

THE OROMOS AND THE CONFLICTS
IN THE HORN OF AFRICA*

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INTRODUCTION

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Washington, D.C. and Metropolitan Chapter of the Union of Oromo students in North America for inviting me to give the keynote address at this special occasion - the Oromo National Day.

My participation as the main speaker tonight has special significance for me personally for two reasons. First, I remember during my early years, there was one historical event that was remembered in my family. It was the cold-blooded slaughter, about seventy years ago, of five members of my family by an Amhara raid. It occurred in the wee hours of the morning at a community wedding celebration in the First Valley in the Oromo country. The victims of the raid were my grandfather, one of his sons, and three other relatives. The pretext for the raid was that they did not pay taxes to

*This paper was presented as the Key Note Address at Oromo National Day, April 27, 1985, Howard University, Washington, D.C.; June 15, 1985, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

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the new colonial government. In addition to the loss of lives, the entire wealth the family possessed was confiscated and the family members who survived the indiscriminate killings of that fateful morning had to flee for their lives. My grandmother, who is now dead, was one of the adults who escaped; the raid killed her oldest son. The other four children whom she took along on her flight were too young to remember that tragic event. It was our grandmother who passed the painful story and bitter memory to her surviving children and later on to the next generation. She reminded her family of the tragedy through tales of horror and tears of grief for her perished family members. I would like to underscore, at this juncture, that surviving family members of the approximately five million Oromos who perished during the years of Emperor Menelik's raids to the Oromo country, (Oromia) and subsequent colonization of the Oromo people, did remember and commemorate the loss of their loved ones; but this was, in the main, an isolated, individual family affair rather than a national observance. For me, celebrating Oromo National Day in the manner we are doing tonight, appropriately links the agony and sad memory of each Oromo family who lost loved ones to the Abyssinian aggression at a national level. After all,

the Oromos who perished during those years and during the subsequent century, and today with intensely renewed persecution of the Oromo people, were the targets for destruction for no other reason than their very identity - being Oromos.

The second reason why this occasion has special significance for me personally, stems from my own desire and dream that the Oromos could form a formidable power base to deliver their people if the educated sons and daughters would only realize this and work together. I vividly remember having such thoughts when I was still in Grade Six. I would like to emphasize here that I am not claiming that I was a more enlightened person than the other Oromos in thinking this way when I was so young. The truth is that I grew up in the most oppressed region - the Rift Valley in the Oromo country, and had daily encounters with all forms of brutal aggression and subjugation by the colonists. This made me wonder why so much suffering and constant aggression was visited upon us and asked myself the question, "Is there any way out of this total encapsulation?" I want to tell you tonight, that I have been so fortunate to have lived to witness the coming together of so many educated Oromos to work for the many issues which concern the Oromo people including the celebration of National Day.

For all of these reasons, my participation tonight in this memorable occasion is more than an academic exercise! It is indeed, a fulfillment of my personal dream!

I. Recent Events Overview

The Horn of Africa is an area roughly three-quarters of a million square miles in the Northeast portion of the African continent. The name, "Horn of Africa," certainly does not denote any political entity. It is a metaphor and therefore has no precise boundaries.¹ However, it is usually thought to encompass Kenya, Somalia, Djibutti, the Ethiopian Empire and the Sudan. And although there are more than 75 million people in the entire region,² they do share one thing in common - the painful experience of the long series of violent conflicts which have occurred in the region.

The Horn is uniquely located adjacent to the Red Sea in an area that was, and still is, a major gateway to the Orient for the Mediterranean World and Africa. When the Suez Canal opened in 1869 the geopolitical value of the region was dramatically enhanced. And since that time there have been frequent confrontations and violent clashes among the people of the region, often with direct encouragement and intervention from the external world.³

Since 1974 the conflicts in the Horn of Africa have received considerable attention from the scholars who study the region. More than ten books have been written which address conflicts in the entire region.⁴ And there are, of course, many published books which focus on one or more of the states in the region during the same period. Two scholarly journals have emerged: the Horn of Africa and the Northeast African Studies.⁵ Several major conferences on the Horn of Africa have been convened during the same period: three in the U.S.; one in Europe; and the fifth was held in Cairo, Egypt last summer.⁶ During this period papers have also been presented on the Horn of Africa at International Conferences. For example, last summer at the African Studies Association Annual Conference in Los Angeles, there were four panels on the conflicts in the Horn of Africa.⁷

Another significant development during this period has been the emergence of student movements. Several student organizations based on various nationalities from the region have organized in the U.S. and abroad. Although these organizations have different names in different places, they may be categorized as Eritrian, Oromo, Somalian, Tigrean, etc.⁸ These student organizations have their own reporters and publications such as

newsletters and journals. And several parallel humanitarian organizations have also been developed.⁹

One could legitimately ask, what are the implications? The patterns of activity during the last decade, which I have briefly outlined above, indicate at least two major interrelated developments: First, people are concerned about the conflicts in the region; and second, scholarship and our understanding of the region are going through fundamental changes. In other words, organized activity and scholarship concerned with the Horn of Africa region are going through a process of growth, change and conflict.

My presentation this evening follows the same pattern, which is why I selected the title, "The Oromos and the Conflicts in the Horn of Africa." This title emerges from an awareness and concern that the role of the Oromo in the regions conflicts is not well known. The result of the impact those conflicts have had on Oromo society has not been appreciated. The role of the Oromo society in the regional conflicts has not been adequately surmised. By way of illustrating general neglect here are three examples of how the Oromos have been treated both by the media and by those who have been involved in providing services to political and drought victims in the area.

First example: The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), in the 1982 report of the breakdown of refugees in Djibouti by ethnic group, listed the following: ISA, AFAR, SOMALIA, ERITREA & TIGRAY, and AMHARA.¹⁰ Please note! There was no mention of Oromos in that report! However, according to refugees from the area and outside observers, about 60% of the refugees in Djibouti were Oromos.

Second example: The Washington Post, in a recent report, stated that the majority of people in the Province of Harrar are Isas and Somalis. In actuality the overwhelming majority in the Province of Harrar are Oromos. In that article the Post was describing the fate of those refugees who were repatriated from Djibouti to Ethiopia between 1983 and 1984.¹¹ Some of you will recall that the repatriation took place as a result of the Tripartite agreement between the UNCHR, the Djoubiti Government and the Addis Ababa regime. Although many who were familiar with the situation vehemently opposed the repatriation, the UNCHR, mainly because of political considerations, went along with it.¹² The focus of the Washington Post article was that the repatriation scheme collapsed and the lives of the refugees were in danger. The relevant question here is, why did the Washington

Post article list the victims only as Isas and Somalis. Why were the Oromos omitted when in fact they constituted the majority?

Third example: Since Nov. 23, 1984, when BBC first reported the Hidden famine which was affecting millions in the Ethiopian Empire, Western media has continued to give extensive coverage.¹³ At the same time the Addis Ababa regime has successfully convinced foreign governments and humanitarian organizations that the solution to the famine in the North is to transfer the people to the "Southwestern Fertile Provinces." They have already moved 300,000 and plan to transfer 1.5 million people.¹⁴ In this example I would like to point out that the expression "Southwestern Fertile Provinces" is an euphemism for the old phrase, "Ye Galla Meret, (Oromo Land)" clearly defined policy for confiscating Oromo land and giving it to the supporters of the Government, mostly from the North.¹⁵ Again, curiously, the media coverage does not say that these provinces are occupied by Oromos, and indeed the area has already been cultivated. The sociology of the people in the region is not even explored. If it was it would be discovered, for example, that the population grows much faster in Oromo land than among Northerners where monogamy is the norm.¹⁶

The media has covered the plight of the famine victims from Tigray and Eritrea.¹⁷ We have been informed of the Rescue Mission launched by the Israeli Government, with the support of other governments, to evacuate the so-called "Ethiopian Jews."¹⁸ But we do not hear, see and read in the media about the Oromos, who are also experiencing the pains of famine. There seems to be no analysis of the implications of transferring over a million people to Oromo land. There is no attempt to make the obvious connection between the North to South settlement from 1867 to 1911; a policy which destroyed about 5 million Oromos. The three examples above and the recent omissions of the Oromo role in the current conflict should concern us. Therefore, I have organized my presentation around this issue "the Oromos and the conflict in the Horn of Africa."

II. BACKGROUND. It will be helpful if I briefly review the major conflicts in the Horn of Africa. I will then examine the roles Oromos played in these conflicts and what happened to them. I have selected five major conflicts for our consideration tonight. I must say, there may be some people who do not agree with my characterization of the five conflicts I will be discussing. I selected them because they have made an impact on the

region and its people which is short-term and long-term in scale. If you or anybody can come up with a different list and characterization, you should do so.

In order to have some understanding of the background to the true conflicts, we need to look back and briefly trace the development of the Abyssinian Kingdom.

Written history tells us that semitic colonizers crossed the Red Sea from Southern Arabia and settled on the Northern plateau of the present Ethiopian Empire.¹⁹ This was the Aksimite Kingdom which was Christian by 4 A.D.²⁰ In the 10th Century the Aksumite Kingdom was destroyed and the Agawe dynasty of Zagwe emerged. This lasted into the 13th Century.²¹ But by 1270 A.D. Yikuno Amlak, an Amhara warlord,²² had ascended and claimed a geneological link with King Solomon of the Israelites.²³

With the rise of Yikuno Amlak, the Abyssinian state, and the Christian Church combined into a powerful political force which lasted until 1975.²⁴ This was achieved in part because of a sophisticated ideology developed in the 14th Century and laid out in the Kebrä Negast (Glory of the Kings). The Kebrä Negast carefully constructed the argument that the Abyssinians were chosen by God and destined to rule the rest.²⁵ To accomplish this, three propositions were made: 1) The Abyssinians

were linked to King Solomon through Menelik I, son of Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. 2) The Abyssinians (Ethiopia) worshipped God during the reign of King Solomon - long before the rise of Christianity. 3) The "Ethiopians" accepted Christianity, where as the Jews rejected it. This made the "Ethiopians" a special people in the eyes of God. Kebra Negast states, "Following the Jew's rejection of Christ, the light of God flew to the country of Ethiopia and it shone there with exceedingly great brightness forever. It willed to dwell there."²⁶

To further support this myth, the name "Ethiopia" was extrapolated from the Old Testament where it was used in reference to black people in the entire region. This gave rise "to the claim of Ethiopia's existence in Biblical times and the myth of a history that is 3,000 years old."²⁷ The formation of this myth provided ideological justification to conquer and dominate the non-Christian Cushitic people in the North and South. Thus, the faith, throne and nation became inseparable forces which served the spread of Abyssinian control during several centuries.²⁸ By the 16th century they had extended their control to the Riff Valley and beyond.²⁹

III. Five Major Conflicts

A. Confrontation between the Christian Kingdom and the Islamic movement (16th Century). During the 16th Century, when the Christian Kingdom was challenged by Islam, another Semitic religion which was spreading into the Horn of Africa. A charismatic Moslem leader, Iman Ahmed Ibrahim El-Gazi (1527-1542), launched a Jihad, a religious Holy War, against the Abyssinian Christian Kingdom.³⁰ This confrontation involved external intervention which set a pattern followed to the present time. King John II of Portugal had sent an envoy to Abyssinia by the name of Pedro Do Covilham. He had become a trusted advisor to the Abyssinian throne by 1493. This was followed by years of good relations. When the Abyssinians were threatened by the Gagn (the left handed) they turned to the Portuguese. With four hundred Portuguese soldiers, armed with sophisticated guns, a decisive victory was won in 1543 victory against the Moslem forces.³¹

B. The Era of Western Imperialism (19th and 20th Centuries). During this period the entire region was partitioned. Virtually all territory was taken over by major European powers, France, Great Britain, and Italy. The Somali people and their land was partitioned between

France, Italy, Great Britain, and the Ethiopian Empire. Eritrea was taken by Italy. The Sudan was occupied by the British. These four colonial empires, Britain, France, Italy, and Ethiopia, three White and one Black, flourished side by side in the region.³²

C. The Italian Occupation of Ethiopia (1935-1941).

On the eve of the 40th anniversary of the Italian defeat at the Battle of Adowa, Benito Mussolini, the Italian Fascist, invaded the Ethiopian Empire and occupied it until 1941. The British, out of fear that Fascist Italy would adversely influence the British territories in the Horn, drove out the Italians and returned Emperor Haile Selassie I to the throne.³³

D. The Era of African Independence - 1960's. The early 1960's was the era of decolonization and independence for most of Africa. In 1960, about 15 African states became independent.³⁴ The OAU was organized in 1963. Its headquarters was in Addis Ababa. It had three main objectives: 1) to decolonize the continent, 2) to enhance economic development, and 3) to create a harmonious relationship among African states.³⁵ Ironically, and in a very curious way, independence in the rest of Africa created more tension and conflict for the people in the Horn of Africa. The Ethiopian Empire, instead of decolonizing, increased its territory. Eritrea was annexed in

1962. And other national groups, such as the Oromos and Somalis, which had long been subjugated, were further restrained by force. The newly decolonized Somali state started demanding the rights of the Somalis in Ogaden. This tension led to the modern liberation movements. Emperor Haile Selassie I brutally suppressed these forces with American aid, weapons, and technology.³⁶

E. The 1977 Ethio-Somali War. The invasion of the Ethiopian Empire by Somalia through the province of Harrar in 1977 brought a new dimension to the conflict. The U.S., a superpower which had supplied arms to the Haile Selassie Government from 1950-1974, declined to provide additional support to the military junta. The Soviet Union, the second superpower and principal rival to the U.S., responded to the grand opportunity. The USSR perceived potential benefits in terms of political, economic and ideological influence. Lured by a larger population and material resources the USSR willingly provided money, weapons and military experts to the Addis Ababa regime. In the meantime the west, and the U.S. in particular, remained undecided. Somalia essentially lost because of the support provided by the USSR to the Empire.³⁷

In each of the five conflicts reviewed above, there was one power which came out as the winner. Why only one? Why always a definitive victory? A succinct summary by Professor John Spencer sheds some light on the question. Professor Spencer served as the chief advisor to the Haile Sellassie government in foreign policy for 43 years. His reflections are contained in his recent book, Ethiopia at Bay: A Personal Account of the Haile Sellassie Years.

Ethiopia's supreme crises were of external origin and were often resolved by foreign *dei ex machina*. The 16th century invasions led by the Somali Gragn were repelled at the Portuguese. The defeat of Italy at Adwa at the end of the 19th century was achieved in part with French and German arms. The Emperor's own rise to power in the early years of the 20th century had been achieved to a significant degree through the intervention of European states opposed to the reign of Menelik's successor, Lij Iyassu. Haile Sellassie fell from power because of European support of the Fascist invasion, and went into exile in England where he was kept on hand for possible utilization against Italy. It was the British who put him back on the throne and the United States which furnished the occasion for his downfall.

Like Britain and Portugal before it, the Soviet Union became the third *deus ex machina*. It has spent more than two billion dollars in military aid to counter Somali and Eritrean attacks on the highlands of Ethiopia so as, in the end, to covert her into a Soviet colony.³⁸

Professor Spencer uses a metaphor of Latin origin which describes this perpetual dependence of the Abyssinian rulers on external powers for survival and dominance. As we will see, his metaphorical description is apt and fitting. The metaphor I am referring to is "*deus ex machina*." He also uses it in plural form - *dei ex machina* - to indicate the successive powers which were involved in this relationship with the Ethiopian Empire. Deus ex Machina literally means "God out of the machine." Its real meaning, however, is "last minute savior." It is also interesting to note that Professor Spencer is not alone in this interpretation of the historical utility of outside aid. Abyssinian scholars who have attended a number of recent conferences have been heard quite openly blaming the Arabs, and praising the USSR for saving the country from the Arab takeover.³⁹ As a matter of fact, according to a recent report in the Washington Post, Mengistu (reportedly) told a western Famine Relief Official "that America abandoned Ethiopia and the Russians saved the country."⁴⁰

IV. Where Were the Oromos?

We have reviewed five major conflicts in the Horn of Africa. We have illustrated how outside intervention has consistently maintained the dominance of the

Ethiopian Regime. The question remains: Where were the Oromos during these conflicts?

The Abyssinian literature depicts Oromos as outsiders and newcomers to modern Ethiopia.⁴¹ Bahrey, an Abyssinian monk who lived during the 16th century, talks about the "great Oromo migration" during that period.⁴² Some even say that Oromos came from water - somewhere from the Indian Ocean.⁴³

It is a common phenomena in the Horn and in other regimes of the globe, the group which controls the economic and the political system in a state, engages in deligitimization of the sub-ordinate group(s). This is a way of legitimizing an oppressive system. Indeed, we can make a long list of this phenomena throughout human political experience that substantiates this pattern. For the purpose of our comparison three concrete examples will suffice.

1. In the U.S. it was argued, until 1970, that the Afro-Americans came to the U.S. only during the 17th century and were thus late-comers. Therefore, they should go back to Africa if they did not like their status. A closer study of history, however, reveals that Africans arrived in North America a century earlier than

the North European settlers. Afro-Americans came during the earliest years of Spanish trade in the Americas, including North America, a century earlier than the first North Europeans who settled in New England.⁴⁴

2. In South Africa, the White Minority Regime advances the argument that the Boers arrived in the area first and the Africans came later. Again, history indicates the opposite.⁴⁵

3. In the Middle East, Menachem Begin of the Luckid party in Israel stunned the world, including the more progressive Israeli politicians, when he declared in 1978 shortly after his election that there was no such thing as the West bank, Golan Heights. He said that these were the historical Jewish territories of Judea and Samaria.⁴⁶

Careful study of Oromo oral history, linguistic patterns and other evidence show now that Oromos were not "newcomers and outsiders" as mentioned in Abyssinian literature. They had lived in the Horn for most of their history. Most scholars and Oromos now think that Bale and the surrounding region was their original homeland.

There are indications also that the Oromos were present in the region before the Somalis.⁴⁷

A. The Oromos during the Late 16th Century. When Gagn, the Muslim leader, came from the east using Harrar as a base for challenging the expanding Christian kingdom to the South, the Oromos were probably caught in the middle. After the Abyssinian kingdom defeated the Muslim incursion in the mid-16th century, with Portuguese assistance, the Muslims generally remained weak in the region for the next three centuries. However, the Christian kingdom did have to contend with major internal conflicts. As a result the state was gradually forced to break down into its provincial parts. The chiefs of each struggled for supremacy. This period is known as the "Age of Princes" in Abyssinian history.⁴⁸ Since the Abyssinians were preoccupied with the internal power struggles, the indigenous people in the region, including the Oromo, were able to flourish without direct interference.⁴⁹

B. The Oromos during the Era of Imperialism and African Independence. During this period the Oromos were the main target of conquest and colonization among the peoples of the Horn of Africa. After all the Oromos were the most largest group among all the nations in the region - estimated at about 10 million during this period.

They also occupied the most fertile land in the region. During this era (19th - 20th century) the Abyssinian kingdom under the Shawa Dynasty began to reconquer and consolidate. King Sahle-Selassie of Menz, the grandfather of Emperor Menelik II (whom we will discuss later), takes the reign of power. In a masterful way he modifies the Abyssinian ideology of supremacy that had been originally conceptualized in Kebra Negast. He applied the ideology in two ways: to coopt Oromos for the purpose of using them against other Oromos, and to campaign in Europe for arms to conquer them.⁵⁰ He wrote to Europe to achieve this goal. And the missionaries and diplomats who visited his court lobbied on his behalf. Requests were made for the explicit purpose of subduing the "pagan" Oromos and spreading civilization among them. Britain and France responded. Weapons were sent to the king. With relatively modern firearms, the king regularly raided the Oromos, particularly Shoa Province.⁵¹ Sahle Sellassie told Major Harris, a British diplomat, that he, the King, made 84 raids against Oromo settlements in one year. In one of the raids when Major Harris was present, the King raided Meta Oromos and killed 4,500 persons. According to Harris's record, the King had 8,000 slaves (men and women), and of these, 300 were

concubines of the royal harem. Further evidence of policies toward the Oromo can be seen under successive kings.⁵²

Emperor Tewodros - 1855-1868

Historians and Abyssinian nationals give credit to Tewodros for further securing the foundation of the empire. His name still evokes patriotic emotion among Amharas. He is considered a national hero and even a state hero of the Empire, worthy of canonization.⁵³ Here are his policies toward the Oromo people:

- 1) To Christianize the Moslem Oromos of Wallo by force.
- 2) To unify the traditional Christian of the North on a racist/anti-Oromo policy. His slogans were "defeat the Galla spectre and the Islamic menace."
- 3) According to him, the Oromos were pagans and enemies, fit only for massacre and enslavement.
- 4) Evacuate the Oromos from their homeland in Wollo, and settle them in Begemder - if they did not obey this order they were exterminated.
- 5) Forced Oromos to pay tribute to the King.⁵⁴

Emperor Menelik II

Emperor Menelik II, after successfully subjugating his rivals in the North, became known in Europe. He was actually admired for his imperial ambitions, and his manipulative skills which paralleled the contemporary European imperialists.⁵⁵ Abyssinians consider him the father of modern Ethiopia. Even expatriot Ethiopianists view him as the quintessential diplomat, and a tolerant and wise emperor.⁵⁶ Ironically, the Black World generally remembers him as an African power who stood up to European imperialists. However, from another point of view it is clear that Menelik pursued the long standing ambition of the Abyssinian Kings to expand their empire to the Oromo country and beyond. Menelik, shrewd as he was, refined and sharpened the methodologies which were conceived and utilized by Sahle Sellassie. The southern drive occurred with unparalleled rigor and intensity. He continued his grandfather's policy of soliciting European arms and using assimilated Oromo against other Oromos.

Menelik II, like his grandfather, Sahle-Sellassie, wrote to Europe and obtained even more arms: France, Britain, Italy and Czarist Russia piled up modern arms in his warehouse.⁵⁷ It was the European manpower and

technical know how that provided him with the ability to maintain sustained wars in Oromo land. A British diplomat by the name of Earl Lytton, the author of Stolen Desert, wrote:

Menelik seems to have operated with French technicians, French mapmakers, French advice on the management of a standing army and more French advice as to holding captured provinces with permanent garrisons of conscripted colonial troops. The French also armed its troops with firearms and did much else to organize its campaigns....The Gala (Oromo) were thus conquered by the Habash for the first time in recorded history. Without massive European help the Galla (Oromo) would not have been conquered at all.⁵⁸

We can ascertain further what was happening to the Oromos by looking at Menelik II's successes.

- 1) Oromo population was reduced to half after the conquest.
- 2) The land was taken away and distributed to:
 - a) Amhara settlers
 - b) The Emperor and royal family
 - c) Generals
 - d) The orthodox
- 3) The tenants were tied to the land for the purpose of serving the colonial masters.
- 4) Military garrisons were established, which later became permanent towns and cities.

- 5) Amhara language was elevated to the status language while the Oromo language was suppressed.
- 6) The Amhara culture was promoted while the Oromo culture was stifled.
- 7) A series, of over 23 types, of taxations were introduced.
- 8) He introduced slavery with great intensity. Ironically he did make proclamations to abolish slavery, but there was just ka anget belay (above the neck).⁵⁹ In the Amhara classic tradition of ambiguity he actually intensified it. The following quote from another historian

illustrates:

....Menelik maintained slavery in his colonies as a means of making the conquered subjects pay by their labor all the expense of his wars of aggression against them. Second, Menelik used slavery as a method of evangelism to teach his captive aremawyans (pagans) Christian virtue and divine love. Third, Menelik issued a series of proclamations against the slave trade, while he maintained slavery as a means of war reparations and evangelism.⁶⁰

C. The Oromos during the Italian Occupation.

The brief Italian occupation took place during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie I. He was also considered an enlightened despot - a modernizing monarch.

Therefore, it is appropriate to examine his policies toward the Oromos. I would like to stress three major policies that he carried out on the Oromos prior to the arrival of Mussolini. He too followed the "Divine Missions" developed for the Abyssinian rulers, as prescribed as Kebra Negast. In fact, he clearly followed King Sahle Selassie, Emperor Menelik II's policies in the South.

- More Oromo land was confiscated and was given to the Amhara Naftanga - colonial settlers.
- Taxes increased progressively.
- In 1933, he passed a law which tied the Oromo Gabhars (semi-slaves) legally to the land which they occupied and were given to the Naftangas. They were forbidden to leave the land without the permission of their landlords.⁶¹ When the Italians came, the Oromos responded with mixed feelings.

Both oral history and studies based on the Italian documents clearly indicate that the Oromos did not like Italian occupation. They wanted freedom. However, the same sources attest that the Oromos preferred Italian to Amhara dominance.⁶² There are two interrelated reasons to explain the Oromo response.

There is some discernible relationship between the stage of economic, political and technological development of the colonizing power, and the nature of treatment it imposes on colonized people. If the colonizing power is more advanced it imposes relatively less harsh treatment on the colonized. Conversely, the less developed the colonizing power, the harsher the treatment of its victims.

Some examples from African experience should shed some light on this phenomenon. The British and French colonial processes were less harsh when compared to the Portuguese colonial rule. The Portuguese colonial system was much more crude, cruel and brutal when compared to those of the British and French. The Portuguese demanded more, and extracted more wealth and services from its colonial subjects. In turn, it gave back less.⁶³ The Italian economic and political development at the same time was inferior to the British and the French and consequently, the Italian dominance was relatively more harsh. Since the Amhara state was still in a feudal stage, its colonial system was perhaps the worst in African experience.

The second point on why Oromos may have preferred Italian domination concerns the majority-minority factor

in colonialism. If the colonial settler community is a numerical minority, that ruling minority tends to live in fear and behaves with a seige mentality. It fears that any step toward liberalism and democratization would lead to the ultimate downfall of their supremacy and possible endanger their survival. Therefore, the colonization usually employs brutal policies to control its colonized subjects. The Apartheid system developed by the White minority colonial settlers in South Africa is a classic example of such mentality.⁶⁴

In contrast, the Italian regime constructed policies which had practical benefits for the Oromo people:

- Distributed land back to the Oromo peasant, land that had been taken away by the Ethiopian empire state.
- Abandoned taxation.
- Increased local Oromo participation in their government.
- Abolished the Abyssinian prison system.
- Banned slavery.
- Introduced the usage of Oromo language on radio.
- Introduced the usage of Oromo language in all courts.⁶⁵

In short, the Oromos were caught between two imperialist powers, one black, the other white. They resisted both,

but relatively preferred the white supremacy to that of the black. The degree of brutality was clearly an influencing factor.

By the 1960's, the Oromo condition had reached rock bottom. Oromos could not even obtain Gabars (semi-slave status). And they could not farm on the land because the royal family, its associates and the landlords found that they could derive more benefits from the land by introducing modern farm machinery, farming themselves, or renting the land to rich companies who could use modern technology and yield more profit. Therefore, by the late 60's, the Oromo peasant had to either compete with rich companies or move off the land. Villages were ploughed around; houses were burned down.⁶⁶ The few educated Oromos became suspects on any pretext.

This was the Oromo experience during the period of African Liberation. It was during that time that the Oromo in Bale Province began armed struggle. The Oromo intellectuals, students and professionals gradually organized under the Match-Tuluma Association, which was later banned by the Haile Selassie Government.⁶⁷

D. The Oromos During the Ethio-Somali War of 1977.

Once again they were caught in between two regional powers; each backed by one of the two principal rival

super-powers. By this time various Oromo nationalist movements had come to the conclusion that the Oromos would not realize any meaningful democratization within the Ethiopian empire. By 1974, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was born. By 1977, its influence was spreading among the Oromo peasants in southeastern provinces. When the Addis Ababa regime lost its control over the Ogaden and Harrar provinces in general, the military junta and its Amhara supporters made the Oromos the scapegoat for the swift victories attained by the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) and their supporters. A new slogan was coined: roughly translated: "What has Somali done to us, it is the Galla (Oromo) who finished us." ከሚያገኙ፡ ምዕራባዊዎች፡ ጋራ፡ ስራ፡ ምዕራባዊዎች፡፡

There was a resurgence of Amhara chauvinism. The former Amhara landlords were re-armed with the latest Soviet guns, to suppress Oromos and Somalis. Landlords described as, *Agar woddad abbat naftanyooch*.

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(elderly Neftena patriots) - elderly colonial settler-patriots in the Junta propaganda. Conscious Oromo students and intellectuals were not called comrades any more, but were branded "narrow nationalists" and were

declared the main enemies of the revolution. Massive and indiscriminate arrests and jailing of the Oromo intelligentsia began in earnest.⁶⁸

Between 1977 and 1979, whatever the Oromos gained from the 1974 Revolution came down to zero level. The experience continues as a deficit for Oromos insofar as a Revolution is concerned:

1. Under the "Ye Galla Meret" policy, when the state took land away from the Oromos and gave it to the royal family and colonial landlords under Emperor Menelik and his successors, now belongs to the Amhara state. None of it has been returned during the change in government.
2. The collective farming has become established. The Oromo peasants can not even control production any more. The state takes the amount it desires to feed the urban and the military operations against the Oromos, Eriterians and Tigries and Somalis.
3. The so-called Green corporations were organized in order to enable the government to force the farmers to sell their products at Government set prices.

4. A new plan was launched to resettle about 3 million people from the North in the Oromo country in the east and South in Oromo country. It should be noted here that the decision to resettle the famine victims from Wollo and Tigries areas in the so-called "fertile areas of the Southwest" is not new. It did not come up as a way of resolving the famine crisis in the North. It is a euphemism for the Amhara Colonial policy, known as "Ye Galla Merit" (The Oromo land).
5. Full scale state-sponsored religious persecution was initiated against non-orthodox Christians and Moslems (Oromos). Churches and mosques have been destroyed. Religious lay persons and clergies have been imprisoned and killed.
6. Extensive and forced recruitment of the able male for military use has been enforced. Indeed, this has contributed to the current cruel famine in the South.
7. The systematic persecution, harrassment, economic mismanagement by the Addis Ababa regime has forced over 3 million persons to leave the Ethiopian Empire between 1979-1982. Indeed a

recent study conducted by Ulrich Brankumper, a German scholar, on Oromo refugees clearly ascertain these facts with respect to the State of Oromo condition under the current regime.

According to the information available, the flight of Oromo refugees - roughly in order of importance - was caused by:
1. the direct effects of fighting; 2. the fear of terroristic actions by Ethiopian soldiers; 3. the persecution for being a member or suspected supporter of a "national" (ethnic) liberation movement; 4. the actual or projected resettlement programs of the Ethiopian government; 5. limitations on religious life or fear of religious persecution; 6. fear of recruitment into the army and militia; 7. dissatisfaction with the implementation of the land reform; 8. dissatisfaction and economic difficulties in connection with the state monopoly on agricultural products, particularly cash crops; 9. and the fear of persecution because of membership in a political grouping such as the EPRP, Meisone.⁶⁹

More are still exiting these days. It is believed that half of the refugees in the Horn of Africa may be Oromos. Since the Oromos have been deprived of economic and educational opportunities, the overwhelming majority of them are illiterate. Due to their illiteracy, they do not qualify for resettlement in a "Third Country", usually the West. The Oromo refugees languish in the refugee camps in the states adjacent to the Ethiopian Empire. Even there, they experience considerable discrimination.⁷⁰

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Where have the Oromos been during these five major conflicts in the Horn of Africa? In this presentation tonight, I hope I have established that the Oromos, the largest nation in the entire region, perhaps the largest ethnic group in all sub-Sahara Africa, were in the middle of these conflicts. In most cases they have been involuntary participants and victims in the conflicts. They seem to stand on the receiving end of the worst in consequences of each of the conflicts. And in the midst of these strenuous periods, they have been the silent and invisible, faceless majority.

As all of you in this audience know by now, the Israeli government, in collaboration with the Jewish Community in the U.S. and other governments, undertook a very daring project, known as the "Mercy Mission," to deliver one of the oppressed groups in the Ethiopian Empire, the so-called "Falashas." The main goal was to extricate about 30,000 of these people out of the Ethiopian empire and take them to Israel. It was indeed a deliverance from the hands of those who drink from the ideological pool as espoused in Kebra Negast.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I ask who will deliver the Oromos? By deliverance, I do not mean in here a process

that would necessarily involve physical extrication of the entire Oromo nation. Deliverance has other important dimensions: Liberation and relief would make a tremendous difference in millions of lives. And lending moral and national support for a dying nation will contribute toward the deliverance of the Oromo people.

Toward this end it is essential to convince the Western nations and their humanitarian organizations not to support or be used by the Addis Ababa regime in the resettlement scheme in the South (which undoubtedly will do more damage). This is some form of deliverance.

The Oromos are doing their part. Today, the Oromo people - intelligentsia and peasants - under the leadership of OLF is in a struggle for self-determination. Oromo nationalism is thriving at home and abroad, albeit under very difficult circumstances. The yearly celebration of Oromo national day is a testimony of this. Indeed, the survival of Oromo nationalism in the face of great odds is a living testimony to the strength of the human spirit.

Oromo nationalism, and struggle for self-determination is not some abstract concern. It has to do with the very survival future of a great nation. Oromo concerns and aspirations can be summarized in the following words:

Injustice and oppression have been tried with us during a period of more than two hundred years. Under the whole heaven, you will find no parallel to the wrongs we have endured. We have worked without wages, lived without hope, wept without sympathy, and bled without mercy. Now, in the name of common humanity, we simply ask, the right to bear the responsibility of our own existence.⁷¹

These elequent words were not uttered by an Oromo; the person who spoke these words did not even know Oromos for he was born and reared in North America some 120 years ago. But he knew so well the nature of oppression because he himself was a product of such experience and he spent his entire life so tirelessly and ceaselessly for the deliverance of his slaved people. These were the words of Frederick Douglass, the eloquent and great Afro-American, a great liberator and spokesperson for his people. Tonight, I have adopted his words to capture the Oromo experience and aspirations. They echo the need of all oppressed people.

Thank you very much!!!

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⁵The Horn of Africa published its first issue in Winter of 1978; it is published in Trenton, New Jersey. Northeast African Studies is published by the Northeast African Studies Committee, The African Studies Center, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan. The first issue appeared in 1979.

⁶The conferences held during this period: a) "Social Crisis in the Horn of Africa," April 23-26, 1980, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan. The proceedings were published in Northeast African Studies, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1980-81; Vol. 3, No. 1, 1981. b) "Nationalism and Self-Determination in the Horn of Africa," March 31-April 2, 1980, Oxford University, UK. The papers from the conference were published in a book with Professor I. M. Lewis of London as the editor. (The full reference has been cited in this text; please see footnote 4.) c) "The Political Economy of Northeast Africa," April 21-23, 1983, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan. The proceedings of the conference have been published in Northeast African Studies, Vol. 6, No. 102, 1984. d) A day conference on the Horn of Africa, August 25, 1984, Howard University, Washington, D.C. e) A conference on the Horn of Africa, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt, Fall 1984.

⁷See ASA News, Vol. XVII, No. 3, (July/September, 1984).

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⁹Among such organizations are: a) Eriterian Relief Association; b) Oromo Relief Association in North America (ORANA); c) The Oromo Committee on Immigration and Refugees (OCIR); d) Tigray Relief Association (RIST).

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