Henze that the meaning may have changed dramatically with literacy, his informant may not have been accurate in assigning meaning to these symbolic patterns. Dr. Gemechu suggests that the fact that there is some degree of standardization in the older memorials may in fact represent Oromo ethnic alignment. The cattle brands that were traditionally used by the Oromo to demonstrate ownership were ethnically specific. Therefore the presence of this geometric design may in fact indicate alignment with a specific Oromo group, such as the Arsi.

The image of the deceased upon a horse is a theme that has seemingly disappeared from the current practice. As mentioned previously, this may in fact be a result of the irrelevance of the warrior/soldier theme to contemporary life in Southern Ethiopia. The importance and meaning of warfare as known by the Oromo has undoubtedly atrophied and changed greatly over time. This would account for the fact that many of the portrayals of the deceased are simple portraits in modern, Western clothing. The frontal portrait of the deceased in a suit is particularly prevalent. This theme, as discussed by Pankhurst, is one of the elements that are purely demonstrative of cultural adaptation and change in Oromo society today.

There are other themes in the contemporary practice that have not received previous academic attention. Primary among these is the occupation theme clearly visible on several of

the memorials examined. One clearly demonstrated that the deceased had been a carpenter during life, while another portrayed the individual in a teacher's uniform. This is an interesting phenomenon, particularly because these professions would not be seen as highly courageous or specifically unusual. These themes may further suggest that these memorial graves are a growing practice in which they may serve the purpose of ordinary headstones. This would not only account for the presence of this grave form within modern cemeteries, but also for its seeming popularity as well.

The question of Islamic and Christian influence on contemporary Oromo memorial graves is rather complex. Dr. Gemechu has suggested that the presence of crosses on the graves at Batu is particularly troubling. He has suggested that these may represent later additions or attempts at making the traditional Oromo practice suitable for modern Christian/Islamic cemeteries. However, there is the alternative that perhaps these examples exhibit what may be deemed as a hybrid practice. Perhaps Oromo individuals who associate with Islam and Christianity have appropriated the practice of traditional Oromo memorial graves. The apparent emphasis on Oromo life as incorporative of both traditional Oromo beliefs and Islamic or Christian practices would support this hybridism.

There are several examples that demonstrate elements of Islam as well. These memorials often feature the star and crescent and are far more interesting. Pankhurst has indicated that this practice has come under scrutiny by Muslim conservatives who do not condone human representation and the visibility of Islam together (Pankhurst - Personal Communication). This notion also contradicts the interpretation assigned to geometric patterning on Miji Kenda grave posts. This would appear to further promote the idea of syncretism in Oromo religious belief and

practice today. Additionally however, it demonstrates the degree to which Oromo burial practices have been politicized.

According to Dr. Gemechu, there is a cultural stigma towards traditional Oromo burial practices that has inhibited the ability of the Oromo to pursue traditional beliefs. Although not confirmed, he states that the revised Constitution of 1955 prohibits the placement of traditional Oromo burials within officially designated cemeteries. Apparently this statement, although no longer legally outlined in the current constitution, continues to be an important element in the popular Ethiopian mind regarding burial practices. This could possibly explain the difficulty with which memorial grave artists may be found. Throughout research, there were several individuals who claimed they knew the whereabouts of specific artists responsible for the memorial graves. Unfortunately the pursuit of the artists was very unproductive and it may be that there is a concern held by the artists towards anyone interested in the practice.

Although this cannot be confirmed, it may be that the political stigma attached to traditional Oromo practices has led to secrecy among Oromo memorial grave artists. It was also suggested by an informant however, that the artists responsible for the graving and for the painting are in fact two different individuals. This would explain the elaborate and highly technical characteristics of the contemporary practice. Of another important note, several informants were able to clarify that the artists responsible for the graves were in many cases illiterate and usually untrained. The extreme beauty and skill demonstrated by these pieces is therefore suggestive of the high degree of innovation that is embodied in the contemporary practice.

***Conclusion***

Contemporary Oromo burial practices are deeply rooted within a larger framework of African burial tradition and belief. There is a high degree of similarity in both form and theme that can be clearly demonstrated in the physical structure and theme of Oromo grave practices. This relationship is also visible in the cultural practices associated with Oromo burials. Although there are definitive elements of Christianity and Islam within Oromo burial and grave practices today, these are undoubtedly the result of the adoption of these religions by the Oromo over the course of history. The fundamental qualities of Oromo burial practices and artistic themes however, are purely African.

This relationship is quite clear given the archaeological and historical records. Those East African groups that have coincidentally shared contact with the Oromo, and also practice some form of memorial grave art, have received artistic interpretation suggestive of themes visible in Oromo art. This implies that African burial traditions and East African art themes were not only kept alive in Oromo tradition, but by other contemporary East African ethnic groups as well. The outlined themes in Oromo grave art are highly suggestive of a shared East African cultural tradition, perhaps rooted in pastoralism. Although the details remain ambiguous, it is clear that Oromo innovation and cultural tradition should not be undermined in pursuit of external influence on contemporary practices.

The evolution of Oromo memorial grave art practices is extremely noteworthy. The practice has continued to evolve and incorporate the themes of modern life that are slowly encroaching on Oromo society. At the same time, the fact that this tradition is still very important in Oromo burial practices, and may even becoming more widespread, is indicative of the extreme Oromo adherence to cultural tradition and religious belief. The fact remains that scholarship on

Oromo social and cultural traditions is dangerously unobserved. There is a serious concern for Oromo cultural traditions and practices that are seemingly misunderstood in the web of external religious and political factors that have been associated with the Oromo in the modern era.

Further studies should attempt to document Oromo traditions and practices within the framework of Oromo social ideology. Additionally, there is a need for scholarship on Oromo art practices in particular. The beauty and high level of technical skill involved in Oromo art practices is undeniable. Unfortunately the current trend of modernization may see the disappearance of many of these practices within the near future. Attempts should also be made to place these artistic practices within their Oromo context, as opposed to merely assigning them to the broad categories of "Ethiopian" art.

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