THE JOURNAL OF OROMO STUDIES

Volume 18, Number 1 **July 2011**

Special Issue:

Sisai Ibssa and the Oromo National Movement

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Ezekiel Gebissa and Bonnie K. Holcomb

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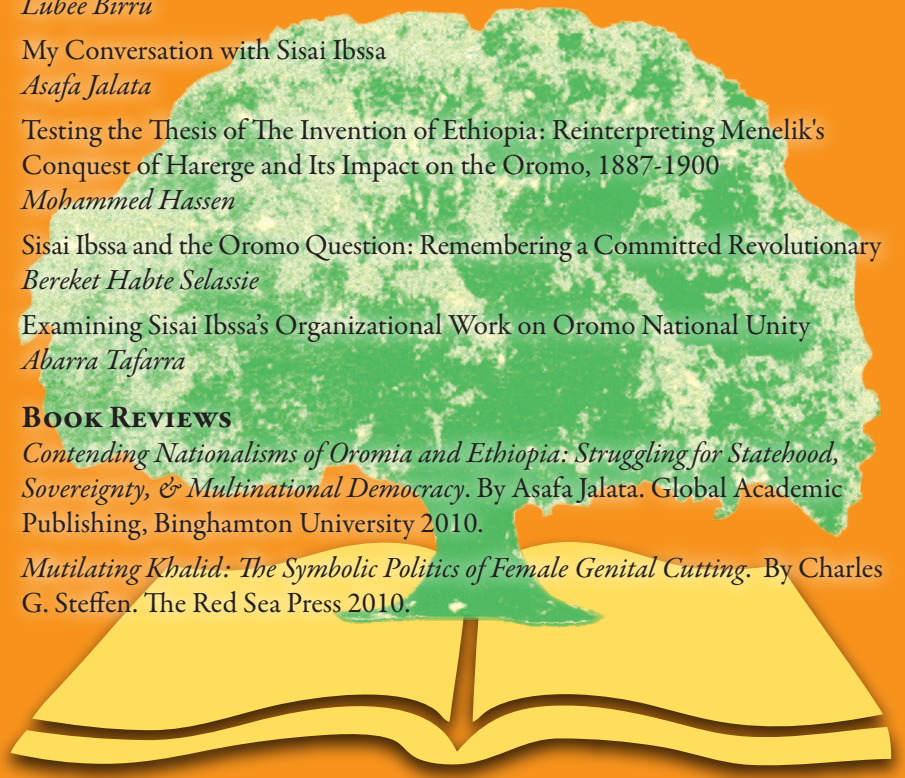
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A Publication of the Oromo Studies Association

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Guest Editor:

BONNIE K. HOLCOMB

The Journal of Oromo Studies (JOS) is a leading scholarly publication of the Oromo Studies Association (OSA). Issued twice a year, the journal publishes articles pertaining to all areas of Oromo Studies past, present and future, including topics related to the Oromo diaspora worldwide. Its interdisciplinary scope and revisionary approach offers readers a critical view of the socioeconomic, political and cultural achievements of the Oromo people in their interactions with the people of the Horn of Africa and beyond.

Reflecting the diverse interests of OSA members, the journal emphasizes multidisciplinarity and embraces variety by publishing articles that allow both the specialist and the general reader to gain far-reaching insights and a thorough understanding of the Oromo people, the Horn of Africa and the international community of which they are a part.

All manuscripts submitted for publication consideration must be original work that has not been published previously and is not currently being considered by any other publication outlet. Submitted articles are evaluated by scholars who are experts in the field. The journal's editorial team is committed to communicating editorial decisions within a reasonable period to authors.

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Individual $35
Institutional $55
Single Issue $20
Add $15 annually for shipping.

Send in US currency payments and subscription requests to: Oromo Studies Association P.O. Box 32391, Fridley, MN 55432, (USA). Make checks or money orders out to the Oromo Studies Association.

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Editorial Overview

Ezekiel Gebissa and Bonnie K. Holcomb

This Special Issue of *The Journal of Oromo Studies* is devoted to honoring Sisai Ibssa, who was one of the founders of the Oromo Studies Association. He formed the Committee to Organize Oromo Studies in 1986 to organize an initial two-day conference for the next year which launched the Oromo Studies Association. This year is the 25th anniversary of that beginning.

Sisai was an Oromo intellectual, activist, organizer, and advocate. Several key people with knowledge of Sisai's life and work have provided articles to honor his contribution to Oromo studies and to the Oromo national liberation movement. It is the purpose of the editors of JOS to honor Sisai by launching a conversation about the implications of his scholarly work and some of the provocative positions he took for Oromo studies. Each of these articles reveals a different dimension of Sisai Ibssa, his work, and his philosophy. Some of the articles represent a particular perspective on Sisai

and by extension on the Oromo liberation movement. By devoting a Special Issue to examining Sisai's ideas, *The Journal of Oromo Studies* is not endorsing or presenting particular accounts of witnesses as unalterable facts, but rather acknowledging that each one offers a specific viewpoint on a critical period in the life of the Oromo national movement and Sisai's role in it. In devoting this issue to Sisai Ibssa, JOS's editors wish to recognize Sisai's work by highlighting the principles that he espoused. The overall purpose is to capture the issues, debates, and controversies that characterized an absolutely critical time in the history of the Oromo movement. Because the accounts offered here represent particular viewpoints, we invite others to present their perspectives for the record with the understanding that what transpired during that period might shed light on what might be done today to pursue that elusive "unity" which is on the tongues of everyone. Other papers on this topic will be published in JOS or elsewhere later. We particularly request material accounts of Sisai's relationship with the OLF, the experience of participating organizations in ULFO, and historical material that will shed light on the period in the Ethiopian Students Union in North America (ESUNA) at the time that the Eritrean and Oromo student organizations were formed. It is very much in keeping with Sisai's approach to difficult issues that we anticipate a good exchange leading to greater knowledge and understanding that can result in more effective pursuit of the shared goal.

Bonnie Holcomb launches the issue with a paper that introduces Sisai, reviews his intellectual journey—particularly focusing on the ways in which it informed and was informed by his organizational work—and examines

how his guiding vision of constructing an Oromo civil state influenced all of his efforts. Having worked with Sisai for over 25 years, co-authoring many publications with him, she argues that Sisai's own thinking and contributions should be examined as carefully and critically as he examined the work of others. Her conclusions are that not only will his work hold up to scrutiny but also can provide useful input into current debates over the meaning of self-determination, organizational development and routes to unity. She draws attention to the single-mindedness with which he worked to strengthen Oromo organization and to provide intellectual tools for activists as they strive to fashion practical mechanisms for liberation. The implications of her piece are that it is rare for a person to concentrate all of his capabilities toward the good of the collective in the way that Sisai did. Implicit in this message is that his selfless pursuit of the advancement of the Oromo was a gift to the Oromo nation and it is appropriate that we honor it as such.

Lubee Birru provides important background and biographical data. He brings intimate detail about growing up in Bacho with Sisai, their early experiences living in a society still operating largely according to traditional Oromo principles, their journeys to attend schools in the capital city, Finfinnee (Addis Ababa), and eventually in the United States. What emerges from this account is the underlying and lasting influence on Sisai of his own experience of *Oromummaa* (Oromoness) at an early age. It helps to interpret the confidence with which he devoted himself to exploring and championing the Oromo heritage as he matured and offers important clues about how Sisai can be seen to exemplify an Oromo man. These eyewitness observations are invalu-

able to understanding Sisai and the forces that shaped his perspectives. In a way, his life's experiences tell a larger story of what it means to be an Oromo activist.

The approach chosen by Asafa Jalata to introduce his encounter and ongoing relationship with Sisai is very apt – a conversation. Many people who participated in some aspect of Oromo organization could attest that Sisai was at his best in direct conversations where they came into contact with the full force of his personality and encountered his worldview. He especially enjoyed sparring with a person who held a different position and was willing to engage in a give-and-take or, even better, with someone who appreciated the dialectical method and was willing to defend an opposing position so that each could be examined closely enough that the essence of each position was able to emerge. Asafa's memory of reading Sisai's article, "Red Star on the Emperor's Crown," three years after it had been presented at Michigan State University provides interesting feedback by one who felt the impact of Sisai's courage and intellectual argument at a distance, a fascinating bit of history offered by someone who was not even in the room at the time of the presentation while the sparks were flying. Asafa's article paints a picture of an Oromo activist-scholar.

Historian Mohammed Hassen honors the memory of Sisai Ibssa by taking seriously one of Sisai's core theses and confirming its explanatory power through careful evaluation of the historical record of the colonization of Harer, first by Egyptian and then by Ethiopian occupiers. The critical role of European supplies in the accomplishment of the Ethiopian conquest and in the subsequent establishment of Abyssinian settler/landlords is striking. The ruthlessness by which Ethiopian occupiers exploited

their Oromo subjects is attributed to the relative poverty of the dependent colonizer. Egypt, as a direct colonial power, had the resources to compensate its colonists and consequently the Egyptians were not forced or empowered to extract all their own sustenance from the subject people. These data also support the thesis of dependent colonialism. In addition, Mohammed provides a personal account of his encounter with Sisai in mid-2005 following a day of research at the National Archives. Mohammed was able to cite new evidence that supports the view that the dynamic of dependent colonialism was still actively at work in the 1960s as well. Readers look forward to publication of those revelatory documents. It is no surprise to learn that Sisai was gratified and encouraged to receive this indication from Mohammed that Sisai's own theses were borne out by official documents and that his scholarly work endures. From Mohammed's article emerges a vivid portrait of an original thinker.

The contribution by Bereket Habte Selassie, a longtime colleague and friend of Sisai's is a welcome record of their longstanding exchanges and enduring relationship over a period of dramatic changes in the political dynamics around them. Sisai and Bereket maintained a warm friendship even when their respective political organizations were at odds. Sisai defended Eritreans' right to pursue and defend their own national interest as they saw it, even after a chorus of Oromo voices opposed Eritrean organizations for their positions on the Oromo question in the early 1990s. Sisai himself was occasionally critical of positions that Eritreans took on the Oromo question, but his friendship and ongoing conversation with Bereket remained intact. The two men worked very closely on COHAC (Committee to

Organize the Horn of Africa Conference) to coordinate the first Conference of its time in Washington, DC in 1984. On another note, Bereket had encouraged Sisai to pursue publication of his ideas on the Ethiopian state in *The Invention of Ethiopia* and offered useful comments on the text while the manuscript was in production. It is worth mentioning that when the book was published, it was well-advertised by Eritrean organizations and hundreds of copies were purchased by Eritrean nationalists who communicated with the authors their enthusiasm for the argument presented.

The final article, presented by Abarra Tafarra, is an examination of Sisai's work toward establishing the United Liberation Forces of Oromia (ULFO). Abarra was a close colleague with Sisai and fellow member in the Gumii Bilisumma Oromo (GBO) organization as that group participated in the formation of the ULFO throughout the period covered by his account. He documents the tireless efforts Sisai made to establish a unity movement among Oromo organizations. Yet he closes with the following acknowledgement that, despite Sisai's indefatigable efforts, the goal of unity has not been attained: "So the task is still not done. Even though the effort of those years taught Oromos and those in political organizations to believe that unity is necessary for advancing the Oromo cause, the mechanism for creating a viable unity has eluded them." The arduousness of the process that Abarra describes shows the indomitable spirit of Sisai and the committed revolutionary that he was.

Abarra's approach to this endeavor is very much in the spirit of Sisai, who firmly believed in the importance and the necessity of learning significant lessons from lack of success if those setbacks are admitted and examined

with care. His position was that that tackling obstacles often forces us to adjust our understanding of the realities we are facing, make corrections and keep on trying with increased knowledge, which otherwise is inaccessible to us. By publishing this version of events surrounding the experience of building the ULFO, JOS editors present an account that we realize is written from the perspective of a member of one among several organizations that worked together toward a unity movement – creating ULFO as an umbrella organization. JOS editors believe that this debate and analysis – regarding what constitutes unity, on what principles attempts have been made and what explains setbacks and difficulties – is worth continuing, either on the pages of JOS or elsewhere, in order to better interpret the forces that are currently at work in the Oromo national movement. Again, JOS welcomes contributions of well-documented papers that address this and related issues. An enlightened, even dialectical, exchange on these topics is an entirely appropriate way, in fact may be the best way, to continue to honor Sisai Ibssa and the objectives he worked for tirelessly – by recognizing his founding role in stimulating discussion and forcing a focus on provocative topics that remain central to the Oromo movement.

On Sisai Ibssa: Oromo Visionary and Strategist

Bonnie K. Holcomb

My longtime collaboration with Sisai Ibssa began in 1978, soon after I moved to Washington, DC. I was a graduate student who had returned to the United States following two years of anthropology research in Western and Central Oromia. Upon reaching the Washington area, I asked every person I saw from the Horn of Africa if he or she spoke or knew anyone who could speak the Oromo language. Finally an Eritrean had put me in touch with Sisai Ibssa. As an anthropologist, I had my own strong opinions and experience of the Oromo people and culture prior to

Journal of Oromo Studies, Vol. 18, No. 1 (July 2011), pp. 1-41.

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meeting him. At that time I could find only four other Americans who spoke *afaan Oromo* (two were children of missionaries). The collaboration between Sisai and me that began at that time continued strong until it was ended abruptly with his death in mid-2005. It was my choice, my privilege, my challenge, and my deep joy to work closely with Sisai.

There is much to be said about Sisai because his ideas reached into many previously unlit spaces, his organizational work confronted the status quo and his life force touched many people. The diversity of people who offered tributes at his eulogy service[1] on August 27, 2005 revealed several of Sisai's prodigious personal capacities. He was a visionary; he was a fighter; he was charismatic; he was tough-minded. Those who knew him or encountered his work saw many dimensions of a complex man. But I think in Sisai's honor we should focus on how he consciously chose to direct those remarkable capacities. Yes, he was a fighter, but in what arena did he choose to do battle and what was he fighting for? He was a visionary; what was that vision? He had a tough-minded intellect. What conclusions did he reach with that acumen? He was selfless. What was he sacrificing for? He planned to contribute to another book. What was the essential message he hoped to convey? If we do not focus on his purpose, we miss the essence of the man and fail to grasp his greatest contribution.

The Making of a Revolutionary

The direction of Sisai's life was pretty well established by the mid-1970s when he was turning 30. Born in rural Bacho, in central Oromia in 1945, he was raised there as the youngest of 13 children born to a mother

who was widowed three years after his birth. His mother, who spoke only the Oromo language, had, by the time of his early memories, become widely regarded as a wise elder and counselor in the community. Sisai was constantly at her side, exposed early in life to the inner workings of traditional Oromo systems of peacemaking, mediation, reconciliation and the rule of law. He learned a life lesson that peace is an achievable goal but one that requires constant vigilance. He gained faith in the rule of law from a young age by observing members of the community struggle to apply shared principles and traditional law to difficult situations. He acquired a key component of his personal outlook on life, i.e., that justice is a right of all people without exception. As her last child, he was the apple of his mother's eye and very close to her. He always spoke of her as his wisest teacher, quoting her constantly throughout his life. With her at his side, he was not intimidated by anyone, regardless of age or rank. After she sent him to receive an urban education, he returned to spend summers in Bacho but did not live in the Oromo countryside again. He later came to treasure these early experiences and they eventually contributed to his firm faith in the Oromo heritage. For Sisai, this heritage was not an abstract concept but a lived reality. But his route to a political position grounded in Oromo values was not direct.

He arrived in the capital city Finfinnee (Addis Ababa) as the privileged youngest sibling of a successful well-known family and under the watchful eyes of several prominent brothers. His adolescent years were marked by a macho confidence in his physical prowess, by his intense competitiveness and formidable presence as a defense player on the soccer field (one well regarded for

his ability to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing team), by his lack of intimidation when challenging authority figures, and by his legendary efforts to correct injustices that occurred in the classroom, on the sports field or on the streets of the capital city, where he developed significant street smarts.

In 1967 at age 21 he traveled to the USA on a tourist visa planning to enter college with the intention of becoming a physicist, living the good life and driving a BMW. Before long he was swept up in the political currents swirling in the US at that juncture, especially as they shaped the experience of campus life. Sisai's intellectual awakening occurred and his political journey began with his exposure to Washington, DC politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As a student at Federal City College, now the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), he first curiously witnessed and then participated in heated and sophisticated leftist discussions related to social upheaval in the United States, the Viet Nam war, feminism and the emergence of black power ideology. Plans to become a physicist gave way to interest in political science and then political economy. He became a member of the Ethiopian Students Union of North America (ESUNA).

By the time he joined ESUNA he had already begun to devour and debate the writings of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, Rosa Luxembourg and Lenin. He had attended demonstrations organized by the Black Panthers. In ESUNA he stepped up to participate in organizing demonstrations at the Ethiopian embassy, protesting the brutality of what he regarded by then as Haile Selassie's "feudal regime." In ESUNA he further refined his thinking in the crucible of the unrest building up to what is called the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution.

During this period, his passion fused with his intellect to create a revolutionary spirit. Later in life, reflecting on this period in his 20s, he recounted that a debating partner – someone who knew of his physical prowess on and off the soccer field – challenged him by saying, "You are not going to win this battle with your muscle. When you develop your brain power to equal your physical skill and strategy, then you will be useful to the revolution." He recalled that he was galvanized by this prospect. He rose to the challenge by dissecting Marx's classic works and mastering the methodology Marx employed rather than, as he put it, merely learning to "throw phrases." Marxism provided an oppositional doctrine for him that clarified social justice issues, defined liberation and revolution in economic as well as socio-cultural terms.

Above all, he was shaped by his encounter with the analysis that Marx applied in *Das Kapital.* It introduced an intellectual rigor that greatly appealed to Sisai and offered a penetrating definition of the state, providing the framework that he used thereafter to understand the state and, through an understanding of the state, to think strategically about how to define revolution and revolutionary action. He appreciated the predictive power of historical materialism and the profound insights that came with dialectical thinking. His interest in the state permeated every aspect of his thinking and gave him the tools to explain political dynamics beyond Europe, where Marx had focused his own analysis, to Africa, where Sisai's immediate interest lay, and, eventually, to the globe. He cut his political teeth on daily application of his newfound analytical skills by examining and interpreting the unfolding events in the US and in the Ethiopian empire in the early 1970s.

Although Sisai eventually rejected the label "Marxist," he never abandoned Marx's methodology. Later, in 1988 in the voice of H Q Loltu, this sentiment found expression:

> I do not call myself a Marxist – in fact I usually hate to listen to people who say that they are Marxists. I am a nationalist. I do, however, see a great deal of value in the methods that Karl Marx developed ... Historical materialism ...and the dialectical method ... Both of these approaches can be learned and can be used to develop a clear strategy for changing a social and political situation. Both of these methods have been used by the under classes for social change because they make it possible to assess conditions clearly without relying on the ruling group's explanations of events. Very few so-called Marxists use, or even know how to use, these methods Marx used. This is why I hate to listen to them. (The Kindling Point no. 24:1-2).

Sisai's interest in the state was lifelong and lay at the heart of his understanding of revolution and his practice. He regarded the state as the instrument by which the dominant sector of society identifies and pursues its interests by organizing and controlling economic and social life to protect those interests. Revolution is the process by which a subjugated group shatters that dominant sector's instrument of control and replaces the state with an alternative structure of its own making. At first Sisai applied this understanding in a general sense to the worldwide struggle of the oppressed.

For quite some time (eight and one half years, according to Sisai's own account[2]), Sisai worked within ESUNA to call for the destruction of Haile Selassie's feudal state to make way for victory of the oppressed masses. How and why that was going to happen in Ethiopia was a hotly contentious issue leading to the formation of a score of revolutionary groups who contended to lead the revolution before and after the *derg* came into power – EPRP, MEISON, MALERED, Seded, Waz Ader League, and ECH'AT emerged from the cauldron of dissent that characterized Ethiopia at that time. Sisai participated in the leadership of ESUNA at the height of the social unrest leading up to and surrounding the fitful takeover of the reins of government by the committee (*derg*) eventually headed by Mengistu Haile Mariam.

It was during the period that Sisai was actively involved in ESUNA, as an interested and engaged Ethiopian, he was denied renewal of the tourist visa with which he had entered the country. Renewal was required to update his student status. He felt that he had no reason to expect trouble. Other ESUNA members in a similar situation had faced no difficulty in obtaining an automatic upgrade. To his shock, Sisai's application was denied. In the course of challenging the decision and demanding an explanation, it was revealed to Sisai that his status as an Oromo caused his application to be turned down. This realization that he was the victim of discrimination due to his Oromo nationality and that he was not regarded as equal to Abyssinian members of ESUNA, opened his eyes to the general experience of Oromo subjugation and challenged his view of the world. As Lubee Birru recounts elsewhere in this volume, he did manage to go over the heads of the bureaucrats in the

embassy to appeal successfully to the Foreign Minister of the "feudal regime," Ketema Yifrew, through family connections to reverse the action. However, he knew that this had been an opportunistic move, one not available to the bulk of the Oromo people who would have no such recourse at the hands of a repressive regime. The lesson stayed with him and took root, even though it was some time before his political thinking adjusted to the implications of this insight. Looking back later, he pinpointed this emotional moment of clarity, when he felt vulnerable and completely outraged, as the spark that awakened his Oromo consciousness and transformed his outlook, a touchstone which served to remind him that he was technically as susceptible to discrimination as any and all Oromo in the empire. He had been singled out, not because he had taken any actions on behalf of the Oromo (he had not), but simply by virtue of being Oromo. Prior to this incident, Sisai had been aware of the Oromo cause, but it had not shaped his consciousness. He had not yet comprehended it personally.

The concurrence of events in the early 1970s – Sisai's outspoken defense within ESUNA of Eritrea's colonial status, the growing number of Oromo and Somali members bringing diversity into ESUNA, increasing news about the activities of the Macha Tulama Association, plus Lubee Birru's arrival in the United States with intimate accounts of his own experiences of capture and mistreatment by Ethiopian authorities – compelled Sisai to direct his attention toward the particular case of the Oromo in Ethiopia. He joined the Oromo student organization in North America, (Tokkummaa Oromo Organization of North America, TOONA, which was quickly renamed Union of Oromo Students in North

America, UOSNA) as it was forming in mid-1974. He remained a member of ESUNA until he sent a formal letter of resignation in Amharic dated May 23, 1976 which was published in *Bakakkaa*[3] later that year. From that point on, he withdrew from Ethiopian organizations and worked exclusively with Oromo organizations.

The full force of his intellect shifted from the general condition of the "oppressed masses of Ethiopia" to focus on the situation of his own Oromo people and other peoples who had been brought into the empire by force of conquest and subsequent incorporation into an empire. He began to assess the situation of these conquered peoples differently, determining that their condition was not properly explained as 'national oppression' but, rather, as colonial domination. To throw off this condition required a different remedy. Reforming or takeover of the empire was no longer the ultimate goal nor would it serve as an effective long term strategy. In fact he defined revolution in Ethiopia as dismantling and replacement of the state structure. Anything less did not qualify. From this vantage point, he dismissed the "1974 Ethiopian revolution" as a move to reform and to sustain the colonial state, strengthening its hand against the Oromo and other conquered peoples.

As I view the trajectory of his intellectual journey, this transition to pursue Oromo liberation is the point when Sisai embraced a cause big enough to require all of his considerable abilities. He began to find his voice, to formulate and articulate his vision and to function as a revolutionary strategist. Situated as he was in Washington, DC, center of US political and corporate officialdom, he did not lose sight of those who suffered halfway around the world as a consequence of the global

system that was operating full tilt in his new front yard. He concluded that the Oromo people as a nation needed to concentrate their energies and attention on the long-term project of building up an alternative form of state structure rather than try to take over and to manage the very state apparatus that had locked the Oromo and others into servitude. Comprehending the mammoth and daunting nature of that task, he became intent on designing and implementing a practical course of action toward one objective: liberation of the Oromo. It was his calling and Sisai rose to the challenge as he saw it.

Jack Rakove in his book, *Revolutionaries: a New History of the Invention of America*, has said about Bostonian Samuel Adams, a prominent revolutionary figure of the early resistance period in America, that Adams "inhabited his ideology. His identity and his politics fused so completely that he probably did not know where one left off and the other began."[4] The same observation can be made about Sisai Ibssa. His personal life and political position became one. This fusion explains a lot of what distinguished Sisai in the experience of so many who came in contact with him. He chose to live the way he did so that he could be effective to achieve his goal. He was intense and uncompromising. His deliberate choice to drive a taxicab to pay his bills allowed him to control his own time. He turned down business opportunities, graduate fellowships, employment, marriage arrangements – all in order to free himself to be able to pursue his passion with honesty. With these choices, he experienced a sense of empowerment rather than a sense of loss.

It is difficult to convey on the page the searing intensity that Sisai conveyed in his interactions with people. He approached others, regardless of status or accom-

plishment, as if he expected of them the same level of clarity and passion about their choices that he had about his own. His interest led to probing questions about people's motivation for their actions. This certainly got people's attention and Sisai engaged them in deep intellectual conversations. People remembered his questions and his unexpected observations. His fascination with individuals was genuine, as was his frank way of relating to them. The interactions were connected with his ideology and born out of his big-picture outlook. His interest focused on how the ever-shifting configuration of global and local forces came to shape the lives of individuals, what skills they had to acquire to secure a niche in the world system, what revolutionary potential they had and what they revealed or taught him about aspects of the world at large. This interest energized him. It was as if he eagerly welcomed nearly every occasion to meet people as an opportunity to test or confirm his view of the world. He never seemed to tire of it.

Driving a cab in Washington, DC,[5] he learned a lot from riders of all walks of life. He observed and conversed with people, from those living on the streets of the Capital City to those he saw as "transnational elites" shuttling in his cab from the offices of global economic corporations to the Congress, and then to their hotels. He often engaged his clients in serious discussions about the implications of their work for the poor and oppressed. Taken aback, a good proportion of people were candid about doubts and divulged stories about egregious violations and questionable practices in corporate and official life – all shared with an anonymous cab driver.

In a very real sense, he found the richness of his life in his cause. As an activist intellectual, he was sustained

and invigorated by the work of organizing and advocacy. He read avidly and widely, often while waiting in the taxi stands at National Airport or at the Washington Hilton Hotel, seriously examining the ideas for their practical import. The books in his library, well annotated and filled with underlining, marginal notes and coffee stains, reveal that he actively engaged with the ideas. As he participated in the flow of events around him, his thinking was sharpened.

Once while presenting a paper at a conference, a member of the audience asked what he did for a living. "I sell my labor," was his response. He underscored that his choice kept him free to pursue and develop his area of deepest commitment. He was his own man. He gave freely of his talent and time on his own terms for his own purposes. For example, he volunteered to coach my son's soccer team. When the Bethesda parents thought that they should give him some payment or gift for his time, he scoffed at the notion saying that if they wanted to pay him they could not afford him. He was there on time every day, as he was for all his appointments, because he chose to be there for his own reasons. People asked if he ever took a break, in response he asked what diversion anyone could offer him that would provide pleasure equivalent to pursuing his objective. Finding a path to a liberated Oromia determined his life choices and remained his ever-present and passionate concern. He took his joy in the headway made in this arena and in few others. In this regard he was truly larger than life,

His goal was revolution in its classic sense: to help create the means for the Oromo people to throw off the repressive colonial state structure under which they suffered and replace it with a new set of institutional

arrangements that could be identified as an Oromo state. He marked this change as the essence of revolution.

Ideological Battle

Sisai contributed to Oromo Studies and the Oromo movement a compelling vision of the future of the Oromo nation. He backed it by his commitment to build that future with every personal capacity that he could bring to bear. His other contributions were shaped by that vision. He developed analytical tools to locate the Oromo nation in the global political and economic system; he worked tirelessly to develop key dimensions of organizational work among the Oromo, particularly to bring about unity; he courageously defended the Oromo against adversaries; he spoke truth to Oromo and non-Oromo whose practices he thought posed obstacles to Oromo progress.

Examining a salient example of Sisai's pursuit of this goal will have to suffice here. The other papers which comprise this volume offer further support. Sisai framed the task of exposing the nature of the Ethiopian regime as an ideological battle which he was ready to wage in increasingly wider arenas. In the late 1970s, Oromo subject matter was rarely included in academic conferences on Africa or Ethiopia. Sisai and others set out to change that. In mid 1979, Sisai and two others submitted abstracts specifically on Oromo topics when they applied to participate in a conference titled "Social Crisis in the Horn of Africa" to be held at Michigan State University, organized by a historian of Ethiopia, Harold Marcus. All three papers were approved, accompanied by acceptance letters and formal invitations to the April 1980 event.

Sisai's paper topic was a critique of the *derg* government. He asserted that despite its claims to socialism, the *derg* presided over a virtually unchanged imperial state structure. It turns out that the Ethiopian chargé d'affaires had learned that Sisai was on the program to present a paper at the conference and had objected to the organizer requesting his removal. (The United States and Ethiopia did not exchange ambassadors at that time so the chargé d'affaires was the highest ranking official of the Ethiopian government at the time.) A friend of Sisai's from the ESUNA days informed him of the action taken by the chargé d'affaires and added that the official had argued that Sisai was a mere cab driver whose participation in the conference was inappropriate and that he was unqualified to speak to scholars. Sisai's response was to welcome the information greedily. He was a competitor who knew to prepare well for the contest. He redoubled his efforts to prepare the arguments thoroughly, to work fervently to collect the necessary data and to complete the paper in good order.

Upon arriving at the conference, he discovered that indeed his name was not on the program. He asked directions to the organizer's office where he met Harold Marcus face-to-face for the first time. Pointing out his omission from the program and presenting the letter of acceptance inviting him to make a presentation at the conference, he demanded an explanation in an insistent but polite manner. Harold Marcus, to his credit, sized Sisai up on the spot and responded that it was an unfortunate "clerical error" that would be corrected immediately. He would present his paper the next morning. Sisai did not reveal at that time how much he knew about the behind-the-scenes demand that had been made by the

official. Of course Sisai had been ready to go the distance to challenge the move, but, when it was not necessary, he did not reveal his full hand.[6]

The first morning of the conference, Sisai arrived exuding an aura of confidence. He was immaculately and fashionably dressed in sport coat and tie, creating quite a stir among the Ethiopian academics who did not expect him to appear. There was a palpable tension in the air as Sisai, defiantly but with ease, presented the well-researched and well-argued paper titled "Red Star on the Emperor's Crown: Pseudo-Revolution in the Ethiopian Empire." Elsewhere in this volume Asafa Jalata recounts his reaction to reading this paper in 1983, when, as a refugee from the *derg* government, he ran across the proceedings of the 1980 conference that were published in the *Journal of Northeast African Studies* (vol. 3, no.1, 1980, 77-91). Ethiopians appeared to be shocked at the audacity of Sisai's claims that not only did the *derg's* government fail to qualify as a revolutionary force or as socialist, but it was repressive and imperial. Furthermore, he argued that the Soviet Union itself exemplified a form of state capitalism. The audience in the room was shocked by what was viewed as heresy. People had been arrested or disappeared in Ethiopia for challenging this government with far less inflammatory statements. But several usually-quiet historians and economists began to speak up to provide data that supported Sisai's version of events. I was impressed with one quiet scholar in the corner of the room who offered documentation for how the peasant associations operated as tools of repression silencing persons who opposed the *derg's* agricultural policies and described how, when *derg* party members arrived in the rural areas, the locally elected peasant

association chairpersons were removed from office or elections were invalidated and *derg* sympathizers elected to replace them. The tenor of the discussion supported Sisai's data and his position. Once the gauntlet had been thrown down by Sisai, even reclusive non-political scholars offered confirming data – data that they had not managed to put into print.

Had Sisai not risen to the occasion and asserted himself and his argument, the usual heavy-handed attempt of Ethiopian officialdom to silence the Oromo in this kind of venue would have succeeded. It was the first of many occasions in which Sisai's challenge of the status quo electrified audiences and stimulated discussion and new scholarship. Mohammed Hassen in his reminiscence of Sisai mentions Sisai's role in exciting audiences. This event serves as an example of Sisai's vision, leadership, courage, well-placed confidence, and keen analysis of the dynamics at work in a politicized setting. At the Michigan State event, he rightly judged it a microcosm of the kind of Ethiopian repression and discrimination which operated in a variety of venues in Ethiopia and beyond.

Sisai continued to expand and to deepen his analysis of the state and to prepare papers for a variety of organizational and academic conferences. He became a member of the African Studies Association and regularly attended its annual meetings to present materials which examined dimensions of the global state apparatus arrayed against the Oromo and arguing the colonial nature of the Ethiopian state.[7]

The ideas that Sisai developed throughout the 1980s were brought to bear on our joint project of research, analysis, and writing which resulted in *The Invention of*

Ethiopia: the Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa (Holcomb and Ibssa 1990). We had each independently determined that the continuing acceptance of the ideology of Greater Ethiopia profoundly affected the historiography of the region and had virtually prevented clear analysis of the condition of the Oromo and conquered regions of Ethiopia. The nature of the Ethiopian state was obscured behind the assumption that Ethiopia constituted the sole independent country in Africa that had escaped colonialism. The interests of the superpowers of Europe that colluded to create and recognize Ethiopia as a colonial outpost were unexamined; there was little or no recognition of the fact that the mechanisms and tools which enabled highland Ethiopians to control the Oromo nation were not of their own design or making and needed reassessment. The implications for how these arrangements might be undone were profound. Addressing the myth of Greater Ethiopia, Sisai confronted the prevailing ideology that had fortified the Ethiopian stranglehold over the Oromo. We wrote in our Preface to *The Invention of Ethiopia*, "Most of what is currently available offers Ethiopianist interpretations of the Ethiopian state which recount the classic features of what we call Ethiopian colonial mythology" (1990: xiv) *The Invention of Ethiopia* offered a sustained analysis of the Ethiopian state which posed a specific challenge to the dominant political history of the region. As explained in the Preface:

> ...Ethiopia has been from its formation an artificial unit, not a naturally-occurring one as so many believe, and it should be recognized as such. Its creation was the result of an alliance struck between imperial powers of Europe, who

> were seeking to manage their own conflicts in those days, and Abyssinia, that was attempting to resolve its internal crises. This alliance gave rise to the set of state institutions that constitute Ethiopia today. These institutions were the product of a European ruling class that had to send representatives to northeast Africa to serve as advisers to member of a local nationality willing to colonize the region with them...
>
> The central institutions of the state were set in motion from outside the boundaries of the empire and represent forces external to the empire in ways that need to be examined....
>
> Ethiopia is always treated as an exception to the general explanations offered for developments in the rest of colonized Africa. But it was not an exception; in fact the creation of Ethiopia was an extension of dependent colonial policy and carried in it the seeds for the future of the continent – Ethiopian became a test case for what is usually called neo-colonialism or corporate access to regions already subjugated (1990: xv-xvi)

But even in the opening pages, we admitted that the book was produced as a by- product of work which was central to both of our interests: the issue of self-determination. In order to understand the work of liberation, we had found it necessary to depict clearly the forces against which the people struggled. We wrote:

> This book is a work of interpretation. Its central ideas were developed for an introduction to

> a book we began to write on the issue of self-determination, to be titled Exploring the Bases for Self –Determination. We originally set out to examine the cultural and political content of liberation movements in the Horn of Africa. But we found that it was not possible to conduct an adequate analysis of liberation movements without a close look at what they are resisting and why (1990: xiii).

His close attention to repressive Ethiopian state structure, Sisai gave equal or greater attention to what was necessary to build a political instrument for achieving liberation from Ethiopian control. Although that proposed book on self-determination has not been forthcoming, Sisai's prevailing interest in that topic dominated his life's work. He rejected the prospect of stepping into and retooling a repressive state apparatus in an attempt to usher in national liberation. His position on this matter was unshakable, grounded firmly in his understanding that a particular state is fashioned to serve the interests of the group that shaped it. He thought that the Oromo effort could be path-breaking since he had concluded that the source of revolutionary impetus in the twentieth century was to be found in the periphery of the world capitalist system – and the Oromo were on the periphery of the periphery. Writing about another part of Africa which had been subject to the Portuguese brand of dependent colonialism, Amilcar Cabral had written a speech titled *Return to the Source*, calling for the people of Guinea Bissau to draw on the strength of their own culture to resist subjugation and build a force for liberation. The prospect coincided with Sisai's developing ideas. But, he asked, how could such a

return occur in practical terms and what was the essence of "the source," and where did it reside? By a sustained and deliberative process of reading and debate, Sisai considered the potential for dimensions of the ancient heritage of the Oromo to serve as sources for twentieth century organization, and eventually began to advocate the value of tapping Oromo traditional principles that underlay the *gadaa* system for such inspiration. In light of the specific challenges the Oromo faced in confronting a form of dependent colonialism, he believed that solutions found for the Oromo had far-reaching implications for liberation for peoples resisting similarly strong alliances of imperial and colonial powers.

The Kindling Point – Clandestine Struggle

Meanwhile events of enormous and immediate import were unfolding in the region. In the year 1984, as famine conditions gripped the empire, "The Kindling Point" was launched. It was an occasional paper, distributed hand to hand as a kind of blog before its time, which served as a running commentary on the challenges faced by Oromo desiring freedom. Sisai and I decided to write together, using the pen name H. Q. Loltu and making a pact that neither of us would reveal his identity until death took one of us. At his funeral I confirmed that it was our challenge, our frustration and our genuine delight to create Loltu. For my part, I was inspired by some literature and a powerful play which highlighted the contribution that Thomas Paine as an Englishman was able to make to the American Revolution by writing under a pen name to address central concerns. Sisai from his vantage point highlighted the success of V.I. Lenin's

periodical, *The Spark*, whose purpose was to rally the working population to revolution. Together, we created H. Q. Loltu. Hordoffa means help/assistant, Qabsisa (a combination of our names) means the igniter of the fire /light and Loltu means fighter. So "The Kindling Point" was to help in the struggle by igniting and enlightening the fighting spirit, to spark, to ignite, to bring to a point of bursting into flame – that was the intent of "The Kindling Point."

It was indeed a satisfying collaborative work. Loltu was neither Sisai nor me; rather, Loltu was a fictitious character who wrote "The Kindling Point" for 18 years. The synergy sharpened our thinking as we debated our way through those years. Sisai loved to listen to people talk about Loltu as if he were a real person. How he laughed when people wrote to offer personal advice to Loltu! It fascinated him that readers would pay attention to Loltu's opinions and arguments at times when they would not listen to Sisai himself or to me in direct conversation, even when we expressed the very same ideas in our own names. Sisai really appreciated the power of Loltu's pen. We often reflected on how much pleasure it had given to us and to the readers but how challenging to keep separate our own opinions expressed in written and oral form as part of our ongoing work. Yes, Loltu was indeed entertaining, but Sisai loved "The Kindling Point" primarily because it accomplished its purpose by making people think in new ways. It generated real debate on cultural, religious, social and political issues affecting the Oromo – and other people in that region as well.

One strong advantage of issuing "The Kindling Point" was that it provided a conversational venue which played on Sisai's strengths and gave me voice. For

example in the piece On "Drought and "Resettlement" (*The Kindling Point* #2, written in 1984) the West is being compared to a former lover of Ethiopia who is a seductive woman, then in a liaison with the Soviets, she is not ashamed to flirt with the West in order to receive gifts, but won't give herself. It is the kind of analogy that Sisai would freely use in conversation now transferred to the page:

> The West never really expected that its old sweetheart, Ethiopia, would go ahead and follow its threat to form a Workers' Party and conduct a fancy wedding ceremony with the U.S.S.R. But now that Ethiopia's marriage to the Soviets has become a reality, the West, especially the U.S. wants to expose what an ugly mistake it was for its "ex" to be married to the enemy – "Communism."
>
> ... You might ask, what is the attraction? I will tell you; it is her body, a body that has never been fully revealed to anybody. The amazing aspect of this is that even the former spouses and lovers of Ethiopia were never really allowed to have full access to her body or even to really see it.... This was even one of the reasons that they let her go in frustration to join with another. But the mystery is still there, and they still feel something when she moves her body in a seductive fashion. (Of course the most beautiful part of the body that she is showing off is Oromia; without it she is just a skeleton.) (#2, December 1984)

Sisai's most effective engagement with people and an area in which he had great impact was in one-on-one conversations where he could apply his arsenal of good arguments and analogies in assessing a specific issue and placing it in perspective. "The Kindling Point" writings offered a vehicle for demonstrating this particular approach with a wider audience.

"The Kindling Point" provided a wide palette for speaking out on personal, political, ideological, economic and organizational matters and became an effective organizing tool. Its reach ranged from personal to grand scale, offering comments on personal challenges and skewering attitudes that prevented an individual Oromo from expressing himself or herself. The debates that it generated were several. "On Religion and Liberation" (KP no.20) encourages tolerance by telling the story of a terrified young boy. He had been baptized Christian and was facing the prospect of tasting Muslim meat. He survives. This spawned a discussion of meat taboos between Christians and Muslim Oromo which for generations prevented them from sharing a meal. The piece "On Marriage as an Exit from Politics " (KP no.16) chides former Oromo activists for blaming their Amhara wives for taking them out of the struggle, when the real explanation was that they were tired and out of ideas. "On the Power of Phrases," (KP no.4) "On the Meaning of Ethiopian " (KP no.3) and "On Regionalism" (KP no.15) address intimidation tactics of members of the dominant culture and the challenge of asserting one's Oromummaa (Oromoness) in a hostile psychological environment. This debate smoldered for a long while over whether Oromo should ever identify themselves as "Ethiopian" under any circumstances. Political com-

mentary ranged from: On the Future of the Amharas" (KP no. 7) to a critique of the Eritrean position espoused in their publication Adulis titled, "On Adding Insult to Injury: Adulis on the National Question," (KP no. 8 in which Eritreans are depicted as struggling with their recovery as "rehabilitated rapists.")

"The Kindling Point" pieces created space for open debate of Oromo nationalism, assisting in the effort to deepen Oromo consciousness in which Sisai deeply believed and to discuss difficult political issues.

Organizational Work –From TOONA to ULFO

Sisai regarded organizational work as the primary activity of liberation. He became involved in many ventures, publications, forums and debates that all contributed to the same purpose – strengthening the Oromo nation-building project. He saw each connection, each member, each resolution, each publication, each successful event as contributing to the laying of a foundation for a future structure of the new state, the democratic republic of Oromia

To learn from practical experience of others, Sisai searched the history of revolutionary movements among colonized peoples, such as Viet Nam, confirming that advantage comes by building a web of communication among the subjugated population, built on a separate foundation that the colonizer does not share. Such an infrastructure delegitimizes the authority of the regime and creates a parallel institution that becomes capable of governance and equipped to replace the repressive institutions of the state. Locally based movements also have the capability to outmaneuver the regime while they are building this strength.

After he had concluded that the Oromo could never build a democracy from within the structure of the Ethiopian state and should stop flirting with the idea, he devoted his undivided attention to the issue of grounding the Oromo struggle.

It was at this point in his intellectual journey that Sisai came full circle to appreciate from within his new outlook not only the importance but the feasibility of returning to Oromo sources for inspiration. He argued that the Oromo people's heritage had been passed over, not only by himself, but by the educated Oromo as a group. The Oromo past had been dismissed and reviled by the Ethiopian establishment as they focused on One Ethiopia, and that stance had influenced Oromo to neglect and undermine Oromo traditional culture as well. His organizational work was part of his quest to find and establish what he called "ways and means" to develop the foundation for a new kind of political arrangement on the face of the globe. Strategically he believed that the Oromo people could do this, that the Oromo paradigm – the set of principles that undergird Oromo society and make it unique – is powerful enough and resilient enough to fashion a unique model of a democratic state in Africa. This idea at the core of Sisai's philosophy was relatively controversial at the time and was viewed as a departure from his leftist positions. He saw no contradictions.

He began to apply this idea of building on an Oromo paradigm to his work in the Oromo student movement starting in UOSNA and emphasized its importance with increasing urgency over the years leading up to the formation of ULFO. In the mid-1980s he proposed rotating committees within UOSNA that would be responsible

for different tasks for a year at a time, eventually rotating into the position of Executive Committee. Virtually all Oromo supported the existence of *gadaa* as a symbol of Oromo greatness and historical proof that the Oromo were capable of organizing a democratic republic. As such *gadaa* had begun to serve as a component in Oromo national identity. But regarding the idea that a modern Oromo organization could be fashioned or grounded in Oromo principles, most were skeptical non-participants who asked, "How is this to happen?" and put little effort into the response. A debate over how the Oromo movement should interpret *gadaa* floundered in organizational periodicals over what terminology to use for different portions of the *gadaa* structure, what were the historical differences in how *gadaa* functioned in different parts of Oromia, was it compatible with Christianity and Islam, were women locked out of power under the *gadaa*, etc. These were all important questions, but none were resolved nor was there enough interest or urgency to sustain a meaningful exchange at an organizational level.

Sisai continued to explore, through a number of different organizational initiatives, the prospect of reviving Oromo democracy. Lubee and Asafa in their papers also reveal that one of the points of conversation with Sisai focused on this very issue of how Oromo nationalists regard the *gadaa*. There were often three aspects of this conversation with Sisai, who raised this subject with virtually every Oromo scholar: 1) whether to try to dismiss the ancient *gadaa* as a beautiful work of antique art, but one that fell apart under the weight of normal social change, 2) whether to view the *gadaa* structure as a potentially viable institutional model and try to tinker with it to upgrade or modify its components

in the current era, or 3) whether to approach *gadaa* as the product of a set of principles which gave rise to an operational democratic system in an earlier age and thus should be considered capable of giving rise to an equally operational system in the current age.

Admittedly, in the early 1980s Sisai thought the practical answers and secrets lay in the rules and operations of the *gadaa* structure itself, somehow hidden in its intricacy. He read all he could find written about *gadaa* as well as about Oromo philosophy and governing structures. He carried out long discussions with persons who were reputed to be experts or knowledgeable about *gadaa*. He was disappointed and frustrated at the minimal amount of practical data usable for his purposes. On the other hand, he was quite impressed with ordinary Oromo who spoke with great wisdom and applied principles with competence and alacrity. He saw that Oromo principles were alive and viable in the hands of most Oromo – with the possible exception of the educated group that was putting itself forward to lead.

He eventually came to the position that the Oromo principles and knowledge that produce social institutions should be considered the source of the *gadaa*. Thus the *gadaa* should be regarded and studied as the product of a living viable knowledge system. He welcomed the work of Gemechu Megerssa on Oromo knowledge[8] and of Asmarom Legesse on Oromo democracy.[9] Sisai himself worked with others to establish an Oromo Center in Washington, DC for the purpose of encouraging Oromo cultural life. He advocated strongly until his death for the creation of an Oromo Information Center to provide a place where documents, films, stories, photos, interviews, etc. could be deposited and

exchanges could be facilitated to deepen understanding of Oromo knowledge and philosophy. He championed a model of diversity in the liberation organization by advocating for broad-based participation of all sectors or interest groups of the Oromo society in a coordinated effort. This position was shared by the members of UONA. Sisai's ready acceptance of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) program and support of collaborative work with the OLF was grounded in his acceptance of the clause in the 1976 OLF program (pp. 15-16) which called for a "people's democratic republic of Oromia" as a key objective of the OLF. The relevant portion of the programs read as follows:

> The fundamental objective of the struggle is the realization of national self-determination for the Oromo people and their liberation from oppression and exploitation in all their forms. This can only be realized through the successful consummation of the new democratic revolution by waging anti-feudal, anti- colonial, and anti-imperialist struggle, and by the establishment of the people's democratic republic of Oromia.[10]

This objective matched Sisai's conviction that in order to achieve a truly revolutionary change, it is necessary to create a separate structure through which Oromo could achieve self-expression and by which the people could relate on an equal basis with their neighbors. Once some within the OLF moved to drop that portion of the program, Sisai resisted strongly.

He set out to determine whether it was possible to frame and pursue a civil state in the current economic climate, then to begin a national project to engage a

wide spectrum of Oromo in the process of understanding what is involved in constructing Oromo institutions. He asked: "Can the Oromo organize in such a way that people from all sectors are empowered to influence the formation of a state based on Oromo principles, one that is envisioned, planned, and administered by a defined collective?" Sisai thought that this effort could be carried out in the Diaspora, where people are free to gather and participate, but as much as possible should also be connected to developments in Oromia, with the idea that the model could be refined and corrected whenever a political opening occurred in the region which would allow open communication to take place among Oromo abroad and Oromo in Oromia and any who accepted the Oromo as equal partners. Such an opening had occurred in his lifetime in 1974. He thought that not only was it possible to plan for such an eventuality, it was necessary to do so. He felt a sense of urgency about getting started. He believed that groups with different experiences and diverse interests should be encouraged to organize themselves and a central umbrella organization should then recognize and loosely coordinate the various associations, encouraging each to voice its needs and protect its interests under a common law. He foresaw that Oromo and non-Oromo would participate in this venture.

It was this model for encouraging diverse sectors of the Oromo population to organize that gave birth to the Oromo Studies Association. The purpose of the Committee to Organize Oromo Studies set up in 1986 – the event OSA celebrates on its 25th anniversary – was to establish a basis for Oromo scholars and professionals to come together and carve out their common interests, for Oromo and non-Oromo to contribute to the well-

being of the nation and the region and to bring data that would prove to be valuable in understanding the past and present of the Oromo experience. The prospect was that OSA would find its own way to contribute and to participate in the Oromo nation-building project.

Sisai's growing dissent from the OLF leadership's interpretation of the OLF program started in the late 1980s when the OLF began to downplay the need for a separate democratic republic. This shift occurred most visibly in the period leading to the formation of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE). Then during the year 1991-1992, the political opening that Sisai had foreseen occurred. But when the OLF participated in the Transitional Government of Ethiopia, it appeared to reinterpret the OLF program to eliminate any reference to establishing Oromo institutions. Sisai's dissatisfaction grew. He disagreed with the OLF methods of organization based precisely in this point. He argued that the population needs to organize around realities on the ground and must be encouraged to participate, adapt and share power. This approach requires proliferating as many associations as there are sectors in Oromo society in order to encourage a collective state-building program. On this point he differed with those in the OLF, who adhered to a tighter more centralized model of organization.

When the OLF entered the TGE, Sisai advocated that at least they should seize the opportunity to enter Oromia to mobilize as much of the population as possible on the basis of a shared nationalism with the hope of organizing around a shared ideology. Sisai experienced extreme frustration when he perceived that the persons he was working with to achieve liberation were settling

for less than what he thought was possible to gain upon entering the country. The leaders of OLF, however, did not frame the issues in the same terms as Sisai and thus they often worked at cross purposes. Much of his effort to clarify the issues to the Oromo population was accomplished through "The Kindling Point" writings (nine papers were distributed between June 1991 and July 1992).

Sisai did watch carefully the response in Oromia of the Oromo population to the OLF's legitimate presence in the country during the year that the OLF participated in the coalition government. He interpreted the enthusiastic reception of the Oromo people to the OLF representatives and the OLF flag as a nationalistic response to the valued cultural symbol of the *odaa* tree depicted on the flag. Since the *odaa* tree is where Oromo traditionally gathered for deliberation, Sisai argued that the people's delight with the flag was in large part a response to the *odaa* tree symbol and served as confirmation of Sisai's idea that the time was ripe for mobilization and for beginning the preparation for building a democratic society.

His difference with OLF was partially over how to build a nation of participants rather than a nation of followers and how to connect and empower the people across the country. In January 1993, after the OLF left the country, frustration with the actions of certain OLF leaders was beginning to escalate. Loltu was generous in his commentary on this point focusing on the advantage that the Oromo could take from the year of experience in the coalition. The piece did take the opportunity to remind Oromo readers that, as he saw it, the nation-building task was just beginning:

> We had been told that as a nation we were small, divided and poor, but now we can see that we are big, united and well-endowed. We had been told that we were ugly, but we see that we have unusual natural beauty as a nation. We had been told that we were incomplete, or handicapped, but we see that no single part is missing or deformed. We had been told that we were a bit too slow and dull-witted to take care of ourselves, and that our limited perception would prevent us from acting appropriately, but we have seen in the short one year that our observations and assessments about the causes of our problems are sharp, precise and far superior to those of any outside observer. However, we can see for ourselves that the body of ours is not yet well-coordinated, having been caged and suffocated for decades. We do not yet walk with grace, power and self-assurance, having had no exercise recently. We have work to do.
>
> We have seen what we have to work with, and it is magnificent, but it is unrefined. At the same time that we have seen our body, we have seen that our job of preparing ourselves for the future is just beginning, not ending. (p. 1)

Following the withdrawal of the OLF from the TGE, Sisai anticipated that the OLF would shift to pursue a longer-term strategy for preparing the nation for liberation. He emphasized that he thought it was possible to learn from the efforts of that year and to build productively on that knowledge. This view was given voice in

Kindling Point six months after the OLF had left the governing coalition in January 1993:

> ...Yes, we have made some mistakes. We can learn from them. Some of our men went with torches down an unknown path to explore whether that avenue (negotiation) could get us to our destination. They took on some personal risk to go that way. As a result of their efforts we have all learned that that path was a dead end, a road leading to nowhere. Their attempt makes us able to turn our full attention toward a better avenue. Our resolve can be strengthened; none of us has to wish or wonder whether taking that other road might have been productive. We now know for certain that it is closed. Negotiation with the Eritreans and the Tigray is a blind alley. We are waiting for those Oromo scouts who explored it to come back and join hands with the other who sacrificed to cut another path. Instead of taking on a **gofta** (overlord) mentality, they should be humble and clear about the role they played and why it was so limited (KP no. 37 p.4)

These observations were written 13 years before Sisai died. To his disappointment, the OLF leaders, who were depicted as "Oromo scouts," did not immediately join hands with other Oromo organizations, but pursued a path of continuing efforts at negotiations with Ethiopia and Ethiopian organizations. During the intervening 13 years, Sisai turned his energies on the need for Oromo to come together to act in unity and to form some kind of unity structure. In 1994 he and the UONA group renounced their status as a 'mass organization' of the

OLF, a position they had adopted as a group nine years earlier, and reasserted the independence of UONA. Soon thereafter Sisai lobbied for the creation of a unity council composed of all independent Oromo organizations to be known as Gumii Bilisummaa (liberation council). This was officially launched in 1998, but without the participation of OLF. When that effort failed, he determined that it was largely due to OLF's absence. He, with colleagues, agreed to correct the mistake, and started over with a new unity effort that included the OLF. Sisai applied all personal skills to the task of securing OLF's participation. ULFO was the result, created in September 2000. Abarra's paper in this volume provides the detail about this period from his vantage point as a member of UONA and Gumii Bilisummaa Oromia (GBO or Oromia Liberation Council). Even the structure of ULFO, however, was limited to political institutions and did not include a diverse range of civic associations as part of the launch. When it became difficult even to call a meeting of these leaders, Sisai repeatedly speculated that his older generation was not likely capable of leading the people to liberation. Sisai chose to focus on the younger generation. He gave it his best effort. On April 9-10, 2005, in advance of the ULFO Delegates Assembly arranged, finally, to ratify the ULFO constitution called for in 2000, Sisai presided over a public meeting titled *"Assessing the Past, Constructing the Future."* This event provides a template for how Sisai envisioned the Oromo liberation process unfolding. The program called elders, youth, women, artists, scholars, religious leaders, businesspeople, and members of civic groups to discuss the construction of a future Oromiyaa state.[11]

Despite Sisai's efforts to get things started along the lines he espoused, ULFO did not succeed in creating Oromo unity or even effective communication. Participating groups differed immediately over the Ethiopian elections of May 2005 and splintered after Sisai's death. At this writing ULFO has shrunk to a very small membership. I suggest that Sisai's failed efforts to create unity should be treated in the same way that he treated the OLF's unsuccessful attempts to negotiate a way to Oromo liberation. Just as the OLF tried and failed in their attempt at negotiation with Ethiopians, Sisai himself went with others carrying a torch down a little-trodden path to explore whether a unity movement formed in the diaspora among independent political groups could carry the Oromo to the destination of liberation. He tried and he failed. Thanks to his efforts and to the transparency of the project, it has become clear that this particular path will not lead to liberation either. His own and others' relentless attempts reveal that it is necessary to turn attention toward a different avenue with better prospects. Learning from one's mistakes, personal or collective, was central to Sisai's philosophy, a principle repeated time and again. His position came through the words of Loltu:

> When individuals try to do something for the common good, even when they fail it benefits the struggle because those who follow will learn not to repeat the same error again. Their process ultimately makes the movement more mature and efficient. Failures become setbacks only when those responsible for the errors do not clearly assess their actions in order to assure future success. When individuals responsible

> for a failed tactic do not recognize the failure or become personally committed to a tactic rather than to a cause and refuse to change an unsuccessful approach, the refusal can introduce a real setback. (KP no. 37)

He argued that to be stripped of one's illusions forces a person or an organization to face what he always called the "objective reality" and to be able to move more effectively toward the goal with that hard-won knowledge. After the OLF participated in the July Conference of 1991 that launched the TGE, Loltu wrote, "We are closer to state power in Oromia than we were before the July conference for the simple reason that many of the illusions that kept us from dealing with the realities have been stripped away, and we are ready to build on solid ground" (KP no. 37). He went on to say,

> The struggle for the liberation of Oromia is a process of fashioning means to manage our own affairs. Everything that we do should contribute somehow to state-building. It is no secret that our collective efforts, though they have been significant have not yet produced all the necessary elements to organize the state of Oromia (KP no. 37).

Summary

Sisai thought that Oromo liberation consisted of preparing a new institutional apparatus which will emerge as a collective product of creative political thinking and sustained effort. For him this was not a platitude, it was a challenge to a national undertaking. He applied himself as much as possible to this goal. As far

as he was concerned, the potential contribution of the Oromo people on the world scene was enormous – he was confident that working together, the Oromo could hone and deliver a new model of democracy, shape a diplomatic approach that would garner allies, transform the resources of one of the most fertile areas of eastern Africa into a breadbasket for the region, serve as a good neighbor to former adversaries and provide a center of peace in a former battle zone. This was not just his vision; it was his conviction and his life's work.

His final effort floundered. Was that the end of the road? Indeed it is not. It was only Sisai's last effort because he did not live to try again. But on his last day, he was talking and writing about the importance of focusing on youth and setting up an Oromo Information Center, asking, "How can people develop if they have no knowledge and no information?" His argument was that the Oromo have no other real choice but to take this route if they want to build a democracy that will effectively distribute power among the Oromo people and prevent the emergence of another dictatorship formed by whoever grabs the reins of power in Ethiopia (regardless of their ethnicity). He argued that to stop short of a grassroots-based democracy is to accept the rise of a new set of dictators who will have all the power in their hands via the state institutions of Ethiopia. But he also knew that it was going to take a great deal of sustained work on the part of a vast number of people working together with a shared objective on many dimensions of the task under extremely repressive circumstances.

There is no reason to doubt that Sisai would still be working on this issue of building Oromo democratic capacity had he survived. In fact he would have

been intrigued by the events of what is called the "Arab Spring" of 2011. The same questions he raised about the Oromo condition would have been raised about that development as well: is the movement grounded in an infrastructure capable of distributing power within the society, protecting the people and preventing the re-emergence of tyrants with new technologies? Unfortunately, he was gone too soon to witness that uprising (which he anticipated) or to explore the technologies of social networking himself. But he never lost hope in the vision of the Oromo people building a peaceful and prosperous Oromia and living side by side with their former Abyssinian overlords.

It is my opinion that Sisai's most notable contribution is the overall vision for an Oromo nation-building project and his undaunted pursuit of the strategy of building a unified Oromo organization as the only vehicle capable of undertaking that project. In fact, the direction, pattern, and transparency of his work keep open the possibility for others to engage with this vision. Those who respect his work – study his ideas, examine his strategic efforts, analyze and avoid the pitfalls he encountered and find inspiration in his conviction that the Oromo have within their culture the capacity to reshape social, political and economic life in the Horn of Africa – those are the ones who do him great honor.

Sisai Ibssa was a superb colleague, a generous friend, an original thinker far ahead of his time and, above all, a visionary with a clarity and a stubborn confidence in the Oromo people that can continue to inspire them to the greatness of which he thought them capable.

Notes

1. A DVD of Sisai's traditional Oromo funeral at Callithea Horse Farm in Potomac, MD in the morning and the complete afternoon eulogy service including 27 speakers held on August 27, 2005 in the Washington, DC area can be obtained at the Oromo Center, 811 Upshur St. NW, Washington, DC 20011.
2. Sisai Ibsa, Letter of Resignation from ESUNA, dated May 23, 1976 published in *Bakakkaa*, Publication of the Union of Oromo Students in North America.
3. ***Bakakkaa*** was the newsletter of the Union of Oromo Students in North America, which began publication in 1975
4. Jack Rakove, *Revolutionaries: a New History of the Invention of America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010: 41.
5. Obituary, *Washington Post*, "Sisai Ibssa, Advocate of the Oromo People in Africa, Dies at 60"
6. Years later Sisai shared with Marcus how much he had known in advance about the request of the chargé d'affaires and Marcus confirmed the story. By that time the chargé d'affaires had defected from the derg government and was reputedly living in comfort in California while Sisai continued to champion the Oromo perspective in wider venues and with ever deeper analysis based upon focused involvement in building a movement. The two men, Sisai and Marcus, who maintained a friendly rivalry, occasionally met at African Studies Association conferences and shared reminiscences over beers in a hotel restaurant. Their contributions far outlived the regime. Marcus died suddenly two years before Sisai's final illness.
7. See, for example, his paper, "Ideological Foundations of Current US Foreign Policy," first presented to the African Studies Association, *JOS Volume 5*: 1-34.

8. Gemetchu Megerssa, "Knowledge, Identity and the Colonizing Structure: the Case of the Oromo in East and Northeast Africa." PhD dissertation submitted the University of London, SOAS, 1993.
9. Asmarom Legesse, *Oromo Democracy* Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press 1987, 2000.
10. Article 5, Section A. Oromo Liberation Front, *Bakkalcha Oromo*, Program, Prepared in Finfine, Oromia, October, 1974, amended June 1976, pp 15-16.
11. The full program of the public meeting is reproduced in *Daandii Bilisummaa* Vol II, No 3: 3-4.

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Sisai Ibssa: An Oromo Man

Lubee Birru

Sisai Ibssa was my maternal uncle, *e'echuma*, but he was more than that to me. He was my playmate in childhood, my roommate in the city, my comrade at home and abroad, my colleague and my special friend from youth through every stage of life to the onset of our graying years. Only his early death has prevented us from enjoying old age together.

Given the page limitation of a journal article, it is difficult for me to share what I can about the life of this great man without bypassing several important aspects of his life. It would be much easier to write an entire book about him than to condense all important hap-

Journal of Oromo Studies, Vol. 18, No. 1 (July 2011), pp. 43-80.

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penings into a few pages. Therefore, knowing that a lot of important events are not included because of space restrictions, I will limit myself to some incidents that I think instructive for this journal.

I believe I know Sisai better than anyone else, because not only was he my mother's brother, a very significant relationship to start with, we were raised together in the same house. I lived with him in Bachoo, central Oromia, then in Finfinne, and finally in the United States—in other words, all of my life until death separated us. My account is based on eyewitness accounts of Sisai's experience during the part of his life that I shared with him in Bacho Kaldhachaa, in Finfinne, and in the United States.

I remember that one time when I was a child, I was sent to my father's area, only an hour and half distance away on foot, to live for a few months. It was the only time I was separated from Sisai while I was in Bacho. During these short months, I missed my grandparents' treatment and their home, crowded with children (actually many of them were my uncles and aunts) to play with. But above all, I missed Sisai. I was happy to be taken back by my grandmother and raised there as one of their first grandsons, where there were many children to play with both in the house and in the neighborhood. But Sisai was my special friend. He had a special place in my life and in my heart from the day I came to know him when he was three years and and I was five. We remained friends to his last day on earth.

Sisai was born in July 23, 1945, in Bachoo Kaldhacha, to his mother Warqee Odaa, and his father Ibssa Tajii. Among fourteen children of Warqee and Ibssa, Sisai was the youngest. His father died when he was three years old so his mother raised him. Since he was the last child of

twelve living siblings, he was loved by all his relatives and together his family raised him properly. Like any Oromo child, he was instructed in Oromo culture, but in his particular case, he had his mother, twelve brothers and sisters and also children like me from his older siblings, in addition to children who were simply age mates in his neighborhood to teach him. He was born into a family that was culturally very rich and he grew up observing and participating in a multitude of cultural events and ritual activities. Some activities had age requirements and some a social position. Sisai's participation was mostly with his age mates, or *hiriyaa*. Oromo song, dance, horseback riding, swimming, *darabaa* (grazing of livestock by turns), adventure, etc. are some activities that one observes and then learns through practice. Sisai never hesitated to be part of any activity but due to his young age, he was not allowed to practice some dangerous activities without the approval of his family and even then an adult supervisor was required to be with him.

Sisai's Early Family Life

I wonder when I hear many well-educated people with good income complain about the difficulty of raising just two children in the United States. Among the Oromo, it is normal to have an average of eight children. Only a very poor Oromo family who had difficulty raising all their children would turn to others for help, knowing that there are many Oromo families who would gladly take in and raise the children of others. In addition to the general community norms about the discipline of children, each family, especially familes with many children, had their own rules and expectations that all children living under the same roof remember and know

that they must abide by. Sisai's family instituted their own strict family rules—necessary to raise the surviving twelve children together with several grandchildren. They expected us to adhere to those clear guidelines or face the consequences. Sisai's mother, my grandmother, was known to be a very strict disciplinarian. If any one broke any of her rules there was no mercy and no getting away without punishment. One such rule was no swimming in the Hawwaas (Awash) River without an adult supervisor. Others were: no climbing trees without permission, no jumping over the narrow river from one edge to another, no stealing, lying, no intentionally covering up mistakes, no insulting anyone older than us, no eating from the houses of others without parents' knowledge and permission, etc. To join a huge crowd of children for *dhichissa* (dancing) or *gugssi fardaa* (horse riding), etc. always required expressed permission from the family and even then could only be done when supervised by an adult male or female.

At the same time that Sisai, along with other children in the area, was learning the traditional Oromo way of life. In addition, he was daily being taught a kind of Abyssinian traditional education from a priest. A long time before Sisai was born his father hired this priest for the purpose of teaching his older children and other children in the neighboring villages. According to Abyssinian Orthodox Christianity, followers of this religion had an obligation to avoid dairy products every Wednesday and Friday of their lives. In addition to these restrictions they had to fast two months continuously, avoiding all meat and dairy products. On the last three days of their two months' fast, they avoid eating and drinking all types of food or drink, even water. Our teacher

was a typical Abyssinian extremist who always tried to impose his church rules on our family and neighbors. But like many Abyssinian priests at the time, he lacked the knowledge to educate us about his religion. Like the majority of Abyssinian priests at that time he could read, but he could not write. He taught us Ge'ez, an ancient language that he himself did not understand. He did not know Afaan Oromo and the people he lived among did not speak his native Amharic language. Thus he was handicapped in teaching his religion to children.

One day during the period of the longest fasting period, our hungry priest was tired and fell asleep under the tree where all of us students sat around him. We began teaching ourselves by making near song-like noises. He was completely asleep with his mouth wide open. We looked at him and at each other sometimes laughing at him, but only when we were sure he was in a deep sleep and would not awaken. This priest was fond of Sisai, liking him more than any of the other students. He never punished him, though he whipped us at least once a day with or without a reason. Watching our teacher and seeing his mouth open towards the sky, Sisai, young as he was, knew that this priest had not eaten for a day and a half. Sisai presumed that the priest had his mouth open because he needed some food and decided to help in his capacity, because they were best friends. He went home to get some cheese for his teacher. He returned with a *farsso* (ale) drink and some cheese for him. He made himself comfortable by sitting close to our teacher's chest. Our teacher's open mouth was ready to accept any thing placed in it. For few minutes Sisai fed him cheese and the sleepy priest really appeared to enjoy the meal. As observers we were unable to hold

our laughter, and when everyone began laughing at the drama unfolding before them, the loud laughter woke up the priest. When the aroused priest saw Sisai so close to his mouth with another handful of cheese ready to put more into his mouth, he saw that his own mouth, beard and part of his clothes were covered with a great deal of cheese. The priest realized what was happening to him and caught Sisai red-handed with cheese poised to go into his mouth. We onlookers were happy because the priest could not accuse any other of his students except his own teacher's pet.

The priest tried to hide his anger from the students because he liked Sisai, and did not want to shame him for whatever improper act Sisai was guilty of doing to him. Never in the past had the teacher punished Sisai regardless of whatever wrong he did. Besides that, the priest knew that Sisai, as the last son of Ibssa and Warqee, was liked by everybody in the house and in the neighborhood. The priest was not interested in disappointing anyone by punishing Sisai, who was not more than five years old. Instead, he politely asked Sisai why he did this to him while he was in a deep sleep. Sisai replied, "I know that you have not eaten yesterday or today, I do not want you to die of hunger. This is the only way I can help you." Then the teacher asked him if we (older students) encouraged him to do, but Sisai said "I did it by myself, I know people open their mouths when they are hungry, and you opened your mouth wide, so I fed you. Nobody encouraged me. Are you telling me I did the wrong thing by feeding you?" To avoid disappointing little Sisai, the teacher changed the subject.

I remember the time when this Abyssinian teacher left us for a full year in order to advance his education.

Our time was our own, with the exception of helping our family members in the fields. I joined in league with Sisai's older twin brothers and we three yielded to the temption of breaking the family rules. Among the many family rules, three in particular were very difficult for young children. Those three were climbing trees, jumping from trees, and trying to deny or cover up what we had been up to. Many times we three left Sisai behind in the family compound to go a little further without supervision, in order to jump across the narrow river, climb the trees, and eventually jump from the trees. Every day we older kids broke those rules, and every night Sisai would report what we did to his mother. We ended up being punished at an average of four times a week. We tried our best to prevent Sisai from going around with us, but whenever we successfully hid ourselves from him, he would return home frustrated to tell to his mother or my mother that he could not find us. As we returned from our short trip, we faced punishment for leaving Sisai alone, or for breaking some particular family rule. However, the next morning we would go out and do the same thing. Eventually we found it difficult to manage unless we negotiated with Sisai, who was at least three years younger.

As Sisai grew up it was increasingly difficult to hide from him, because he could go everywhere we could go; if we climbed a tree, he climbed with us or, if he could not climb it, he could sit under the same tree without being discouraged. If we jumped across the stream, he would try jumping too, though sometimes he did fall into the middle of the stream. Finally, Sisai's twin brothers and I discussed a plan to resolve our dilemma. We invited him to be a part of the older boys group. We even gave him

a fake title "Ashkari." We had heard the words "*Ashkari Nugusaa*" (the king's servant) from our people, which referred to the Abyssinian police who were once sent to our area looking for rebels. As children we observed that these people had special uniforms, carried guns, spoke a different language, and had the ability to harass any adult in the district. People feared them. Since these men were feared, I proposed "*Ashkari*" as an appropriate name to be given to Sisai. The others agreed and Sisai accepted the title. (For the rest of his life, I playfully called Sisai "Ashkari," harking back to these times when we were both very young children.) Once Sisai became part of us he never told to anybody what rules we broke together while out on our adventures. It was relief for three of us older boys to be free from the regular punishment we had received up to that point. It was relief for Sisai to be included into the group and even to become our leader. He had one advantage over us, partly because he was younger and partly because he belonged to the generation before us. If he was ever caught breaking the rules, he was not punished. Instead they let him go only with a light warning. Sisai continued to act as our leader until his twin brothers moved to Finfinne for a modern education.

Sisai and I remained very close to each other after the departure of our playmates, in fact, we were closer than before. Whenever we got a chance, we tested all the limits together. We made up our own games. For example, we were on good terms with children of our neighbors and so we joined together with them to attack passing children from neighborhoods at a further distance. We would organize a group of provocateurs who intentionally created unnecessary problems between us and children from the other groups. Since our house was

located near the Hawwaas River, many children with hundreds of livestock passed through our land every day. It was a highway where no permission was needed to pass. But many times we refused to let them pass through our land unless they begged us politely or acknowledged that we were great. Once we obtained recognition from these children of our own age we let them pass through our property.

Sisai's Experience of the Gadaa System

Looking back on his life, it becomes clear that Sisai's early exposure to the gadaa system shaped him as an Oromo man in his adult life. It instilled in him a strong sense of justice which never left him; it made him appreciate all people as of equal value regardless of status and it gave him an unshakeable conviction that people acting together can find peace, govern their own affairs and live well with dignity and mutual respect. He never wavered from these values.

Like all Oromo children in our area Sisai was born to a family who practiced and had deep knowledge about the Gadaa system. Even family rules were intimately connected with the Gadaa system. Since his family was rich in gadaa knowledge, he learned by listening, seeing and practicing it. Sisai at age five had learned and could remember each gadaa class and *miseenssa* plus each gadaa grade. He knew to which class and grade he belonged. As he grew up, in addition to his observations, he learned about gadaa by hearing from Oromo elders and receiving instruction from all of the adults around him, both male and female. Of course as *Da'imee* of no gadaa grade but of the *Robalee* party, elders of the ages 80-88 from the

Ragaa grade are responsible to raise the children from infancy to age eight years. Sisai was successful in obtaining basic education and learning proper practice from these assigned elders and from others. He was promoted along with his peers to *Ittimakoo* grade of the *Robalee* class. The *gadaamojji* elders of the age 72-80 took over the education of the *Robale* party's *Ittimakoo* grade (children between eight and sixteen years old). Sisai took part in this *Ittimakoo* class education program and practiced it until his traditional education was interrupted when the family moved him to Finfinne to attend modern school. Even then, in the *Ittimakoo* grade, he maintained his chance to learn further from the elders and adults, and his chance to practice what he learned about the traditional gadaa culture during vacations in the rural area and sometimes on special occasions when he went back to the countryside for a weekend. According to the gadaa system, members of *Ittimakoo* class always get their oral instruction from gadaamojji elders and practice what they have learned under the direction of *Folle* or military grade, for another eight years.

We cannot separate Oromo social practice, culture, politics, economics, military activities or religion from the gadaa system. Gadaa classes create five stages in which the Oromo receive a systematic education by participating in each grade for eight years—from the lowest grade, known as *Ittimako* through *Dabballee*, *Foolle* and *Qondaala* to the highest, *Lubaa*, or the ruling grade. In reality, one could not separate his/her daily life from the gadaa system in the area where Sisai and I were born and raised. Daily activities reflect the gadaa system, and as Oromo every aspect of our social life was conducted according to the gadaa system. People directly or indi-

rectly practiced gadaa culture every single day of their lives. Under the gadaa system children must obey their family members, especially elders and must assist their family in the kinds of work that were assigned to their age. As children, under the Gadaa governing system, we also learned by doing. Sisai, for one, practiced the tending of several calves, working on the farm, preparing and fencing enclosures for the livestock, and tending herds of hundreds (as *daraba*) far away from his home.

I remember one time when I was about 14 years old school in Finffinee was closed and we went to Bachoo to spend the rainy season vacation with our family. We knew that it was our family's regular routine every winter to send our cattle to a place where they had already purchased enough grazing grasses to feed approximately one hundred livestock for at least for three months. Unfortunately the employee who tended our livestock became sick, and could not do the job. It was very difficult in the winter season to hire a new person. Even though we had become semi-urban boys, we decided not to ignore our parent's problem. Sisai and I discussed the problem and agreed together to take the cattle wherever our family had bought the grazing area grasses. We declared to them that we were available to take the cattle for the family. We promised them we could do everything that they expected from the other worker. For us, it was partly an adventure and partly an education. For our parents it was a relief; they were very happy about our willingness to help them.

Most *darabddus* (boys who take turns grazing cattle) have reached *Dabballe* grade in the social/cultural age system. Instructing *darabddu* in self-reliance is required before everything. Accordingly, Sisai and I were instructed to memorize the names of all the cattle, to do

milking, to separate the butter from the milk and put the butter into a clean container, store it in a secure place, and to make cheese. We were also instructed in how to make a small hut for us to stay in and how to prevent wild beasts from hurting us or killing our animals (regardless of how dangerous they were), how wisely to take care of fire, how to protect our animals from daytime or night-time thieves, how to associate with other children, etc. These instructions are also what the *Dabbale* learn from their elders. We were equipped with everything that our instructors thought was necessary for *darabduu* to know. During our instruction we carefully listened to these interesting elders in our village. First, I was sent to a place called Boxolle located about fifteen kilometers from our home. On the fifteenth day, Sisai came to relive me for fifteen days, and it was arranged like this for the three-month program. Sisai and I each found ourselves among teenaged strangers who had also gone there from different villages as *darabduu* to tend the family cattle. They had already built more than sixty huts to be used by individuals who were there as *darabdduu*. The children carried their village custom, village culture, and knowledge to the *darabddu* village. *Darabddu* thus learned from one another many things that were different from that which they had been familiar with when they were at home with their own families.

Sisai and I always said that *daraba* was an intense Oromo education similar to on-the-job training. It was during *daraba* when children began hunting big wild beasts, catching *sololiyaa* and *goggorri*, horse riding (*gugssi*) every day, learning the discipline, skill and responsibility of taking care of the mother cow when it had a calf, tending the calf, making the butter, taking

herds to the grazing field and standing by them, protecting livestock from wild beasts both day and night, protecting the cattle from local thieves day and night, taking the cattle to the water everyday at a regular time, etc. *Daraba* was a system where individual youth were given a chance to learn responsibility with no relatives or adults supervising them. *Darabddu* learn to depend upon themselves and to trust their fellow *darabdu*. It is a period and a place when teenagers act like elders, practicing what they already know and what they recently learned from other *darabduus*. When *darabddu* quarreled they immediately created a committee that investigated the cause for quarrel. After the research was completed these teenagers explained their findings to the gathering. A few people would speak while others listened and some still watched the livestock. They resolved the problem within the group and between individuals in approximately one or two days, in fact more quickly than their elders. Sisai was popular in investigating problems and in bringing peace among *darabdduus*. Sisai served his family as *darabdu* for fifty days while I served another fifty days. It was an intense tutorial which neither of us ever forgot. It also influenced us in profound ways, giving us a deep and experiential appreciation of the way cultural forms trained the young people, providing them with confidence and skills.

One experience, that had a lifelong impact on both Sisai and I and probably served to prepare us for such negotiations among peers, was our exposure at a young age to adult deliberation and problem solving at the village level. In was common in our area for a person who was asked to examine and advise on problems within their villages, or for an elder who was asked to travel a

few hours distance to visit or counsel friends or relatives, to purposely arrange to be accompanied by young boys. It was a learning experience for the boys. When a local meeting was held under the shade tree to discuss and present alternative solutions to common problems, the head of each family who planned to participate in any of these activities always took one of their boys with them to give him a chance to observe, listen and finally report to those who missed the chance of participating for any reason. These common problems could be quarrels between individuals, groups, or villages, or figuring out how to respond to manmade or natural disasters.

Sisai often accompanied his mother—a respected, outspoken, and popular mediator—during her local visits to serve as an arbitrator. He traveled with her to different parts of the Soddo and Bacho areas to visit relatives and friends. When he returned, we expected him to give us a full report about what he heard and what he observed from the interactions and the decisions of the elders. This custom remained as a part of gadaa activities in every household during the growing up years of young boys. Accompanying adults, boys learn how adults respectfully listen to each other, and how they found the truth through accumulating testimony and hard evidence before reaching conclusions or making jugdements, etc. Sisai as a boy participated in most of these activities while traveling with his relatively elderly mother. Later on he admired how the gadaa system organized such kinds of education through enabling and requiring young people to observe, listen and faithfully reproduce the information in a report. Oromos in our area carried out such deliberative activities at local meetings—usually sitting under the shade of a tree with rep-

resentative of the village—called to appropriate actions to take on problematic matters that affected them in common. For families it was another form of educating their children, a time-honored form which functions within the gadaa system and continues to function uninterruptered until today. Since Sisai always went with his mother to listen to the elders deliberate and make decisions for the good of the whole he was, by virtue of that exposure, the product of this inheirited culture of education from the gadaa system. His mother also encouraged me to travel with her to observe, listen and report. This firsthand experience set the stage for Sisai never to be awed by authority as something mysterious but rather as something accessible to him. He and I also gained a profound respect for the rule of law because we both saw how the law was meticulously applied.

Sisai's Urban Education

The first time Sisai was separated from his family, and particularly from his mother, was to attend boarding school in Finfinne. While Sisai and I were both sent to Finfinne for Western-style education we stayed in different places and went to different schools. Our chance to meet each other was on weekends. He went for elementary school to the Inxooxo Swedish Mission Boarding School while I was sent to Beyene Maried Elementary School. In Finfinne Sisai missed a lot of things, such as swimming in the Hawwaas River, riding horses, and mules, drinking hot *Ayeetu* (sweet milk) every morning, *marqaa* (porridge), *qincee* (cracked wheat) and *farsso* (local ale) , *qamadi* (wheat) etc. We arranged to meet each other every Saturday and Sunday at one of the famous pastry shops located in the Piazza neighbor-

hood. After we drank tea and ate cake, we began touring around the Piazza window-shopping. Then, regularly, on the weekend afternoons we went to the Cinema. After the show was over we visited one or two relatives who lived in Finfinne. We spent the rest of the weekends with relatives eating *buddeena* and drinking *farsso* or tea, playing with our relatives' children until the sun had set. Every Saturday Sisai would spend the night at the house of his older brother. On Sunday morning I would pick him up from my uncle's (his brother's) house to visit the remaining relatives according to a predictable Sunday program. Sometimes we would go to the Stadium or a local field to watch soccer. When the sun had set on the second day, we would discuss our plans for the next weekend and finally separate, he taking a bus back to his boarding school and I walking to my place.

By nature Sisai did not like provocation. His sense of justice was very clear and strong. If treated kindly and with respect, he was a true friend to every one, regardless of their age and gender. He remained a trusted friend unless he discovered some unnecessary or underhanded act, insult, conspiracy, deceit or provocation perpetrated against him or another undeserving person. He was always ready, with a group behind him or alone, to defend his honor and rights, or the right of any victim. He was not afraid to fight. He would fight other students, sometimes even his own friends, to protect those who were afraid to defend themselves. Sisai became a hero, well-known for defending his rights and the rights of others, whether confronting teachers or even school administers. If he found that he was treated improperly, he was not a bit shy about standing up to the offender. Because of this tendency, he had only a few friends at the

Swedish Mission Evangelical Elementary School. The schools officials complained about Sisai's behavior to his eldest brother, a well respected businessman in town, Mr. Gabra Sillasse Odaa. Odaa understood Sisai very well. He knew that Sisai never fought anybody without a good and defensible reason. But the school officials, all the way up to the Director, were intolerant of Sisai, blaming him for creating problems. It is often the case that school children fight each other yet soon became friends when elders impartially intervene to bring peace between individuals or groups. But in Sisai's experience at the Swedish Mission School, the administrators took sides and avoided listening to Sisai's explanations for how he came to defend victims in a stand-off. Instead, the school officials defined him as a wild individual who rejected Western school discipline. His older brothers conferred and determined that Sisai was not entirely in the wrong and that he was not being given a fair hearing. Under such circumstances he could not pursue his education effectively. Therefore, his brothers decided to send him to another school.

Sisai was then sent to the Aqaaqii Seventh Day Adventist Boarding Elementary School, some twenty kilometers away from Finfinne. At the Aqaaqi School he made several friends among both students and teachers. By comparison with his experience at Inxooxo Sweden Mission School, where he was intentionally punished by being ostracized from the top administrator down to the student level, at Aqaaqi he was popular with everyone except with the director of the school. At his new school he became famous for his prowess in different kinds of sports, especially in soccer, handball, track-and-field, and in the long- and short-jump. These achievements made

Sisai popular, not only in his own school but also in other schools. Academically, most of the time, he was among the top five students from his class. The school director at Aqaaqii Adventist School, however, had final authority and absolute power over the students and expected every student to bow down for him. Any student who asked him as much as a simple question was punished. But such authority made no sense to Sisai. He behaved and acted in the same way he had been instructed under the gadaa system, as *Daime*, *Ittimako* and *Dabballe,* in his home neighborhood. These were the aspects of gadaa culture in which Sisai had been raised and by which he had been trained. It contrasted sharply with the new training and the behavior expected by Western culture, at least as manifested through these Christian missionaries. In each of the schools he attended as a young person, whenever anyone, the director, teacher or administrator, acted in a dictatorial manner, Sisai rejected them. Sisai did not even like it when all the other students were afraid to ask the director a simple question, or were fearful to explain their own case. Sisai marveled that students in the boarding school appeared to be treated like prisoners in a concentration camp. It made no sense to him. Sisai continued defending his right to ask questions of the administrators and the teachers and even to ask questions on behalf of all the students.

One day, the director summoned all students to a central meeting place and terrorized them by spelling out in detail the types of punishment he had developed if they disobeyed him. Immediately after he finished his speech, Sisai raised his hand, but the director said "See me in my office," and rose from his chair to leave. Sisai then locked the door to the auditorium and told the

director he could not leave them without at least listening to the students' grievances. Now the director returned to his chair. Sisai challenged the students, "instead of complaining when you are alone, now that the director is in our hand, ask him any question you like and do not miss this chance." Still the students were still afraid to ask questions. Sisai was ready to say something. He took the stage and explained many incidents in the past when the director had unnecessarily and unfairly imposed punishments on students in a way that he and other student had thought was wrong. The students applauded after every statement Sisai made. Then the director told the audience "you cannot have two directors in the same school, if I cannot remove him, I will resign." For Sisai it was hard to just accept anything unquestioningly on a person's word without a satisfactory explanation. Any order from the top or any obedience from the bottom was hard for Sisai to swallow unless he believed in it. The director was allowed to leave the room, but very soon afterward, while Sisai was attending class, a guard arrived with a piece of paper that ordered Sisai to see the director immediately in his office.

When Sisai went to the director's office, the director ordered him to uproot or pull out by the roots three huge trees in the compound that could be seen from the windows of the school building. This was punishment for Sisai's behavior in the auditorium. To uproot these three trees would take a person more than fifteen days if he worked eight hours a day in full view of the school community. Fortunately, when the director left for Finfinne to spend the weekend, many students, including girls and some of the guards, came to help Sisai with his punishment. All three trees were finished by Sunday

afternoon. The director returned on Monday night and saw that the task was completed and all trees were uprooted. Tuesday morning, the director ran to Sisai's class and shouted loudly into the classroom, "Where is that devil?" The students and the teacher laughed, and then he said, "I mean 'where is Sisai?" Then Sisai said, "I am here, Abbabba." The director asked, "Did devils help you to finish it in three days?" Sisai responded in front of all listeners with angry tone, saying, "Yes!" The students laughed again.

It was an act of unnecessary provocation and the cause of mental anguish for teenagers to be treated this way by the director of that school. Sisai tried to take his punishment, because if he was kicked out from his school he was likely to lose the sympathy of his relatives and be blamed for the trouble by his brothers. Sisai liked the school, the students, and all the teachers—except the director. Because of his popularity among his friends, Sisai tried to stay at that school until he graduated. But, he reached at a point where he could not tolerate the director's harsh behavior any more. One day Sisai asked an honest question in a Bible class taught by the director himself. It was, "If God knows everything and has all the power to affect events in the universe, why did he create Satan and allow sin?" The director was infuriated and, instead of answering the question, ordered Sisai to dig a big hole deep into the ground as a torturous and humiliating punishment. While Sisai was digging, the director went to Sisai to taunt him, asking, "Where are your devils today?" Then Sisai said, "only one devil has arrived so far, that is you." This was a fairly public exchange. Many students heard the communication between Sisai and the director. Already very angry, Sisai held the direc-

tor down and beat him until he satisfied himself. Then, he immediately packed his suitcase and left the school to go to the home of one of his sisters to hide, because he was not sure if his older brother Odaa would support him for what he had done to the director. For some time no one knew where Sisai was, except me, his mother, his sister, and her husband.

Sisai was out of school for about a month altogether. Then his brothers conferred and decided to send him to Raphii Elementary Boarding School, where he finished grade seven. After that his brothers wanted Sisai to go to one of the regular daytime schools located near his oldest brother's residence, where they arranged a room in his house where Sisai was to stay and study. With this arrangement, it was also convenient for his brother to supervise him on a daily basis. As planned, he was transferred to the Prince Makonnen Secondary School. Every night they exchanged brotherly conversations regarding sports and his academic matters. Sisai was always ready and happy to explain to his brother everything, which made both brothers understand more than before. Sisai finished eighth grade at Prince Makonnen School and transferred to Finfinne Technical School. While in secondary school, he was one of the stars on the soccer team, where he played right defense and left defense positions. He improved his swimming skills at the Giyon Hotel pool, and was considered one of the best swimmers in the city. He was certified as a Radio Technician in 1966. In every school he attended, he never compromised his rights. He never accepted injustice against himself or against those too weak or cowardly to defend their own rights.

Both of us attended the Finfinne Technical School 1963-64, taking classes together; together we also chose

to specialize as radio technicians. But, in 1965 I went to Bahardar Polytechnic Institute during which time I was away from Sisai for nine months. We wrote to each other at least once a month. When Sisai graduated from Finfinne Technical School in 1966 with his certification, he was immediately employed by the Ethiopian Airlines as a Radio Technician. He was then an adult, with many friends, including members of the American Peace Corps. In addition to one of his teachers at the Technical School, one Peace Corps member, in particular, advised Sisai to continue his education in USA. Sisai left Finfinne in 1967 and came to the United States to major in physics.

Sisai Enters North America and Becomes Active in Politics

Sisai came to the United States on a tourist visa, because he had no relative or friend to contact. Anyway, even without that, he found friends, rented an apartment, and found a job at the YMCA as a swimming instructor. He also began attending Federal City College (now the University of the District of Columbia, UDC).

In late 1968, Sisai joined the Ethiopian Students Union in North America, a self-described "Marxist-Leninist" political organization. He was attracted to Marxism as a tool for achieving justice and an ideology for the liberation of the oppressed. He became very active in the Ethiopian student movement in general. This took place during the period of the civil rights movement in America, and Sisai participated in a number of demonstrations organized by Kwame Toure. He also became close friends with a number of individual members of the Black Panther Party. At the same time, Sisai organized

Ethiopian students in the USA to protest in front of the Ethiopian embassy, chanting and carrying placards that read "Down with the Dictator!," "Down with Haile Selassie's Government!," "Long Live the Oppressed Masses!," etc.

Unfortunately Sisai's tourist visa expired, and unless he was able to get it renewed, the US immigration service would not offer him a student visa. The Ethiopian Embassy, however, refused to renew his visa because of his political activity. Finally, when Ketema Yefru, Ethiopian Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, was scheduled to come to New York to attend a United Nations meeting, someone from the embassy advised Sisai to go to New York and personally appear to explain his situation to the official. Sisai drove to New York City, waited for Ketema in the lobby of the hotel where he was staying. When Ketema came down to the lobby, Sisai jumped from his seat, shook his hand and told him that he was a brother of Gabra Selassie Odaa and Ilaala Ibssa. Ketema smiled and said, "Nice to see you." Sisai told him that he had driven all night from Washington, DC to see him. Ketema said, "Do you have some problem to tell me." Sisai explained, "My brothers told me you are coming here. At present I am in school but with an expired visa. The embassy refused to renew it just because I participated in some of the demonstrations held by the Ethiopian Students Union in the Washington, DC area. I want you to call the embassy and tell them to renew my visa." Ketema Yefru promised Sisai he would personally talk to the Ethiopian ambassador just after he finished New York meeting. As it turned out, Ketema was called back home to Ethiopia, forcing him to cancel his trip to Washington, DC and return to Finfinne. But Ketema

Yefru did call the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington, DC as he had promised and ordered them to renew Sisai Ibssa's visa, which they did. Gradually many on the Ethiopian Embassy staff, even the ambassador himself, reconciled with Sisai and they became friends.

Sisai's activities in the Ethiopian student movement, his solidarity and support for the civil rights movement, his individual friendship with Black Panther members, and above all, his political philosophy of Marxist-Lenist style socialism, made him known to the American authorities. For example, when a delegation from Haile Selassie's government visited the USA in the late 1960s, Sisai was working at the Shoreham Hotel, where officials of Haile Selassie's government were to stay. The FBI ordered the manager to lay Sisai off from his employment for a while to keep him out of the building during that time. Sisai's manager told him to stay home and return after the Emperor's delegation left the hotel. Sisai did not return at all.

In 1972 when Sisai traveled to Europe to represent the Ethiopian Students Union in North America (ESUNA), as a participant in a meeting hosted by the Ethiopian student association in Europe, he was detained at airport in Boston upon his return to the USA. FBI agents interrogated him, searched all of his belongings, and questioned him about where he had gone and why; at which hotel he stayed; who, besides Ethiopians, he had met; whether he had any connection with Soviet Union, China or any socialist country; etc.

After 24 hours of interrogation at the Boston airport, he was finally released. Sisai refused to be intimidated under this or any other circumstance and never turned away from his political activities. He traveled to differ-

ent parts of the United States to organize a strong and effective Ethiopian political organization. He became an active part of the leadership of ESUNA.

Sisai's commitment to justice made him the first individual in ESUNA to recognize publicly in the meetings the Eritrean right to national self-determination up to and including independence. His public stance came before any Ethiopian spoke out either as a group or individual. As a result, Sisai was very much a respected individual among many Eritreans who knew him well. He served as a prominent political leader of ESUNA until he resigned in late 1976. This was during the period when the country-wide uprising against Haile Sellassie was in full swing and, in Sisai's opinion, chauvinism in the Ethiopian student movement was at its peak and every walking Abyssinian became a member or public supporter of either the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) or the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (known in its Amharic acronym as ME'ISON), groups that Sisai thought were misguided.

Back in Finffinee, when the Oromo-led Macca-Tuulamaa Self-Help Association was attacked by Haile Selassie's security forces, most of the leaders of Macca-Tuulamaa were imprisoned and other activists who could manage to escape left the country; still others silently remained at home. During the last meeting of Macca-Tuulamaa, I was voted onto the education committee along with *Qanyazemach* Abdul Azizi Mohammed and Mr. Guuta Sirnneessa. My committee assigned me to supervise the adult school held in the Maccaa-Tuulama auditorium. This school was created by General Taddessa Birru, and at that time, even though he was imprisoned, Maccaa-Tuulamaa members continued teaching adults

who lived in the Gullalle area five nights a week. Every evening, I visited the night school to check on the teachers. In case a teacher absent from the class, it was my job to fill the gap.

In 1968, an underground organization successfully distributed a seven-page political pamphlet in the compound of the Haile Selassie University, the Piazza business district, Haile Selassie's palace, and in many other parts of Finfinne. In addition, the pamphlet had been distributed in Arsii and Harer. It was also mailed to many government officials. The emperor's security guard kidnapped me in front of the Macca-Tuulamaa office as the primary and only suspect in this case. They took me to an unknown place where I was interrogated and tortured for twenty-seven days. Thanks to a telephone campaign among friends, colleagues, and some relatives who helped me, I was released. However, I was fired from my work and was unable to find a job at all. For the years that followed, the team that had kidnapped me was still trailing me. Even when I was attending classes in law school at what is now Finfinne University, sometimes they would sit next to me and attend the classes with me. Some close friends of mine from the underground movement suggested that it would be good for my security and for the security of our underground organization if I went to Europe or to the USA to organize Oromos abroad. I wrote a letter to Sisai asking him to tell me about life in the United States, and of my plans to join him. He was very glad and immediately responded positively to help me make the transition. In short, I came to the United States to organize Oromo nationals abroad, an assignment given to me by my underground organization in Finfinne.

When I arrived in Washington, DC on the eve of 1972, Sisai with two of his friends came to National Airport and picked me up. I stayed with Sisai when I first arrived. I also told him that my main mission in being in the United States was to organize the Oromo who were in the United States as students or for other different reasons. He introduced to me to three Oromos who were his friends. I found that only one person among them was interested in organizing Oromo nationals in USA. He was Dr. Birhanu Tolasaa, and unfortunately he died very soon after I met him, so I missed the chance to work with him. Sisai advised me that another way for me to locate Oromo students was to join the Ethiopian Student Union in North America, raise the national question there, and present the Oromo as a case. I was convinced and therefore I joined the Ethiopian Student Union in North America for that reason. I took every opportunity to seek out Oromo members, whether in the Ethiopian Student Union, or in any Habasha (Abyssinian) gatherings or elsewhere.

Members of the Ethiopian student organization remember Sisai as one of the zealous Marxists who loved lengthy discussions about Marxist philosophy with fellow ESUNA members. He was among those who revolutionized ESUNA in late 1960s by basing it on Marxist and Leninist philosophical ideology. In 1969 when ESUNA formally recognized the Eritrean question as a colonial question and officially supported the Eritrean struggle for independence as the only correct way to resolve the problem between Ethiopia and Eritrea, Sisai played a major role in convincing members of ESUNA to support that position. Even though ESUNA voted to support the Eritrean struggle for independence, the

same year the organization resolved that the rest of the oppressed nations and nationalities in Ethiopia should be considered as a "national question," in other words, an issue that can be resolved within Ethiopia under the Socialist ideology of treating that sector of the working class like any other form of class oppression. This was the official position of ESUNA in 1969. ESUNA enjoyed support from the majority of Ethiopians and was very active. Their slogans were "Long Live Working Class Government" and "Down with Narrow Nationalism."

During this same time period, Sisai liked to carry on discussions with me about the gadaa system of the Oromo, which he interpreted using a Marxist philosophical approach. During our private discussions, we compared the gadaa system and socialism, compared the gadaa five-party systems or miseenssa with Western multiparty system or with the system of one-party dictatorships in Eastern socialist countries, etc. He wanted me to build my knowledge on a Marxist approach, and encouraged me to read leftist magazines, newspapers, or Marx's, Lenin's and Mao's books to compare the differences and similarities of these great philosophers the way he had done. He believed that he had found in Marxism an instrument that applied to all people for achieving justice. He had many of these books on his shelves. I tried to read some of them from an Oromo perspective and I compared the data and the argument to the Oromo situation. Nevertheless, though I did agree with many of its philosophical approaches when applied to Europe, I told him that I was not ready to be a Marxist. He responded by asking me a question something like this: "What other ideology or option do we have if our country is to be liberated?" I remember my answer was

along these lines: "Sisai! We Oromo have a gadaa system. Gadaa is not new for you, I am not teaching you because you know it. When we were in Bacho we have seen our family, our neighborhood, and others practice it, we have observed enough, we have learned from them, and we have practiced it together. We never stopped. Even when we were in school in Finffinee, we ran to Bachoo to join our friends to practice gadaa in the proper class of our miseenssa whenever school closed for short or long period. Marxism is a strange ideology for our people and it is difficult for the common Oromo to understand, but the gadaa system is in our people's blood, our ordinary Oromo people know better than you and me. We do not teach them, instead we learn from them. Thanks to our ancestors, we have a ready-made ideology, I am sure we agree in this matter."

While, in the mid-1970s, pitched battles were carried out in the streets of Finffinee between supporters of EPRP and ME'ISON, ESUNA as an organization became a diehard supporter of EPRP, while the other student organization in the United States, the United Progressive Ethiopian Students Union in North America (UPESUNA) supported ME'ISON. UPESUNA's slogan was "One country, one religion, one people, one culture, and one language." The UPESUNA group were fewer in number and had less activity, but were pro-derg (the military regime that had taken power in Ethiopia), through ME'ISON. The mid-1970s was a period when more than 90 percent of the Ethiopians in North America were involved in one of these two organizations. Sisai was a very active organizer and maintainer of ESUNA, and was very respected by his colleagues and friends in that group. He was regarded as one of their true Marxist theoreticians

and in every hot discussion people wanted Sisai to be included, in order to make the final decision from a genuinely Marxist perspective. Sisai was in the leading circle who knew everyone in the group. Nothing was hidden from him. For my part, whether at a meeting place or in a group discussion, I never gave Abyssinians an inch when I thought that they were trying to distort the Oromo question in the name of 'dictatorship of working class.' For any disagreement they had with me, they would ask Sisai, to see whether we had the same position. Sisai sometimes supported me and would polish my opinion by placing it in what he deemed a Marxist analytical framework. Sometime he avoided intervening, but he never criticized me in front of Abyssinians.

Sisai and I endlessly discussed the fate of Oromo people from every point of view, such as how to interpret the Oromo case as a national and colonial question from the perspective of different leftist writers, including books on the national and colonial question written by V. I. Lenin. In my capacity, I always came back to the point that we, the Oromo people, are colonized by Abyssinians with the help of European colonial powers. I urged him to hold Marxist ideology on the one hand and then examine the Oromo case under gadaa on the other hand and see if they contradict each other. We studied some books that he recommended to us and again we carefully examined the Oromo case from the different angles provided by those books. Through intense discussion in mid-1972 Sisai and I agreed that the Oromo question was a colonial question and that the Oromo nation deserves independence from the Ethiopian empire. We kept this position to ourselves until the right time came.

In 1973, ESUNA had its annual congress in late August in Washington, DC. This was our opportunity and we seized it. A week before the day of the congress, a discussion paper with more than thirty pages was distributed to members. I discussed the paper with Sisai before the congress began and we had similar opinions on the paper. On the morning of the congress, members were grouped into many workshops. I was assigned to the same workshop as Sisai. In our workshop, a chairperson and secretary were elected and the session started. After two or three individuals had commented on the paper, Sisai raised his hand. The chairperson recognized him. Sisai said, "I have no question, but I have a suggestion. Check your papers from page one to page fifteen. It tells as about 3000 years of the civilization of Abyssinia and the development of Abyssinian churches and the legend of the history of the Queen of Sheba with King Solomon, etc. Since non-Abyssinians are not part of this historical background, and since the Oromo people have no share of your history of 3000 years, I, as one Oromo, suggest the following: Let as start from page sixteen and cancel or tear away pages one to fifteen." Some members were surprised by Sisai's position of dissociating himself from Abyssinia, others were confused for a while. After few other members had shared their opinions, I raised my hand, and the chairperson recognized me. I said, "I support Sisai's suggestion, because if we start from page sixteen we will discuses how Emperor Yohannes the IV and King Minilik colonized the Oromo, Somali, Afar, Kaficho and other people, and also we will learn how Empress Zewditu and Haile Selassie inherited the colonial empire and maintained it for the benefit of Abyssinian settlers." Unexpectedly, there were three Oromos in

our workshop. They too rejected the first fifteen pages and expressed their support for Sisai Ibssa's suggestion. One person said, "What is going on, you guys," then another Abyssinia said, "It is a new development and if we accept it, it means no Ethiopia in the future." Everybody began talking at once and the chairperson tried to calm the workshop. Without reaching a final decision about whether to eliminate pages 1-15, or whether to discuss the issue of colonizers and colonized people, it was time for a scheduled break and the meeting adjourned for half an hour. During this half hour, people gathered into many groups and discussed about the 'colonial question' raised in our workshop, with everybody interested in discussing it.

When the break time was over, the chairperson told us we would not continue workshops in separate sessions. Instead, it was arranged that all workshops would continue the discussion together in the auditorium. In that auditorium about two hundred members were present. The issue of the 'colonial question' in Ethiopia was adopted as an urgent matter to become the primary agenda for discussion at the 1973 Congress. A very heated discussion took place, with many members participating. Persons who were well known in ESUNA as theoreticians such as Abdul Abaa Boraa from Oromo, and Robale Gibril from Somali supported the position that the Oromo question was a colonial question. Finally, all nineteen Oromos and one Somali supported the proposition that the question of the Oromo people and other southern nations and nationalities was a colonial one. The Abyssinians refused to accept that position as the truth while we stood by our previous opinion.

In the late afternoon, some frustrated Habasha suggested that the assembly vote on the matter, but that suggestion was rejected by Eshetu Chole. I cannot give a direct quote of his remarks, but I can paraphrase them. He argued saying, "I am disappointed in the way you have treated this important question. At this moment, I am observing Amhara chauvinism which is more dangerous than the narrow nationalism you are exaggerating. I oppose the suggestion to go for a vote on this matter, for many reasons. One reason is that in this auditorium the Amhara and Tigray are a majority. Second is that you should answer some other questions first, such as, what makes you Amhara and Tigray the majority abroad while the Oromo people are majority at home? What is your knowledge about the Oromo people? How can you vote for or against a position on people whom you do not know." He continued lecturing us, "In the past, we have undermined the Oromo question because of our inherited chauvinism. Most of us were born, raised and went school in urban areas. We are ignorant the life of Ethiopian peasant, in general, and the Oromo people, in particular. The feudal education failed to teach us and denied us the opportunity to learn the history of the Ethiopian people except the history of feudal royal families. Since we are not ready to pass any resolution for those reasons, I suggest that ESUNA postpone this topic for the next year and advise representatives of each chapter to study the matter seriously and come back with a reasonable and well-researched paper."

Now the mood of all in attendance was changed, and his suggestion was supported by the majority present. Since Sisai himself had raised the colonial question, he observed how his Marxist comrades reacted against his

position and adopted what he saw as a colonial attitude. From that day on Sisai did not trust his Ethiopian comrades on this matter. Sometimes they asked him some unsettling questions about his motive, such as whether Sisai and I secretly had any connection with ME'ISON, the opposing party, probably because Haile Fidaa, one of the ME'ISON leaders, was an Oromo. This was surprising because Sisai was very much loved and respected by both Ethiopian and Eritrean students and ESUNA members in the United States. Whether ESUNA called for a vote or not, we had successfully convinced 17 Oromos that the argument on our side was strong enough to treat the Oromo case separately, including Abdul Mohammed, one of the best known Oromo activists in ESUNA.

I remember, in early 1974 I was distributing *Qanqee* pamphlets to Ethiopian students in Washington, DC. Some members brought my case to ESUNA as a disciplinary matter, accusing me of distributing a 'narrow nationalist' pamphlet. Sisai said to them "We cannot accuse an individual of an offense without discussing the paper. Let as have an agenda to discuss the *Qanqee* pamphlets and give our positive or negative comments on it." Since they were not interested in publicly discussing anything about the Oromo, and since they could not deny the facts of what was written in the pamphlet, they dropped my case. Gradually Sisai's tone changed from an exclusively Marxist view to one which gave priority to developing an Oromo nationalist view. In the time before the 1973 showdown he was in absolute agreement with applying a hard line socialist ideology on the national question. But after this event, he developed a habit of asking more questions about where the Oromo question fit rather than issuing dogmatic statements. His

Abyssinian Marxist comrades were puzzled over Sisai's change. Some of them cursed me as if I were the one who changed their comrade to an Oromo nationalist view.

Sisai Makes a Full Commitment to Oromo Politics

When Sisai convinced himself that he could be useful in a separate Oromo organization, he issued the following statement in an ESUNA meeting. He said "As Ethiopians you have a great many progressive intellectuals who are struggling to change a feudal system in Ethiopia by applying the new socialist ideology under the leadership of the working class. But I see that Oromo intellectuals, including myself, are kept hostage to that process and end up serving in this organization to pave the way for our colonizers to continue to rule us Oromos in the name of a new ideology. But that new approach that you are struggling for still forces the Oromo people to remain under Abyssinian colonial rule. It will not change our position in the empire. After struggling with myself for many years, I have finally reached to the point where I know that I cannot serve the interests of my people if I remain in any Ethiopian organization. I know that a few Oromo intellectuals are not aware that they are taken hostage by Abyssinian intellectuals and they are still playing a role in maintaining the colonial empire in different organizations. I think for me it is time to decide either to remain a hostage and serve Abyssinian interests or to liberate myself from any Abyssinian political organization and then organize an Oromo student movement in the United States that is independent from Abyssinian influence. I decide this because they want me and I want them more than I want you. You still remain

my social friends; I do not see you as my enemies for the crimes your ancestors committed against my people." In less than a week after that declaration, on May 23 1976, he wrote a letter of resignation in the spirit of the above statement. He advised me not to resign with him until the time comes. When we announced the establishment of TOONA (Tookumma Oromo Organization in North America), ESUNA was among first to send us a solidarity message and even helped us in typing our first publication known as *Sagalee Oromoo*. The entire journal was about the life and death of General Taddessa Birru.

In a search for Oromos that took two years, I finally obtained the addresses of thirty Oromo individuals who lived in the metropolitan Washington, DC area. Before the official declaration of our organization, two of my friends and I agreed to prepare dinner and invite all Oromos who resided in this Washington, DC area. Out of thirty invited twenty-seven came to the party. Formal political discussion was started in an attempt to learn the opinions of many Oromos in the area. The topic of discussion was forming an Oromo political organization in North America. Everybody present agreed, except one individual. We announced the first meeting to be held at Lubee Birru's place to draft by-laws for the organization we had agreed to establish. Fifteen Oromos arrived to participate and thirteen ignored the announcement. In the first four meetings we worked on the political program for the new organization. On the final day everybody present was asked to fill out the membership form. At the end of the meeting only a few of us, including Sisai, actually committed to fill out the form and sign our names. Those who filled out the form and returned it back to the organizers were declared as the

founders of Tookuma Oromo Organization in North America (TOONA). In September 1974, TOONA officially declared to the public that it had been established. Announcement letters were sent to many embassies located in the USA, and to all progressive organizations in the metropolitan Washington DC area.

Our new organization began effective communication with our underground organization, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) that was based in Finfinne. More interesting was that in less than a year two Oromos were sent from the home front, coming to the USA with more information, including pamphlets. In 1979 we received an official representative from OLF and thenafter almost every year we had good communication through letter exchange, through telephone, or through personal contact. We received pamphlets, such as *Voice Against Tyranny*, *Qaanqee*, the *Oromo Struggle against Settler Colonization*, *Warraqaa Ijoolle Oromoo*, *Bilissumma*, *Oromiaa*, and *Bakkalcha Oromoo* etc. From the outset until the day of his death, Sisai played key roles in the leadership of the independent Oromo organizations in North America. Initially he preferred working as editor in order to launch publications that would reach wider audiences, but sometimes he served as chairperson. Over the years he chaired Union of Oromo Students in North America (UOSNA), Union of Oromo in North America (UONA), Democratic Union of Oromo for the Liberation of Oromia (DUOLO), and Gummi (Oromia Liberation Council). At the time of his death he was serving as the spokesperson of United Liberation Forces of Oromia (ULFO) and Managing Editor of *Daandii Bilisumma* (the Road to Independence).

Once Sisai committed himself to seek justice by fighting for the independence of Oromia, he gave the rest of his life to the struggle to organize the Oromo for that purpose. He loved the Oromo organization more than he loved himself. He never tired of working for the Oromo people. He read widely and was the main contributor to each UONA, Gummi and ULFO publication. He wrote more than one hundred articles in different journals and publications, making a significant contribution to the Oromo struggle for independence. In 1990 he wrote a book jointly with Qabbanee Waaqayo (Bonnie Holcomb) titled *The Invention of Ethiopia*: *the Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa*. He and Qabbanee worked together from 1978 and together occasionally wrote under a pen name a series known as *The Kindling Point* which contained more than thirty articles. It had a big influence on the Oromo struggle.

Sisai was taken from us by an early death. The place that Sisai left is still empty, because no one can come forward to fill Sisai's shoes. I personally miss my uncle, my close lifelong age mate, my friend, my roommate, and my comrade, Sisai Ibssa. He lived and died as a fine example of a courageous Oromo man, who worked tirelessly to champion Oromo values of justice and equality.

My Conversation with Sisai Ibssa

Asafa Jalata

In this article, I focus on my conversations with my brother, friend, and comrade Sisai Ibssa on issues of Oromo scholarship and national struggle. Meeting Sisai in the United States rekindled in my mind memories of some of my comrades and friends in Oromia. His scholarship, demeanor, nationalist expressions, courage, charisma, determination, as well as his love for his people reminded me of my time at Addis Ababa (Finfinnee)

Journal of Oromo Studies, Vol. 18, No. 1 (July 2011), pp. 81-108.

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University in the 1970s and some of my Oromo nationalist friends, from whom I had learned a lot about the Oromo people, Oromo nationalism, and the Oromo national movement.

When Sisai and I began to exchange views on our political experiences, I concluded that our views and interests were similar and complementary in several areas. So it is my view that the spirit of *Oromummaa* (Oromoness), similar worldviews, intellectual orientation, common political interest and the willingness on both sides to debate the issues made us close friends and comrades. For twenty years, we discussed and debated issues central to the scholarship on the Oromo: the Oromo national liberation struggle, Ethiopian colonialism, the imperial interstate system, world politics, Marxism, *gadaa* (Oromo democracy), Oromo culture and history, the present and future relationship of the Oromo with other peoples, the nature and future of an Oromia government, and Oromo leadership and organizations.

Although we agreed on many of these issues, as will be examined below, there were points which we continued to debate. Our genuine disagreements on certain issues probably emerged from our different life and political experiences when we were younger. Whenever we disagreed, realizing that the Oromo struggle has been complex and difficult, Sisai and I tacitly agreed to continue our open, honest, and serious discussion with mutual tolerance and respect. His passing in 2005 was a great personal loss for me and my family. As many Oromo nationalists before him, he was not fortunate enough to witness the liberation of the Oromo. It remains for us to build upon his significant contributions.

Sisai's serious commitment and sacrifice for the Oromo national cause and his actions and practices in relation to social justice, equality, fairness, and democracy for individuals and sectors of Oromo society and others has earned him the respect and admiration of many, including my wife, son, and daughter who knew him well as a family friend. My wife, Zeituna, recalls that he never treated women differently from men because of their gender and children from adults because of their age. He never also treated well-to-do people differently from ordinary people. Sisai evaluated and valued individuals for what they stood for, such as social justice, truth and self-respect rather than for their status in society. These values and practices made him different from some Oromo men who explicitly or implicitly manifest ideologies of sexism, ageism, and classism. My children, Beka and Kulani, admired and loved Sisai because he respected and discussed serious issues with them without treating them like children. What Kulani says in the following quotation reflects his philosophy of life and values in relation to young people:

> Growing up, the conversations I had with Obbo Sisai Ibssa were unforgettable. From lively debates on various aspects of Oromo politics to the hilarious stories he narrated and claimed to be 'totally real,' our conversations were always exciting and moments I will never forget. Looking back now, I understand entirely why. When *Obbo* Sisai talked with you, it was only your words and opinions that mattered. His deep value for you as a person with important ideas and a story to tell truly elevated you and your self-confidence; he truly cared for you.

> But he also constructively challenged you to look beyond your perspective, to be more open-minded and willing to learn about what you might not know. This was what made him a very unique, incomparable person: he was an uncle, friend, and teacher at the same time.
>
> For many Oromo intellectuals, politics becomes personal, which does seem understandable when considering the urgency of the Oromo case. But for *Obbo* Sisai, to who Oromo politics was central, he never let his passion for what he believed in trump the relationships he had with people. This is a very rare human quality. To be able to effectively communicate with anyone, with those you do not agree with or are in opposition to you, is both very difficult to do and a useful quality. It enabled *Obbo* Sisai to be not only an effective communicator, but also a persuasive one. He never thrust his viewpoints on you, but rather, he let you hear them in a way that internally persuaded you to truly consider them as plausible.

Since I have closely observed his interactions with my family members and other people for many years, as I will explain below, I believe that his family background, Oromo culture, and his political philosophy laid the foundation for his outlooks and his relationships with others. Furthermore, Sisai, as an intellectual pioneer, grounded his scholarly work in Oromo studies on Oromo cultural and historical foundations, despite the fact that he was deeply familiar with modernist and Marxist traditions. Consequently, he played a central

role in the development of Oromo-centric scholarship and Oromo nationalism in the Diaspora.

Learning about Sisai through His Work and Personally

Before I personally met Sisai in Washington, DC, in the summer of 1985, when I went there for the first time to attend the annual meeting of the Union of Oromo in North America (UONA), I was already familiar with his name and scholarship through reading his published article titled "Red Star on the Emperor's Crown: Pseudo-Revolution in the Ethiopian Empire," that appeared in *Northeast African Studies* (vol. 3, no.1, 1980, 77-91). When I first discovered this insightful article written by an Oromo revolutionary nationalist scholar, I was very much impressed and wanted to meet the author. I found this article in the library of the University of California at Davis when I started my graduate work in community studies and development there in 1983.

The article and its author captured my attention for two reasons. First, it was an excellent article, depicting the true essence and characteristics of the Ethiopian military regime (the *derg*). His writing served as an exposé of the *derg* at a time when the world at-large was accepting the regime's self-identification as "Marxist and socialist." What Sisai described in this article accurately reflected my experience with the regime as a peculiar form of tyranny. I sought political asylum in the United States because of the crimes this regime committed against the Oromo people in general and against Oromo nationalists in particular. I was one of the Oromo nationalists who were targeted for destruction by this regime, and I saved myself only by running away from my country. I

was amazed that Sisai who was living in exile and who had not visited Oromia and Ethiopia under the military regime was able to explain so precisely the main characteristics of the regime when most scholars in Africa, the West and the East characterized the military regime as 'revolutionary' and 'socialist.'

His understanding of the essence of revolution and socialism was penetrating and precise. Sisai correctly called the Ethiopian military regime the "bastard child of the imperial crown" and asserted the following:

> [The junta] having merely succeeded in confusing some people; there are still some who are asking about the nature of this dergue.... In its struggle against the people's revolution (people's war), the junta has shown its true face by perfecting the old state machine instead of smashing it. That is what the dergue's 'revolution' is; that is what dergue's socialism is; it is this 'revolution' and 'socialism' that I call a pseudo-revolution (Ibssa 1980: 89).

The other reason why I appreciated the importance of this article was that the author was honest, knowledgeable, analytically powerful, sociologically and historically sound, and genuinely revolutionary. Sisai convincingly argued that the *derg* was the continuation of the previous Ethiopian regimes "except that the color has changed to red to distinguish the different era: the dergue is as much the enemy of socialism and progress as its predecessor" (Ibssa 1980: 78). The commitment of Sisai to democracy and revolutionary transformation was deep and profound. For Sisai, there could not be socialism without a "democratically organized state with a democratic army."

In this article, Sisai critically and thoroughly exposed the false ideologies of Ethiopian colonialism; these ideologies include the myth of 'Greater Ethiopia' and 'indivisibility of Ethiopian unity.'

Sisai refuted the labeling of oppressed Oromo nationalism as 'tribalism,' 'regionalism,' or 'narrow nationalism' by successive Ethiopian regimes. He referred to these labels as false claims designed to delegitimize the Oromo national struggle in order that the regime might continue the domination, exploitation, and dehumanization of the Oromo people. I was delighted to know that Oromo society had produced revolutionary scholars such as Sisai who bravely and honestly used liberation knowledge to delegitimize the distorted assertions of Ethiopian colonial elites on the global stage. Before I read Sisai's article, a few Oromo documents had captured my attention; these documents included *The Oromos: Voice against Tyranny* (1981 [1971]), *the Oromo Liberation Front Program*, (1976), *Oromia: an Introduction* (1980) by Gadaa Melbaa, and revolutionary Oromo publications such as *Bakalcha Oromoo, Oromia, Waraaqa, and Guuca Dargaggoo.*

By using an analysis of liberation, Sisai exposed what I knew to be the distortions of the Ethiopian colonial elites and both their local and international supporters. Before many Oromo intellectuals emerged on a global platform to speak for the Oromo, Sisai and his colleagues became the spokespersons of the Oromo nation and disseminated information about the Oromo and their country, Oromia at the global level.

When I was introduced to Sisai in the summer of 1985 in a small Oromo restaurant in Washington, DC, I was in an advantageous position because I already knew about him. After we exchanged greetings, I told him

that I had read his article and expressed to him that I was proud of him. Then he expressed his pleasure at my appreciation of his work with a big smile. Since in the Oromo tradition people do not express their opinions the way I did, he did not seem convinced and he wanted to know my intention. In his attempt to know me closely, Sisai asked me the following questions: "When did you come to the United States?" "From which part of the United States did you come?" "What are you doing in Washington, DC?" I answered questions and also honestly explained to him about myself and my cultural and political background. He expressed an interest in knowing me better.

Within a short time, we established a friendly relationship and he invited me to his apartment in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood of Washington, DC. After he prepared sandwiches for both of us, we ate together and continued our conversation. Then he asked me whether I would like to be introduced to his friend and colleague, Qabbanee (Bonnie K. Holcomb). I responded to him positively. He drove me to her home to introduce me to her. After talking with Qabbanee for a few minutes, we drove away. Since that day I have regarded Sisai and Qabbanee my best friends and colleagues. As I started to be interested in their scholarship and politics, both of them responded with reciprocity. Through several years, my relationship with Sisai was gradually transformed to a personal friendship. We also became comrades and brothers of choice.

Conversations and Discussion

In addition to my regular conversations with Sisai over a period of almost two decades, I also interviewed

him and read most of his writings. On August 3, 1988, I interviewed him for almost two hours for my first book, *Oromia and Ethiopia: State Formation and Ethnonational Conflict, 1868-1992*. I asked him several questions on the impact of Ethiopian colonialism, his personal experience with Ethiopian colonial institutions, the essence of Oromo culture, the contradictory roles of an Oromo educated class that he characterized as the "Oromo petit bourgeoisie," the forms of Oromo resistance to Ethiopian colonialism, and the birth of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). From this interview, what I learned was that Sisai knew critically and thoroughly the devastating effects of Ethiopian colonialism on Oromo society in general and the political economy of Oromia, Oromo culture, Oromo intellectuals, and Oromo worldviews in particular.

The book he wrote with Bonnie K. Holcomb, *The Invention of Ethiopia: the Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa* (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press 1990) critically analyzes and comprehensively explains how the Ethiopian state was created and maintained with the help of the global imperial interstate system. Furthermore, the book explores how the Ethiopian dependent colonial state was created and consolidated through colonizing the Oromo and other peoples, committing genocide, expropriating lands, and reducing the colonized populations into semi-slaves. Their book is a pioneering work and path-breaking in Oromo studies.

Let me summarize the information I obtained from my interview of Sisai in 1988. He expressed how Ethiopian colonial institutions, mainly the state, the church, the schools, and the media tried their best to destroy Oromo culture, peoplehood, and Oromo col-

lective and personal identities by imposing Orthodox Christianity on Oromos and by forcing Oromo youth to be Amharized to serve the Ethiopian state as intermediaries. Young Oromos who went to colonial schools were forced to change their names. Sisai explained how Amhara priests known as *qes* were used as Ethiopian cultural cadres through the church and educational apparatus to de-Oromize young Oromos and to destroy Oromo culture and indigenous Oromo religion called *Waaqeeffana*. Sisai mentioned that the Ethiopian colonial elite replaced Oromo cultural centers by building their Ethiopian Orthodox churches precisely on Oromo traditional religion sacred sites; they used the processes of Christianization and Amharanization in implementing a policy of "de-Oromization."

Sisai explained that the Ethiopian colonial elites used the schools and the church as mechanisms for introducing self-hatred and self-denial to educated Oromos. He emphasized that these two institutions failed to penetrate Oromo society and culture since most Oromos who were ostensibly formally educated and officially converted to the state religion continued to practice their own culture and religion. According to Sisai, Amhara culture failed to replace Oromo culture because it was not superior to that of the Oromo. He informed me that when he was a young boy in rural Oromia, he was socialized into Oromo culture and worldview by his mother; his father passed away when he was a small boy. At that time, he observed that Oromos in his village were familiar with two worldviews. While they exercised an Amhara worldview in public places, they adhered to an Oromo worldview in private spaces.

By referring in detail to the activities of his mother, Warqee Odaa, Sisai revealed that he understood that Oromo women played a far more consistent role in sustaining Oromo culture, worldviews, and language than did Oromo men. I believe that this experience helped Sisai recognize the centrality of Oromo women in Oromo society. According to Sisai, since Oromo women had limited connection with colonial individuals and institutions, they remained closer to and better versed in Oromo culture than men. Oromo men were more susceptible to being assimilated to Amhara culture because of their rather consistent exposure to the official culture.

As Sisai was knowledgeable about and intimately familiar with Abyssinian history and culture, he knew the strengths and weaknesses of Abyssinian institutions, social patterns, culture, and history. He noted that Amhara and Tigrayans have used guns and wars to stabilize their authoritarian culture, worldview, and institutions, and their leaders have expropriated and looted Oromo resources. In Oromo culture, he said, "you cannot own what you did not produce." However, in Amhara culture, according to Sisai, you can create laws to justify forcefully expropriating and owning what others produced. Most Amhara-Tigrayan elites admire these kinds of actions.

Sisai also did not shy away from identifying the ideological and cultural weaknesses of most educated Oromo elites. He discussed how most educated Oromo elites had become disconnected from their cultural roots through the process of Ethiopianization/Amharization and had started to play contradictory roles in Oromo society. He later articulated the contradictory roles of the Oromo elites (whom he referred as the petit bourgeoisie) in the following passage:

> The petit bourgeoisie is notoriously opportunistic, vacillating, and insecure primarily because its fate and fortunes have always been determined by decisions made by the class above it, more specifically by the operations of the state system formed to carry out the decisions of the multinationals. Yes, many skills are deposited with the petit bourgeoisie; there is no doubt about that. But along with those skills the educational process transmits a very submissive and insecure mental outlook. The effect of this is that the petit bourgeoisie, which is the class that we belong to, is by nature fearful, indecisive, its members always battling amongst each other to appear better than the next person in order to reap some benefit to be bestowed by members of the more powerful class above them (Ibssa, 1992: 66).

Sisai identified two types of Oromo elites. The first type is opportunist and reactionary and the second one revolutionary and farsighted. The first group cannot see beyond their personal interests; individuals in this group will do anything to fulfill their personal interests, even if it means joining the enemy camp and hurting their own people. Such Oromo elites have joined successive Ahmara-Tigrayan regimes and have served as mercenaries. They do not have a moral conscience and principles so they can be pushed in any direction. Individuals in the second group are revolutionary and they promote the welfare of their nation; they believe in liberating their people and enabling them to achieve sovereignty, freedom, and democracy.

The most conscious elements of the second group are members of the Oromo national movement. In his

article, "Yadatee Damasa: An Oromo Role Model," Sisai (1994:78-84) identified three Oromo leaders of the 1930s in his village in central Oromia to demonstrate his characterization of reactionary, opportunist and revolutionary Oromo leaders:

> In the area where I was born there were three Oromo leaders: 1) Yadatee Damasa, 2) Bakare Fullee, and 3) Garasu Duki. All of them fought each other for control of an area of central Oromia of about 2500 square miles. Garasu represented the reactionary forces—he was a leader of Haile Selassie's forces. Bakare, on the other hand, opposed Haile Selassie's forces and became pro-Italy, in his own mind allying with Italy for the benefit of the Oromo people. Yadatee took a different position from both of them. He saw both the Haile Selassie group (Garasu's) and the pro-Italian group (Bakare's) as enemies of the Oromo. He stood for the Oromo radical who did not argue that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend.'
>
> We must face the reality that there are two camps among the Oromo today, just as there were during the 1930s and 40s. There is a reactionary camp created by colonialism and there is the camp of nationalism originally created by the radicals who fought against conquest and colonial consolidation.
>
> There have been...great people all over Oromia, like Yadatee Damasa, who have chosen freedom or death over living as subjects. In communities

> all over Oromia, they have produced a great variety of ways to preserve Oromo pride and culture. We have been exposed to them and influenced by them before other influences tried to erase those memories from our past and reshape the way we thought about our future (Ibssa 1994: 78-81).

Sisai also expressed views on Oromo resistance and the birth of the OLF. He believed that pockets of Oromo resistance in different areas of Oromia gradually facilitated the development of an Oromo political consciousness. He maintained that various forms of the Oromo resistance struggle educated Oromo intellectuals to think about the Oromo national struggle and to form political organizations. Sisai also noted that as the Oromo resistance expressed itself in uncoordinated and sporadic ways in the rural areas, urbanized Oromos started to express an overarching Oromo consciousness. When the Ethiopian colonial state attacked the resistance of the Oromo urbanites and attempted to suppress their Oromo political expression, a few revolutionary Oromo elites realized the fundamental contradiction between the Ethiopian colonial state and Oromo society.

In the absence of political space, according to Sisai, it fell to a few Oromo intellectuals to ask themselves very hard questions and to initiate the process of building a national movement. That beginning was spearheaded by Oromo nationals in several different locations, one of which was the OLF. Consequently, Sisai argued, the birth of this front was the result of the Oromo national struggle. The OLF proclaimed the goal to create the Democratic Republic of Oromia by smashing the Ethiopian colonial state and by uprooting all colonial institu-

tions from Oromia. He mentioned that the birth of this front combined the linkage between rural and urban, the connection between mental and physical labor, and the aspiration of Oromo elites and the masses.

Sisai believed that Oromo culture as expressed in the *gadaa* system had never died, but it was weakened by the attack of the Ethiopian colonial system and its collaborators. He explained that the Oromo national movement has been in the process of retrieving Oromo values, traditions, and beliefs from hibernation. So Sisai said that the material base of the Oromo struggle is strong and there is no force in the world that can stop the national struggle of the Oromo for liberation. He forcefully explained why the Oromo nation must develop *gadaa* as an alternative model for the liberation and development of Oromia. Sisai endorsed *gadaa* as an alternative politico-economic model because "the imported capitalist and socialist models...have so far failed" (Ibssa 1993: 113). He summarized the essence of *gadaa* as the following:

1. Gada has...functioned as the dominant social formation in an independent Oromo republic. It is not an alien system. It has roots in every dimension of our social life. Its components can be updated rather than replaced. I feel strongly that once we have attained our independence, Gada will emerge as the dominant social formation naturally. My position is that we should recognize that and work within it.
2. Gada already has within its structure a democratic organization, one supported by all the subsystems within the society such as:
    a) **Politically,** it has branches which prevented the consolidation of power in one location or office.

b) **Educationally,** it has arranged for the training of an effective leadership for the Gada. It has provided for two schools of training, one for the boys and the other for the girls. The males were prepared to function as effective administrators and the females were prepared to function as effective economic managers.

c) **Economically,** people were allowed to control whatever they produced and retained the right to work and to control their own labor.

d) **Ideologically**, the law was fashioned collectively and all persons were equally responsible under the law and were treated on an equal basis. No man or woman was considered to be above another under the law, and each person had an equal right to express an opinion and be listened to (Ibssa 1993: 114-115).

Areas of Disagreement

Although we agreed on most issues, Sisai and I disagreed on a few specific points related to *gadaa,* the OLF, and Oromo organizations. It was my understanding that Sisai believed it would be possible to resurrect the *gadaa* system and use it in establishing a sovereign state in Oromia. He frequently and forcefully argued that he was a '*gadaa* fundamentalist' after somebody attached this label on him. Responding to those who called him a *gadaa* fundamentalist, Sisai (1993: 109) says the following:

> To me [to be labeled this way] was never an insult, and even the person who coined the term, is now talking about the Gada as a system to be proud of. It is good that he finally boarded that train. I

> think that there is no doubt among us any longer about the potential of the Gada, especially since the wider world has had a sudden conversion to democracy as the preferred method of government.... We have come a long way from the days when the Oromo past was considered to be pagan and backward, to the present time when we can imagine Gada as a basis for the development of a future democratic Oromia.

In order to persuade Oromo nationalists to return to the *gadaa* system, I suspect Sisai was never interested in discussing publicly or with me what I and others regarded as its weaknesses. Whenever I mentioned to him how this system was internally challenged in some parts of Oromia because of economic transformations and the emergence of class stratification, he did not agree with me, arguing that the conquest crippled the *gadaa*, rather than that the system eroded from within. I argued with him that since *gadaa* had some political deficiencies, it allowed the emergence of the *mootii* system in northern, central, and western Oromia with the development of class differentiation. I expressed to him several times that we may restore some elements of this system in a new politico-economic environment provided that we liberate ourselves from Ethiopian colonialism and its domestic and global supporters.

Sisai focused on the positive side of the *gadaa* system, while in my view the historical legacy of Oromo political leadership under *gadaa* had positive and negative sides. The positive legacy constitutes the sovereignty of the Oromo people experienced under *gadaa.* For many centuries, the Oromo people used the social institution of *gadaa* to organize themselves politically and culturally

and to maintain their independence. Under *gadaa*, they established the rule of law, promoting equality, social justice, and democracy. Specifically, the design of *gadaa* as a social and political institution obviated exploitation and political domination. On the negative side, *gadaa's* egalitarian disposition put it at a disadvantage in competing with other social systems that engaged in the extraction of economic surplus through exploitation and oppression by building a permanent professional bureaucracy, expanding formal education, and developing technological capabilities.

As I see it, both the intervention of the Ottoman-Egyptian-Harari alliance as Mohammed Hassen relates it (Hassen 1973: 6-18) and the alliance of Ethiopian and European powers operated in Oromo society through military occupation and outright colonialism. These intrusions demonstrated the challenge the Oromo political leadership faced in encounters with externally-imposed exploitative and oppressive social systems. Also, Oromo society and its political leadership started facing serious internal divisions and conflicts during the first half of the nineteenth century. Sisai's focus on the impact of the external forces of conquest on the *gadaa* challenged the assumption that *gadaa* simply fell apart from within due to its shortcomings. While seeing his point, I tried to maintain that because of both external influence and internal weakness of the *gadaa* system after its decentralization, autocratic and hereditary chiefs emerged by overthrowing democratically elected leadership in places like the Gibe states, Wallo, and Leeqaa country in Western Oromia (Abir, 1965; Hassen, 1990; Ta'a, 1986; Jalata, 1993.) Internally, the *mootii* political system with its rudimentary bureaucracy emerged.

This political system was based on class differentiation. During and after the colonization of Oromia, this political system facilitated the development of an Oromo collaborative class that willingly or by force joined the Ethiopian political system. Evidently, the negative legacy associated with a collaborative and subservient leadership emerged in Oromo society because of both external and internal factors. Generally speaking, Sisai appreciated Oromo popular democracy, egalitarianism, and the rule of law in the *gadaa* system.

Anyone who has engaged in frequent political discussion with Sisai recognizes that he believed in popular democracy, egalitarianism, and the rule of law. Therefore, it was easy for Sisai to combine *gadaa* principles with egalitarian democracy. That was why he frequently argued that there could not be socialism without popular democracy. Since he accepted whole-heartedly the principles of self-determination for individuals and peoples, he was a true revolutionary. He believed in truth and social justice. That was why he dealt with every person with a single standard, based on the principle of equality regardless of their respective social background. Individuals who believed in double standards had a hard time dealing with Sisai.

Consistent with his belief in the rule of law, Sisai despised authoritarian behavior. For Sisai, equality, truth, and justice would emerge from revolutionary thinking and egalitarian or popular democracy. I am not sure whether he developed his political principles and philosophy from his cultural background of *gadaa* or from his revolutionary practices or both. Several times he expressed to me that, after studying all ideologies, he realized that there was no ideology that was better than

the *gadaa* worldview. Consequently, he fought bravely with determination to make *gadaa* the foundation of the Oromo thinking and politics.

Sisai was a serious and revolutionary Oromo nationalist thinker who realized that "flag independence" (replacing an Ethiopian colonial state with a puppet or reactionary Oromia state) will not be enough for the true emancipation of the Oromo people. With people like him, he initiated a revolutionary path to bring total freedom for the Oromo masses. Although the full result of this approach will be known in the future, disseminating such revolutionary ideas among the Oromo brought about a political consciousness; consequently, *gadaa* emerged as the main political and cultural concept in the Oromo national political discourse.

There were times when Sisai and I also disagreed on issues concerning the OLF and other Oromo political organizations. In the mid-1990s, when the OLF leadership attempted to dismantle UONA, most members of the Union were disappointed. Claiming that they were reorganizing the Union, high officials of the OLF started to abandon the Oromo cultural tradition of decision-making and made unilateral decisions ordering the Union to take marching orders. Realizing the consequences of such decisions, I even requested the chairman of the OLF to intervene personally and stop such a dangerous trend in the Diaspora. The chairman ignored my appeal and advised me to go through the established channels. Because of this I became dissatisfied with the OLF leadership, although I have continued to support the organization believing in the importance of maintaining the unity of the Oromo national movement.

Sisai's position was that UONA had been an independent organization when it voluntarily agreed to become a "mass organization" of the OLF in 1985. With its dissatisfactions over positions and policies of the OLF leadership, he argued that the Union was within its rights to separate itself from the OLF and continue to pursue the goals for which it had been started. During this time a battle between the Front and the Union raged and some people from both sides began name calling and fabricating information that was unhealthy. Of course, the root cause of the problem as I saw it was the leadership of the Front since it created these problems and failed to solve them.

Understanding this situation, the Union reversed its status from mass organization of the OLF to an independent organization. Some members of the Union accepted the instruction of the leadership of the Front and became its members. Realizing the political mismanagement by the leadership of the Front, I supported the move of the Union. When some members of the Union started to form a liberation organization in the Diaspora, I frequently argued with Sisai and others that it was a mistake to take such a political action. But some elements of the Union formed a liberation organization. I expressed my disagreement with this action to Sisai and others. I thought that this action would fragment the Oromo national movement and it would not strengthen the struggle.

At this juncture, I became neutral to the Front and the new liberation front. I frequently debated these issues with Sisai. He tried to convince me that the OLF was wrong and I did not take a serious position against the Front. On several occasions, I told Sisai that I had my own personal reasons why I could not openly criti-

cize the OLF for committing several mistakes in dealing with UONA. However, Sisai continued to raise the issue with me. This was a time when former friends and comrades turned enemies and stopped talking to one another. Although there were some former members of the Union who became unfriendly to me, Sisai and a few others continued to be my close friends.

Sisai and a few other friends continued to hammer me although most were not like Sisai in bombarding me with questions, comments, and criticisms. Regardless of all these problems, we continued to be friends and relate as comrades because we knew that we have been involved in the Oromo national movement one way or the other. Sisai and I had ample opportunity to closely exchange our views. Sisai was very persistent in trying to convince me that my political position was wrong, and I was defending my friends in the leadership of the Front. Being tired of his persistent questioning of me on this matter, one day I said to him: "Sisai, if I do what you are asking me, I will betray you tomorrow." He asked: "What do you mean Asee?"

Then I told him that I had taken an oath with some revolutionary Oromos who sacrificed their precious lives in building the OLF. Continuing my conversation, I said to him, "what would I tell them if they would resurrect from death and ask me, 'Why did you betray us by abandoning the Oromo Liberation Front that we created and built by our bones and blood?'" I told him that, for me, to turn away from this liberation front because of some political mismanagement was tantamount to betraying these revolutionary and pioneering Oromo heroes and heroines. I recall that Sisai was quiet for some time digesting the information. Then I asked him: "Sisai do

you understand where I am coming from?" "Do you know that if I betray them I will do the same thing to you tomorrow, too?" After that day he never returned to these issues, and we continued our friendship and comradeship.

For my part, I am not convinced that Oromo political organizations in the Diaspora can liberate the Oromo people. I still believe that all types of Oromo Diaspora organizations only play a supportive role for the Oromo national struggle in Oromia. I always question their seriousness, commitment, and principles. Sisai, for his part, did not make a distinction between the Oromo Diaspora and other parts of the movement. Therefore, he sought unity among all existing organizations. I frequently discussed these issues with Sisai. As I have recounted, it is my opinion that we used to have similar political positions until the OLF made some political mistakes in the 1990s and failed to correct these mistakes.

By the mid to late 1990s Sisai had started to search for an alternative political approach. Consequently, he played a central role in creating a united movement. It resulted in his taking a lead in designing and forming the United Liberation Forces of Oromia (ULFO) in 2000. Considering the behavior of Oromo political elites and the characteristics of the Oromo political organizations, I was not convinced that ULFO would be the kind of strong organization that Oromos need to liberate themselves. But, considering the weaknesses of the Oromo national movement and its organizational manifestation, I supported the idea of forming the ULFO. It was my observation that Sisai was disappointed in the performance of this umbrella organization. I still believe that ULFO can play a limited political role in the Diaspora and support the Oromo national struggle in Oromia, provided that it will

become a cohesive umbrella organization that can work on specific political and diplomatic activities.

Sisai and I also frequently exchanged our views on *The Kindling Point* and *The Turning Point* writings which were issued for nearly 20 years. Most of the time I received information about new issues from Sisai himself, and he sent me copies of the writings regularly. *The Kindling Point* was a very informative magazine and it provided a serious and critical analysis of Oromo politics, ideology, and culture. Frequently I felt and expressed to Sisai that I suspected that he had something to do with the writings. He denied that he was involved in the magazine one way or the other, but he appreciated and glorified the writings as most Oromos and others did. The style of writing, the essence of the information, the honesty, truthfulness, and boldness of *The Kindling Point* left in me great admiration for its writers, who turned out to be Sisai and Qabbanee collaborating under a pen name, H. Q. Loltu. Of course, like others I learned that both of them anonymously produced the magazine and that they had made a pact only to announce that they were the writers of *The Kindling Point* when one of them would depart by death. That was what Bonnie told us at Sisai's funeral in Washington, DC on August 27, 2005. It is my opinion that Sisai with his colleague, Qabbanee, engaged in an innovative way to advance the Oromo national struggle through this publication.

Since both Sisai and I believed in the liberation of the Oromo nation and the restoration of *gadaa* democracy, we tacitly agreed to work on things we agreed upon and to continue to seriously and honestly debate issues that we disagreed on. Since we trusted and respected each other, we learned a lot from each other. I always

miss his warm friendship and comradeship, his engaging discussions and debates, his insightful comments and ideas, his provocative questions and political metaphors, and his support and encouragement of my scholarship at the annual conferences of both of the Oromo Studies Association and African Studies Association as well as other Oromo and African political conferences. Finally, it is impossible for me to fully convey the depth of his honest and committed friendship, his personal integrity, his commitment and sacrifice for his people and other oppressed groups and peoples, his courage and bravery in confronting the enemies of his people and his determination to promote the principles of self-determination and social justice.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Sisai Ibssa was a pioneering Oromo nationalist scholar who played a central role in planning and organizing the Oromo in Diaspora, influencing Oromo in and out of Oromia with his powerful advocacy and writing and building Oromo organizations and institutions such as the Union of Oromo in North America, the Oromo Studies Association, and Oromo cultural and community centers. He tirelessly and selflessly performed multi-faceted tasks; he was a revolutionary theoretician, thinker, writer, ideologue, organizer, and a spokesperson for the Oromo nation from his home in North America. For me, he was one among an honored group of Oromo heroes and heroines who bravely, boldly, and selflessly worked day and night to restore Oromo dignity, peoplehood, and statehood so that the Oromo people can achieve their political freedom and join the international community as an

independent nation. Young Oromo women and men can learn a lot from his scholarship, philosophy, and ideology. They can build on the foundations that Oromo heroines and heroes like Sisai have left behind and develop projects for liberating the Oromo nation and creating the Democratic Republic of Oromia. If they do that, they will be fulfilling his vision.

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Testing the Thesis of *The Invention of Ethiopia*: Reinterpreting Menelik's Conquest of Harerge and Its Impact on the Oromo 1887-1900

Mohammed Hassen

This article is inspired by my reading of *The Invention of Ethiopia: the Making of Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa* authored by Sisai Ibssa and Bonnie Holcomb.[1] I intend to use their ideas to more closely examine and interpret the data from Harerge which I used in a paper presented at a workshop at Cambridge University in 1980, several years before the publication of *The Invention of Ethiopia* (1990).[2] Specifically, I intend to test the authors' thesis of dependent colonialism, with appreciation of the fact that their scholarship contributed to our understanding of the colonial nature of the Ethiopian state in particular

Journal of Oromo Studies, Vol. 18, No. 1 (July 2011), pp. 109-150.

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and the rise of a dependent colonial state in northeast Africa in general. Specifically, this article applies the thesis of the book to Menelik's conquest of Harerge and interprets its impact on the Oromo political, cultural and religious institutions.

Reminiscence of Sisai

It is with pleasure that I dedicate this treatment of some of my earliest collected data to the memory of the late Sisai Ibssa. He was a militant, intellectual, and revolutionary Oromo nationalist, who is widely recognized as one of the founding members of both the Union of Oromo Students in North America (UOSNA, later known as UONA) and the Oromo Studies Association (OSA). From 1975 to August 2005, when he died, Sisai was an outstanding and very successful intellectual organizer. One of his many achievements was the role he played in making Oromo studies intellectually respectable by presenting scholarly papers at international conferences and constantly challenging established "wisdom" about the Oromo in Ethiopian historiography. When Sisai Ibssa and few of his fellow Oromo broke away from the Ethiopian Students Union in North America to establish the Union of Oromo Students in North America (UOSNA), the issue of the Oromo struggle for freedom was a subject almost completely taboo in the intellectual and academic world of the time. Sisai Ibssa shattered that taboo through his sharp pen, blowing apart the wall of silence surrounding the issue of the Oromo struggle and, in the process, changed the course of history. Sisai became well known for his daunting courage and organizational skill.

Under his leadership, he made the small number of members of UOSNA confident in themselves, assured that they might pick up the torch of freedom in North America, the part of the world where they had sought and found refuge from a hostile Ethiopian regime. What Sisai Ibssa demonstrated by relentless effort was that struggle changes how people perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others; he proved that as realities change, minds change. What was taboo in 1974, the formation of a separate union of Oromo students in North America, became a reality with the formation of UOSNA in 1975. UOSNA, with Sisai Ibssa as part of the leadership, embarked, without minimizing the difficulty of the task, on undoing a long-standing Abyssinian legacy of dividing the Oromo along regional and religious lines in order to dominate them. From the creative clutter of UOSNA's early publications, mostly authored by Sisai Ibssa, flowed the ideological electricity that powered the transformation of the Oromo struggle from nonexistence into a legitimate part of the liberation movement whose purpose was to struggle for freedom of the nation of Oromia. Long before a single OLF leader visited North America, UOSNA under the leadership of Sisai Ibssa popularized the name OLF and its slogan of "Oromia Shall be Free." Long before the OLF office was established in Washington D.C. in 1991, UOSNA, under a leadership which included Sisai Ibssa, became the nerve center of OLF politics and activities in North America.

Sisai Ibssa was an activist intellectual whose conviction and great passion had a huge impact on Oromo politics in North America. It is important to understand that at the core of his passion was the unity of Oromo

and their political organizations. This intensity made him a formidable advocate of the unity of Oromo political forces and persistent defender of the liberation of Oromia. Above all, Sisai Ibssa believed in the politics of reason. He treated everyone with courtesy, even those who disagreed with him. In discussing Oromo issues, he brought an inexhaustible supply of optimism about the eventual liberation of Oromia. Sisai thrived on ideas, big and powerful ideas that demonstrated the Abyssinian colonization of Oromia and its destruction of Oromo political and cultural institutions. Sisai Ibssa's sharp mind, powerful language, wide horizon, unflinching commitment to the liberation of Oromia, together with his remarkable and easy-going personality, made him one of most influential individuals in the Oromo Diaspora in North America.

Sisai was a thoughtful and cultured man as well, who lived with conviction for and through the drama of Oromo politics. With his supreme intellectual confidence and astonishing stamina, he always argued for and supported the mobilization of Oromo human, material resources for their own liberation. I do not know any other Oromo intellectual who foresaw the twists and turns of Oromo political events since 1991 with such clarity as did Sisai Ibssa. He was blessed with a mind always eager to learn and grow and went beyond the politics of personality that weakened and divided Oromo political forces. The prospects for unity of Oromo forces always filled Sisai with excitement and he worked for its realization to the last breath of his life. At the end of his life, I was fortunate enough to be by his hospital bed. During the two hours I spent with him, Sisai never talked about his illness and the imminent death he was

facing. Instead he talked entirely about the urgent need for uniting Oromo political forces for the liberation of Oromia. That was the measure of a remarkable man, whose untimely death was a terrible loss for the Oromo national liberation struggle. Though he died physically, the rich intellectual legacy he left behind will continue inspiring the struggle for liberation of Oromia.

Testing the Thesis

Let me turn to his major published work. Although *The Invention of Ethiopia: the Making of Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa* was published almost two decades ago, the book's primary argument is as valid today as it was in 1990. The core arguments in *The Invention of Ethiopia: the Making of Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa* can be divided into three broad categories. First is the thesis that the modern Ethiopian empire was built with European weapons of destruction supplied exclusively and strategically to Abyssinian forces eager to conquer Oromo and neighboring territories. Second, European technical skills were offered to Abyssinian elites to assisted them in fashioning a state apparatus designed to occupy conquered Oromo and other southern territories. Third, the newly created Ethiopian empire was a colonial entity characterized as a *dependent* colonial state, meaning one that required the continuing support of European powers to be sustained. This article will demonstrate the validity of these arguments.

Some of my more recent research data, drawn primarily from diplomatic reports of United States and United Kingdom foreign service personnel stationed in Ethiopia from 1900 to the 1960s, provide further corroboration of Holcomb and Ibssa's argument that Ethiopia

was indeed a case of dependent colonialism. These documents, recently made public by the National Archives of the United State through the Freedom of Information Act, reveal a clear pattern of decision-making and political control that confirm without a doubt Holcomb and Ibssa's hypothesis that Ethiopia functioned as a dependent colonial state, not only as it was established in the late 1800s but as it continued through the 1960s and beyond. During the 1960s, Edward Korry, the U.S Ambassador to Ethiopia, was occasionally referred to as "...an ex-officio Prime Minister of Ethiopia." It was during his "...term of office that Ethiopian officials were, in fact, being promoted and demoted through his recommendation to the palace" (Wolde-Mariam 2003:91). This paper will demonstrate that there is ample documentation in the historical record to demonstrate the dependent nature of the Ethiopian colonial state going back to the conquest of Harerge in 1887.

Menelik's Conquest of Harerge

Menelik's interest in the conquest of the Oromo in Harerge was preceded by the annual cattle and slave raids conducted by his grandfather, King Sahle Sellassie of Shawa (1813-1848). According to Holcomb and Ibssa (1990:83), Sahle Selassie was the first king of Shawa to have direct communication with European powers, the British in particular. His direct communication brought British and French diplomats and missionaries to his court in Shawa. The king "...saw the arrival of Europeans both as an opportunity and as a solution to [his] immediate problems (ibid:132), i.e., an opportunity for providing him with weapons for his war against the superior Oromo cavalry and an opportunity for solving Shawa's

lack of exportable commodities through access to the rich resources of his Oromo neighbors. In his letter for the Bristish monarch dated January 20, 1840, the king requested "...may it please you to assist me particularly in sending guns [and] cannons... (Isenberg and Krapf 1968: 197). A British missionary at his court added, "...in order for him to be absolutely superior to the [Oromo] cavalry, we need to provide him with guns and cannons" (Krapf, 1840: folio, 127-28). Sahle Selassie was successful in obtaining what he requested and thus with the guns and cannons provided by the British and the French, he began a "systematic destruction of the Oromo property and people through conquest and occupation of the Oromo territory" (Holcomb & Ibssa: 85). Sahle Sellassie's policy of the destruction of the Oromo and their property in Shawa was then extended to Harerge by his grandson, King Menelik of Shawa (1865-1889), as we shall see.

Sisai Ibssa and Bonnie Holcomb rightly argue that the creation of the modern Ethiopian empire "was the result of an alliance between the major European powers and Abyssinian princes" (preface: xv-xvi). The power of this argument becomes clear with King Menelik, whose very idea of imperial ambition was cultivated by the French support for his cause. In fact, his idea of building by empire was proposed by a French businessman, Arnoux, in 1875, who wrote:

> 'From Shoa...will arise the signal for the regeneration of Ethiopia; from your reign will date...a new era, more glorious and brilliant.' 'France,' Arnoux stressed, 'would act as the catalyst in this national regeneration.' Menelik responded to these ideas with great emotion, telling his visitor,

> 'you have fathered my most secret desires. It is God, without doubt, who has sent you to me. I am happy to listen to your counsels. The French are my friends; it is upon them that I shall base the hope of my reign (quoted in Marcus 1975:44, cited in Holcomb and Ibssa 1990: 94).

Menelik's hope soon materialized. Lord Lytton shows that the French provided him with guns and cannons, trained his soldiers, equipped them with the skill of occupying conquered territories and enabled him to achieve technological superiority over the Oromo cavalry. He writes:

> Menelik...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 his troops with firearms and did much else to organize his campaigns.... The [Oromo] were thus conquered by the [Abyssinians] for the first time in recorded history.Without massive European help the [Oromo] would not have been conquered at all (Lytton 1967:160).

With his French trained and armed soldiers, Menelik was ready to undertake the conquest of Harerge. However, he faced two immediate obstacles. The first was the Egyptian occupation of the city of Harar in 1875 and the second the formidable resistance put up by the Arsi Oromo on his way to Harer. Menelik was alarmed and angered with Egyptian occupation of Harar as well as by his inability to import weapons through the ports of Zeila

and Berbera on the Gulf of Aden. In a letter to Queen Victoria, he stated: "I am about to die from anger because I have been unable to bring in (even) one new...rifle, cannon or worker" (Prouty 1986:48). In another letter to European powers dated, December 6, 1878, Menelik states that the Egyptian blockade prevented arms and skilled Europeans from reaching his kingdom of Shawa and that he had the power to take the port of Tadjura, "...but still hoped to get it without fighting through the justice of European governments" (FO 95/737: folio 176).

Emperor Yohannes' crushing victory over the Egyptians in 1876 at Gura in what is today Eritrea and his desire to send an army to conquer the city of Harer might have influenced Menelik's decision to embark without delay on his conquest of the Arsi and Harerge Oromo (Sellasie 1975:217). This means by the 1870s, the Oromo of Harerge faced colonial invaders, the forces of King Menelik of Shawa or Emperor Yohannes of Tigray and the Egyptians, the Italians, as well as the French and the British indirectly (Caulk 2002:55).

Asma Giyorgis, a contemporary eyewitness historian, concluded that Yohannes and Menelik made a firm agreement in 1878 at Boru Meda (in the region of Wallo) to plunder, enslave and destroy the Oromo power and reduce them to *gabbars*, i.e. serfs (Tafla 1987:755). Asma Giyorgis's conclusion is supported by historical evidence. According to Teshale Tibabu, a prominent Ethiopian historian, "the rise of modern Ethiopia heralded the demise of Oromo power" (Tibabu 1995:39). Following the Boru Meda agreement, Menelik felt Shawa's northern frontier was safe and he turned his attention to the Arsi and Harerge Oromo.

There was no other way of reaching Harerge except through the land of Arsi Oromo, therefore Menelik had to conquer the land of Arsi in order to open the way to the vast region of Harerge. What facilitated the conquest in both Arsi and Harerge was the building of the Awash River bridge. According to Holcomb and Ibssa, it was Alfred Ilg, Menelik's European advisor, who built the Awash River bridge, which "...was used as a tool of aggression...[and] played a significant role" in his plunder of cattle and slaves (1990:124-25). At the same time that he was harvesting material rewards from sponsoring the slave trade and collecting a tax of two or three Maria Theresa dollars per head for slaves sold in the market of Rogge in his kingdom (Delibo 1974: 213-14), Menelik appealed to European powers to provide him with weapons on the pretense that "...he might join them in the suppression of the slave trade" (Caulk 2002:56). It was his European advisors who invented Menelik's policy of "suppressing the slave trade" to coincide with the expressed interests of European powers. According to Holcomb and Ibssa, "[t]he technology & advice of the Europeans" facilitated Menelik's conquest of the Oromo (133). This was certainly the case in Menelik's approach to the conquest of Hararege.

In 1879, Menelik embarked on "his most sustained and most bloody" Arsi campaign (Darkwah 1975: 108). Those campaigns not only rewarded Menelik with a huge booty of cattle, slaves and other goods, but also they broke the backbone of Arsi Oromo resistance, thus paving the way for the conquest of Harerge. "Menelik personally participated in many of the battles in Arsi. In one of them in December 1883, he barely managed to escape with his life" (Zewde 1991:62). And yet his campaign in the land

of the Arsi Oromo was devastating to the people while the very wealth he plundered from the Arsi Oromo paid for the imported European weapons he used to conquer the Oromo of Hararge.

Despite the huge toll they suffered, Arsi Oromo put up a stiff resistance against King Menelik, whom they prevented from occupying their land for seven years. Interestingly it was in 1879 that Menelik began his campaign against Arsi Oromo, who totally lacked firepower. But it was not until 1886, when Menelik had amassed 50,000 guns and a good number of artillery pieces from Europe, that he was finally able to break their resistance. In the final decisive battle, it is estimated that Menelik conquered the Arsi Oromo only after killing thousands of their warriors. King Menelik's soldiers slaughtered, systematically mutilated and sold Arsi Oromo into slavery (Haji 1994:21). The same fate awaited the Oromo in Hararge.

Abbas Haji has pointed out that Arsi Oromo were conquered mainly because of two interrelated factors. First, they lacked any form of modern firepower. Second, Menelik's soldiers used their superiority in modern European weapons of destruction to mutilate and castrate the people who fell under their control. The mutilation and castration were part of Menelik's strategy of breaking the stubborn resistance of the Arsi (Haji 1994:21). An English traveler who passed through land of the Arsi four years after the conquest had this to say about the devastation he observed:

> Now was the time for the terrible...[Oromo] to appear. Where was the country teeming with lusty war-like people? Certainly not here! What we found as we progressed was only a few poor

> villages of a hundred huts each and the native presenting the most abject appearance imaginable. Only four years ago they must have been a fine race of men. They loved to tell us of their former glory; their eyes would light up, and they would forget for the instant their present condition. Now the Abyssinians are the masters, and these poor people are only a remnant of a great tribe.... The Arussa [Arsi Oromo], here as elsewhere, were regarded as slaves and were even sold in the market as such. The troops were thoroughly drilled and armed with Remingtons or French rifles (Smith 1896:123-27).

The ruthless nature of Menelik's warfare and the devastation of the Arsi established a pattern followed in Harerge. By 1883, the hard blow Menelik was striking in Arsi was also strongly felt among the Ittu Oromo in Charchar or western Harerge. It was feared that Menelik's soldiers would attack even the city of Harar (Bernovuille, 1950:102-3). Nevertheless, his soldiers did not venture to attack in 1883, for two primary reasons; first, because of Ittu Oromo resistance in Charchar and second, because of Egyptian military presence in the city of Harar. Between 1883 and the end of 1884, Menelik's general *Dajazmach* Walda Gabrel Abba Satan was not able to crush Ittu Oromo resistance. According to Badir Kabir Mohammed (1995:45), who conducted research among the Ittu Oromo, at the Battle of Matahara and of Bordodde in 1883 and 1884 respectively, the Ittu warriors were victorious. However, by the middle of 1885 Walda Gabrel with his superior fire power had come back to defeat the Ittu. As among the Arsi Oromo, in Ittu land also, it was firearms that made Oromo spears

useless in battle. It was firearms which broke the backbone of Oromo resistance. No wonder that the Oromo believed that firearms "came out of hell, [to] annihilate" Oromo power (de Salviac: 350).

After defeating the Ittu Oromo Walda Gabrel established his headquarters at Galamso, the first Amhara garrison town in the region of Harerge. The establishment of the Galamso garrison represented the seat of a colonizing Amhara power in Ittu land. This beginning exemplifies in its particulars the thesis of dependent colonialism—establishing this garrison that would have been impossible without the European hardware and strategic support. From the well-defended garrison, Walda Gabrel's soldiers raided the Oromo for slaves, cattle and grain. The raids were devastating to the unarmed Ittu Oromo. According to Timothy Fernyhough, Walda Gabrel's attacks "after June 1885 on the Ittu Oromo... left tracts of their territory depopulated and lands uncultivated. The southern part of their region had few resources left when renderpest and famine struck at the end of the decade" (Fernyhough, 1986:185).

An unexpected Egyptian evacuation from Harar in 1885 appears to have quickened the pace of Menelik's preparation for his conquest of Harerge. In April 1886, Amir Abdullahi of Harer inadvertently precipitated the occupation of the city of Harar. By massacring "members of an Italian expedition at Jildessa, to the north of Harar" (Zewide 1991:. 63), Abdullahi prompted Menelik to capture Harer before the Italians occupied the city and the province itself. While putting the finishing touches to his preparation, Menelik sent his embassy to Rome "... to find out the Italians plans" for capturing Harar (Caulk 2002:56). His goal was to capture the city by promis-

ing to punish Amir Abdullahi in the name of avenging Italian Christian blood! The pretence that his campaign against Abdullahi "...was inspired by the injustice done the Italians is an example of the ease with which Menelik could represent his policies as coinciding with those of" the Italians (Caulk ibid).

Meanwhile, Menelik urged his general to march towards Harar. In September 1886 Walda Gabrel abandoned his base at Galmaso in Ittu Oromo land and started his slow move towards the city of Harer, "...some two hundred fifty kilometers" east of the garrison town of Galamso (Ibid. 57). By November 1886 Walda Gabrel arrived at Hirna, about 130 kilometers west of the city of Harar, where he faced the army of Amir Abdullahi.

> At about 9 o'clock in the evening of the same night, the army of Abdullahi fired fireworks and made the sound of their cannons heard in order to terrorize. The army of...Walda Gabrel saw this and was frightened. They thought he might burn them with their various kinds of fire; they packed their tents and deserted by night.... When he [Walda Gabrel] followed them and begged them to return, even his own servants shot at him and left (Tafla: 773).

Walda Gabrel's soldiers fled and returned to Entotto (Gabra-Selassie 1959 EC: 144), Menelik's seat of power above the Oromo village of Finfinnee. This easy victory lulled Amir Abdullahi into a false sense of security. Instead of mobilizing the people against the common enemy, Amir Abdullahi continued with his war against the non-Muslim Oromo without achieving anything.

Because of distance involved and slowness of communication of the time, Menelik did not know what had happened to the soldiers of Walda Gabrel. He kept his march towards Harar secret and crossed the Awash River into Arsi lands in November 1886, where he completed the conquest of Arsi Oromo (described above) and opened the way into Ittu land. By the second half of December 1886, Menelik reoccupied the garrison town of Galmso. King Menelik was marching towards Harar with full confidence of victory because he had come to learn of Amir Abdullahi's military weakness through his agents in the city of Harer, Asma Giyorgis, the famous learned Amhara scholar and his comrade, Mikael. They arrived in Harar in 1885 to serve under Father Taurin, who was in charge of Catholic mission in the city of Harar. Both had mastery of the Oromo language. Asma Giyorgis and Mikael, spied upon Amir Abdullahi with "Taurin's connivance" (Caulk 2002: 336), gathering vital information about the weakness and strength of the Muslim army and Abdullahi's chaotic government. For almost two years Menelik knew about every important political and military event that took place in the city of Harar, while Abdullahi did not know anything about Menelik's determined march for his own city with speed. It became obvious that Abdullahi was no match for Menelik, a cunning empire-builder with a European adviser always at his ear, who, with this approach would soon outmaneuver even the Italian imperialists.

Amir Abdullahi, handicapped by the lack of knowledge of his enemy's strength, appealed at the eleventh hour to the Oromo and the Somali for support against the common enemy. With his trust in Allah and an appeal to the victories of the time of Imam Ahmad

(known popularly as Ahmad Gran, 1527-1543), Abdullahi revived the jihadic spirit within the city of Harar. However, outside the wall he did very little except to construct three stone forts at Warable and another at Bilawa (FO78/4077/folio 92). Although thousands of Oromo responded to Abdullahi's call for war against Menelik, they did not organize themselves into a cohesive fighting force. In fact, the Afran Qallo army under Orfo Jilo is said to have fought against Abdullahi at the Battle of Chiracha in 1886. Orfo, who had a large group of followers in the Gara Mullata region, did not come to the battle at Challanqo even though he himself was later to fight against a Shawan force.

According to accounts from Oromo oral tradition, thousands of Muslim Oromo warriors responded to Amir Abdullahi's slogan of "let us fight against the infidels and die for Islam" (Hassen 1973:42). In all, Abdullahi hoped to organize about 24,000 warriors from among Muslim Oromo around the city (FO78/4077/folio 92). However, he did not have the necessary support system for maintaining such a large cadre of volunteer warriors. In fact, he discouraged volunteers from coming to Harar so as not to overwhelm the city's limited resources. What is more, Abdullahi did not have a trained crack force with which to maintain discipline. It was this leader who was about to face Menelik, whose soldiers, were trained and armed by the French. The ultimate tragedy was that Abbdullahi was never able to coordinate his volunteer warriors, most of whom arrived after the battle was lost. On the day of the battle itself, his forces "...were out outgunned, outnumbered and outmaneuvered" (Zewde 1991:62-63). At the Battle of Challanqo on January 7, 1887, Abdullahi "commanded no more than 3,000-4,000 of which a mere

1,000 had firearms. Perhaps no more than half of these were in good working order. Menelik had a minimum of 20,000-25,000. As many as 10,000-12,000 of these belonged to a crack corps under Menelik's personal command armed with the newest breech loading rifles in his arsenal" (Caulk 1971:15).

The Battle of Challanqo was a landmark in the history of Harerge because it was "...the beginning of systematic destruction of the Oromo property and people through conquest and occupation of the Oromo territory" (Holcomb & Ibssa 1990:85). It also marked the establishment of permanent Amhara administrative centers among the Oromo in Harerge. As will be examined more fully below, Holcomb and Ibssa have identified the process by which the society was restructured by pointing out that these centers marked "the birth of settler class" in Harerge (ibid: 108). It was also a landmark event because, with a single victory, Menelik was able to capture the city of Harar, which had been the seat of an Islamic civilization at least for seven centuries. No previous Amhara leader had been able to permanently occupy the city of Harar. None had arrived armed by European weapons or nor had been strategically advised by Europeans. This itself, though often cited as a major achievement for Menelik, was actually a major milestone in the establishment of a new dependent colonial state system. What is more, the occupation of Harar "was a leap in the advance toward the sea."

The occupation of Harar opened to him what French traders admitted to be the best and safest route from Shawa to the coast, that through Harer to Zeila on the north Somali coast (Caulk 2002:58). Harar became the major entrepot in the arms trade in the region. In fact, as

the richest commercial center in the region, the customs of Harar served as collateral for weapons imported by Menelik to Shawa (ibid. 298). The conquest of Harar was also a landmark event because that victory gave into Menelik's hands the richest province (Marcus 1966:271), whose fertile soil and wealth inspired the single largest population movement from Abyssinia during the last quarter of the nineteenth century—the trek to Harerge. It was a landmark because the occupation of Harar brought Menelik closer to the sea from where he was able import huge amounts of European weaponry with which he created the largest armed force in Black Africa (Kukham & Bekele 1980:8-20). Finally, it was also a landmark in modern Ethiopian history in the sense that it was shortly after Menelik's resounding victory at Challanqo that the Oromo village of Finfinneee was renamed Addis Ababa, serving as a bridgehead for Menelik's colonial expansion into the southern parts of the country, as the nerve center of his empire, and as the political, cultural and economic powerhouse for the Amhara people (Benti 2007: 178). Holcomb and Ibssa point out, in developing the thesis of dependent colonialism, that the establishment of Addis Ababa as the institutional center of the new colonial empire would not have been possible without the control of Harar and the port achieved through the strategic supply of European military hardware and advice. That landmark victory was an essential part of the formula for the otherwise unachievable control of the region.

A day after the battle of Challanqo the Oromo fought against Menelik's soldiers at a place called Qarsa, where Oromo warriors were decimated. "A few days after the battle of Qarsa," Menelik arrived at Hammarressa, about five kilometers west of the city of Harar. Menelik asked

Amir Abdullahi to submit peacefully. Abdullahi rejected the offer and fled towards Somali territory. Menelik entered the city in triumph (Mohammed:51).

A few days after his entry into Harar, in a letter to his wife, Taytu, Menelik boasted "By God's grace...I destroyed all [Amir's] men...I captured all his rifles and cannon; I entered his capital" (Caulk 2002:58). However, in another letter he wrote at the same time to European officials on the coast of the Gulf of Aden, Menelik established "...his claim to Harar by right of conquest" and explained the reason for his conquest was avenging the Italian Christian blood shed by Amir Abdullahi (Caulk 2002:58).

After settling everything in the city, Menelik turned his large army towards pacifying the Oromo east of the city of Harar, a process which took several days and rewarded him with huge booty, which he distributed among his soldiers for a week (Gabre-Selassie 1975:147). Menelik quickly realized that conquest alone did not guarantee control, as the Oromo and the Somalis continued their resistance. What was needed was effective occupation. Holcomb and Ibssa rightly describe as the: "necessary step in colonialism.... Occupation is the sustained and intimate involvement of settlers in attempting to install institutions that will guarantee permanent alteration of the production relations including channeling the application of force necessary to accomplish the task" (Holcomb & Ibssa 1990: 17-18).

As with all forms of colonialism the driving force behind Menelik's colonialism was economic. The search for cattle, coffee, ivory, land, slaves, new sources of food for Menelik's soldiers, the plunder of Oromo property, forced labor and the alienation of Oromo land drove the

engine of conquest and sustained the effort to continue to reap the advantages which led to establishing a colonial state. Some aspects of Menelik's colonizing policies have similarities with European approaches in other parts of Africa. As European colonists dominated the economic resources and controlled the military, judiciary and the politics of their colonies, the Abyssinian settlers dominated the economic resources of the Oromo in Harerge and established new mechanisms to control totally the military, judiciary and political power, institutionalizing the monopoly of their advantages (Hassen 1999:140-41, Hassen 1990:198-199, Hiwet 1975:4). As Sisai rightly points out in his book however, the distinction of dependent colonialism is that the tools and the strategy for building this arrangement were derived from European sources, without which Menelik's colonial state would not have been achievable.

As a crucial step in the permanent occupation of Harerge, Menelik established the provincial administrative center in the city of Harar and "appointed his cousin, Makonnen, to serve as *dajazmach* and governor of the new province" at the end of January 1887 (Caulk 2002:57). This appointment was the beginning of Makonnen's rise to power, becoming the second most famous leader in Ethiopia after Menelik. Until his death in 1906, Makonnen remained the governor of the richest and biggest province in the newly-created Ethiopian empire. It was Makonnen who was responsible for the establishment of various fortified garrison towns for the purpose of controlling the conquered people and "...to protect the settlers from the resistance of the conquered indigenous people" (Holcomb & Ibssa 1990:110), i.e., the Oromo and Somalis in Harerge.

After establishing on firm ground his administration in Harerge, in February 1887 Menelik returned to his newly-named capital Addis Ababa loaded with goods looted from the Oromo and cash indemnity collected from the people of city of Harar. He used the latter to pay for weapons without delay. Above all, he retuned to Shawa with full knowledge that his conquest of Harerge would revolutionize the flow of modern European weaponry to his court. According to Sisai Ibssa and Bonnie Holcomb, before the end of 1887 "...there were hundreds of thousands of rifles and artillery pieces complete with ammunition available to Menelik's army (1990:105). The formula for establishing a dependent colonial empire was implemented immediately.

Consequences of Menelik's Conquests of Harerge

Holcomb and Ibssa point out that following their defeat in the battlefield the Oromo of Harerge were incorporated into the Ethiopian empire through a distinctive process which involved settlement of aliens on Oromo territory, massive and forcible extraction of Oromo labor, suppression of Oromo, organizational, political, and cultural life, and heavy militarization of the settler group for the reinforcement of newly introduced mechanisms for the administration (see 1990:19).

Menelik left behind in Harerge tens of thousands of settlers under the command of *Dajazmach* Makonnen. The governor not only maintained the Egyptian system of agricultural taxes in kind (described in Hassen 1973:45, Caulk 2002:286), but also extended it by hundreds of kilometers beyond the furthest limits reached by the Egyptian administration. The Egyptian system had

been based on officials named *malaq*, *garad*, *damin* and *dogins* who operated in Anniya and Ittu areas. Mokonnen added one new innovation to the Egyptian system. For the first time, a few Oromos were appointed *dogins.* However, under the new Amhara administration, the tax burden on the Oromo in Harerge doubled and tripled over that experienced under the Egyptian administration, when the Oromo paid just two types of agricultural taxes (Hassen 2008:53, Caulk, 2002:286).

First, the Egyptian confiscation of Oromo land was limited in scope, unlike the Abyssinian which transformed the Oromo populations into landless serfs. Second, under the short-lived Egyptian administration there was no forced labor required of Oromo farmers. Third, and most importantly, Egyptian soldiers were paid salaries and therefore, they did not depend on Oromo labor for daily survival. Under the new Amhara administration the Oromo continued paying the old Egyptian taxes plus owing additional new taxes while providing forced labor for the officials, soldiers and settlers. How did it happen?

According to Sisai Ibssa and Bonnie Holcomb, Menelik's conquest provided "immediate benefits" to the Abyssinians who according to Richard Caulk, "...rushed to take advantage of the new opportunities that miraculously opened up for them in the conquered regions" (1990:111). This was particularly true in the case of Harerge. Tens of thousands of settlers flocked to Harerge following Menelik's conquest. The settlers depended entirely on Oromo labor and resources to sustain them. As they came from Abyssinia, the guns they carried came from Europe. Their arrival in Harerge "...marked the birth of the settler class" (Holcomb & Ibssa 1990:108)

among the Oromo in the province. The new settlers were known appropriately as *naftana*, gun-carriers.

The conquered Oromo, together with their land, were given to the *naftanya* in lieu of salary. The number of the Oromo peasants distributed among the colonists depended on the density of the population within a given locality. The military commanders were allocated land and laborers, known as *gabbars*, according to their ranks. The *gabbar* served them and provided them with everything they needed. This means the *naftyana* controlled both the labor and the produce of Oromo *gabbars*. According one governor of Harerge in the 1920s, the *gabbar* system reduced the landless Oromo "to something worse than domestic slavery" (Hassen 1973:44). A contemporary scholar observed that "the multiple exactions imposed on the Oromo *gabbars* meant the loss of a considerable portion of the [*gabbars*]' production, onerous labor service and manifold other impositions (Hussein 1976:14).

One characteristic of dependent colonialism is the relative poverty of the dependent colonizing force. Unlike the Egyptians, who, as a straightforward colonial power, paid their soldiers salaries, the Abyssinian soldiers were unpaid and they had to be supported primarily through raids, looting, plundering, burning, and enslaving captives. The new governor alone had 25,000 unpaid soldiers. He had a number of deputies who commanded thousands of soldiers. The raids were, for the most part, against the Oromo and Somali nomads. According to De Salviac, the beautiful Oromo land was "...flooded with blood and the orgy of pillage" (De Salviac 2005:349). There were a number of instances when the new settlers resorted to open brigandage, raiding and looting the

peaceful Oromo peasants. Any real or contrived Oromo resistance was used as a pretext for plundering and "civilizing" the people. According to De Salviac, an eyewitness to the Abyssinian soldiers "civilizing mission":

The conduct of Abyssinian armies invading a land is simply barbaric. They contrive a sudden irruption, more often at night. At the daybreak, the fire begins; surprised men in the huts or in the fields are three quarters massacred and horribly mutilated; the women and the children and men are reduced to captivity; the soldiers lead the frightened herds toward the camp, take away the grain and the flour which they load on the shoulders of their prisoners spurred on by blows of the whip, destroy the harvest, then, glutted with booty and intoxicated with blood, go to walk a bit further from the devastation. That is what they call 'civilizing mission.' If the first time, they say, the people are not crushed, they rebel, and the must be followed by a great expedition to civilize them entirely (Salviac 2005:349).

The new settlers in Harege were described by a disgruntled Italian in the city of Harer, as the refuse of Shawa, "whom Menelik had shoved out of the capital" (Caulk 1971:16). These unpaid Christian settlers—removed from their own country with deeply-seated prejudice against the Oromo, with whom they differed in language, religion, and manners of life—were compared with locusts. As one observer put it, "Luckily locusts are a migratory animal and pass on; the Amhara stay" (quoted in Caulk 1971:16). Or, in the words of another observer, "locusts destroy only what is in the field. The soldiers destroy what is in store" (Fo1/8, folio 252-53). According to Walter Plowden, a very perceptive British diplomat, "The Abyssinians look upon their non-Chris-

tian neighbours as savages to be plundered" (Ibid). In Harerge the well-armed and permanently settled human "locusts" preyed upon the unarmed Oromo peasantry. On the slightest pretext the settlers raided the Oromo for cattle and slaves (Fernyhough 1986:185).

Characteristic of dependent colonialism, the heavy yoke of supporting approximately two to three hundred thousand new settlers in Harerge fell on the Oromo peasants. The occupying settlers, or *naftanya* (gunbearers), crushed every attempt of Oromo resistance with merciless use of firearms. In 1888, Oromo resistance in the region of Babile, east of the city of Harar, was brutally crushed. In 1890, on the pretext of crushing Anniya Oromo attempt at resistance, *Grazmach* Dassalan, *Dajazmach* Makonnen's lieutenant, attacked defenseless Anniya Oromo pastoralists and captured much livestock (Caulk 2002:291). In February 1891, *Dajazmach* Makonnen pillaged "the Ittu Oromo on the pretext that they refused to pay taxes. In reality they had no means of meeting the governor's demands" (Caulk 2002:265). In August 1891, when "...it was feared that the Oromo might revolt" (Caulk 2002:325), terror was unleashed on innocent Oromo in the region of Babile. Finally, in March 1893, Makonnen himself conducted a punitive "... campaign against the Oromo of Jarso, north and northeast of Harer town" (Caulk 2002:363). What becomes very clear from these instances is that an Oromo attempt at resistance or their inability to meet the demands of arrogant commanders were used as a pretext for plundering peaceful Oromo and Somali pastoralists. The reason for this was obvious. "...[T]he whole province [was] swarming with unemployed soldiers whom their commanders counted on supporting by the

pillage of pastoralists in the lowlands east of Harar and in the Wabe Shabale [valley] (Caulk 2002:336). Oromo farmers who could not escape from wanton plunder and killings reacted in such a way that people who thought of themselves as brave before Menelik's conquest "like lions" were reduced to being described as "frightened sheep" (Mohammed 1995:50).

As Richard Caulk observed, only four short years after the battle of Challanqo, between two and three hundred thousand Abyssinian settlers rushed "to take advantage of the new opportunities" in the vast, fertile and newly-conquered region of Harerge (Caulk 2002:291). "Not aware of the combination of forces that enabled them to move into rich, long-coveted regions and to become established there in positions of authority over the indigenous people, these Abyssinian settlers assumed that their own innate superiority over the local residents accounted for this accomplishment" (Holcomb & Ibssa, 111). The beneficiaries of the colonial state truly thought that they were in this position of dominance because they were superior beings with a superior culture. In reality, they were catapulted into this position by the alignment of forces that created a dependent colonizer. As Holcomb and Ibssa explain, the nature of the colonial state was determined by the depravity of the Abyssinian economy.

> The destructive power used against the people and resources is greater in the case of dependent colonization because the immediate agents of the colonization are there to plunder and consume. Without a long-term strategy for development or for holding the region, they had no interest or plan for preserving resources or people for future

> advancement. This state was designed and assembled with superpower patron/collaborators who had their own strategic agenda in the region; it was not focused on investment for internal economic progress. This explains the decimation of the conquered regions and the fact that there was no real development of the means of production within the new entity called Ethiopia (Holcomb, personal communication).

Comparing Egyptian presence versus Abyssinian in Harerge highlights the lesser destruction of the Egyptian colonizer over the Abyssinian. That alone reveals the greater explanatory power of dependent colonialism—exploitation without any compensatory input. The alienation of land, the *gabbar* system, forced labor and the tribute payments that were imposed on the Oromo had no redeeming aspect. The Abyssinian administration had very little to offer in the way of social progress. As Evelyn Waugh observed in 1936,

> The Abyssinians had nothing to give their subject people, and nothing to teach them. They brought no crafts or knowledge, no new system of agriculture, drainage or road making, no medicine or hygiene, no higher political organization, no superiority except in their magazine rifles and belts of cartridges. They built nothing...dirty, idle and domineering, burning timber, devouring crops, taxing the meager stream of commerce that seeped in from outside, enslaving the people (Waugh 1984: 25-26).

Within a decade after the Battle of Challanqo, numerous fortified garrison centers (*ketemas*) were set up in Ittu,

Afran Qallo and Anniya areas as centers of the Amhara administration. The *ketemas* were regarded as Christian islands surrounded by Muslim and 'pagan' enemies who must be kept under control by the merciless use of fire power. The ketemas were mainly inhabited by the *naftanya*, who thought of themselves and acted as *Agar Aqenyi* "those who conquered, colonized and owned the land," destined to oppress the Oromo with unrestrained use of firearms (Metaferia 1974:186).

Applying the thesis of dependent colonialism, there was no resource available to support the extreme form of control at work besides super-exploitation of the conquered peoples, i.e., consumption of their land and labor. The emperor, who made slavery a major mode of production in Harerge and other parts of his empire, wrote the following letter in October 1891 purporting cooperation with European powers in suppressing slavery. He stated: "As ruler of the only Christian empire in Africa, I am honor-bound to aid by every effort the most Christian work of the European power to suppress slavery', he assured, repeating that he ordered the trade stopped at his frontiers and wished France to close the courts [coast] to slave merchants" (Caulk 2002:311-12).

While Menelik was seeking, through his European advisors, European governments' cooperation to "suppress slavery," he was at the same time known to be "the greatest slave entrepreneur, probably in the world at that time" (Marcus 1975:73). The Christian emperor of Ethiopia, known for issuing a number of proclamations abolishing the slave trade" (Hassen 2002:19), was reported to have had possessed 70,000 domestic slaves at the beginning of twentieth century (Pankhurst 1968:75).

Getahun Delibo, a perceptive Ethiopian historian states that:

> Menelik maintained slavery in the colonies as a means of making the conquered subjects pay by their labour all the expenses of his wars of aggression against them. Second, Menelik used slavery as a method of evangelism to teach his captive aremawyan [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 (Delibo 1974:219).

Afawarq Gabra-Iyyasus (one of the intellectuals of early twentieth century Ethiopia) writes that Ethiopians treated the Oromo as less than human. "[An Oromo] is hassled like a dog that has trespassed into a church" (quoted in Zewde 2002:131). Margery Perham, who knew the political situation in Ethiopia, noted that the Oromo were regarded as "heathens and enemies fit only for massacre or enslavement (Perham, 1969:300). This reflects the negation of Oromo "...humanity and their exclusion from the moral concerns of the conquerors" (Bulcha 2002:70). Such negation of Oromo humanity facilitated the destruction of their political and cultural institutions. This pattern is an often unacknowledged consequence of the ravages required to keep a dependent colonial power in place. Thus, contrary to the popular misconception which claims that Menelik united Ethiopia, he created a colonial empire "of which all the members were subjects rather than citizens, but in which almost all the Oromo were colonial subjects" (Baxter, 1978:288).

Once the dependent colonial system was in place several practices emerged to maintain it. Oromo cultural and religious shrines and places of worship were replaced by those of the colonizers. For instance, the church of Archangel Gabriel was built on a traditional Oromo shrine in the garrison town of Qullubi. The effect was to deprive the Oromo of sacred place of worship central to their identity. In 1892, when an epidemic of cholera raged in Harerge, Dajazmach Makonnen and his soldiers spent a few weeks near the Oromo village of Qullubi. With its temperate climate, fertile soil, rich harvest, Qullubi was also the most famous of the Oromo shrines attracting huge number of worshipers. On the day when Makonnen was at the shrine of Qullubi itself, he heard the news that the cholera epidemic "was loosening its grip" in the city of Harar. There and then Makonnen decided to build the church of Saint Archangel Gabriel on the spot for the purpose of Christianizing the sacred aspect of the Oromo shrine with the miraculous deliverance...ascribed to the Archangel Gabriel." In the process the sacred Oromo shrine was transformed into "...the greatest modern pilgrimage by both Christians and Muslims" annually (Caulk 2002:326).

A major mosque in the center of the city of Harar, where the Muslim Oromos prayed, was converted into an Orthodox Church. The Amhara ruling class introduced the policy of Amharizing even the references to land and place names. For example, Haroo Maya became Alem Maya, Cirro was changed to Aseb Tafari. The village of Ejersa Goro, where Tafari Makonnen (the future Emperor Haile Selassie) was born on July 23, 1892 was renamed Bethlehem, for the purpose of transforming it into a sacred land for Christians. The goal of replac-

ing Oromo village and town names with Amhara ones, to borrow a great scholar's apt phrase, was to obliterate "every reminder of the former national character" of the Oromo (Lemkin 1973:82).

The Oromo democratic institution in Harerge, the *gadaa* system, which had been weakened considerably during the short-lived Egyptian administration, was strategically undermined by the executive order of Emperor Menelik in 1900 (Tafla 1987:134-35). By fiat, Menelik banned both the election of political leaders and the gathering of the *chaffe* assembly, (the Oromo deliberative parliament) which dealt with matters of highest importance, the making of laws, the declaration of war and the conclusion of peace. Once election to Oromo political offices and the gathering of the *chaffe* assembly were abolished, the *gadaa* system lost the *raison d'etre* (reason for existence). By 1900 Menelik had even banned the famous Oromo pilgrimage to the land of Abba Muudda (Knutsson 1967: 147-55), the spiritual head of traditional Oromo religion.

Before Menelik officially banned the pilgrimage, Oromo pilgrims from Harerge, known as *jila*, went to the land of Abba Muudaa in Mormor (de Salviac 2005:181) in the region of Bale. Through the pilgrimage to Abba Muudaa, the Oromo maintained contact with their spiritual father and with one another. Their regular pilgrimages to the land of Abba Muudaa integrated the society by serving as the focal point for their spirit of unity and oneness. For Menelik and the Abyssinian settlers in Harerge, the pilgrimage to Abba Muudaa was seen as "...the principal boulevard of the patriotic spirit, the sovereign activity of the Oromo life and ferment for eventual revolts (ibid: 182). By banning the pilgrimage,

Menelik "...knowingly aimed to destroy the crucial links that sustained Oromo cultural, political and religious unity" (Hassen 2005:149,154).

As I have discussed elsewhere, during the short period of Egyptian colonial administration, the Oromo fiercely resisted acceptance of Islam (Hassen 2008:49-53). However, after the conquest of Harar by Emperor Menelik, the banning of both the meeting of the *chaffee* assembly and the pilgrimage to Abba Muudaa, the entire population of Harerge Oromo turned to Islam en mass, an act which served as a form of rejection of the oppressive colonial order created by Menelik which had been identified with Christianity.

The Oromo did not reject Christianity itself, but the Abyssinian domination. For them Abyssinian domination and Orthodox Christianity were synonymous. Furthermore, the Christian Amhara clergy did not engender sympathy or interest in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. First, the Amhara clergy despised the Oromo and the Oromo returned the favor by rejecting their religion. Second, the Amhara clergy wanted the Oromo to observe the Orthodox Christian food prohibition on milk, butter and meat, which revolted the Oromo. Third, the Amhara clergy "... never worked among the Oromo as missionaries to spread the word of God." According to Mekuria Bulcha:

> [the Orthodox clergy] came as conquerors with Menelik's generals, 'blessing' the massacres that the latter and their soldiers inflicted upon the Oromo people. The Orthodox Church and its priests were the main beneficiaries of the conquest. They shared with the Emperor, his generals and soldiers booties plundered from the Oromo. The clergy were given land that

> was confiscated from the Oromo peasants and became landlords; they owned Oromo peasants as gabbars (serfs) and thrived upon their labour (Bulcha 1994:11).

It was probably because of what he witnessed that Asma Giyorgis, a liberal Amhara Catholic missionary, indicts the Ethiopian Orthodoxy clergy by saying that they not only failed to spread Christianity among the Oromo in Harerge and other areas, but also prevented others from doing so. Writing in the city of Harar shortly after 1900, Asma Giyorgis states:

> the [Oromo] prefer to be Muslim rather than Christian, because they hate the Amara [Amhara]. The Amara priests, the bishops and the clergy do not like the [Oromo]. They believe that Christianity cannot be understood by those whose ancestors were not Christian. Therefore, they do not teach them" (Tafla 1987: 135).

The Oromo of Harerge came to view Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity as serving as an ideological arm of Abyssinian colonialism. They rejected this form of Christianity as an instrument of colonialism, a form of rule over them which had robbed them of their *gadaa* system, their past, present and future. It was a particular form of colonialism that the Oromo in Harerge rejected by turning to Islam *en mass*. For the Oromo in Harerge, Islam became part of their cultural life, a powerful symbol of their identity as a people and a reliable fortress against the extreme form of Abyssinian colonial domination that was perpetrated on them.

Conclusion

During the nineteenth century Abyssinian princes realized the "inexorable relationships" that existed between military power and their own self-preservation, military power and their dream of expansion into the Oromo territory, military power and their capability of plundering Oromo wealth to pay for the importation of European weapons of destruction, and military power and the realization of their ambition of destroying Oromo power. After centuries of struggle against the Oromo, the Abyssinian princes realized that the Oromo could be conquered only with European weapons of destruction and made the importation of European weapons the centerpiece of their domestic as well as foreign policies. This was particularly true of King Menelik of Shawa, whose army was trained and provided with guns and cannons by the French as well as the Italians and the Russians.

The thesis of the *Invention of Ethiopia* adds to our understanding the rationale for why the European powers made arms available and the interest they had in assisting in building a mechanism of control in this region. With a single victory at the Battle of Challanqo, Menelik was able to achieve what no previous Abyssinian emperor had achieved. He not only occupied the Muslim city of Harar, but also conquered and transformed all the Oromo into tribute-paying *gabbars*, 400 years after the war against the Oromo commenced (Tafla, 1987: 777). The record we examined with regard to Harer demonstrates the absolute dependence of Abyssinians on European armaments in order to accomplish not only the conquest of the Oromo in the 1880s but also to establish a firm control they had failed to achieve in the previous several centuries.

The dependent colonialism thesis focuses on the structure of the institutions as an explanatory device rather than explaining conflict as "interethnic" relations between those who control the government and those who are subject to it. It highlights the strategic role of the imported weaponry and the expatriate advice for maneuvering and positioning Ethiopia on the international scene. It also puts the mythology of greater Ethiopia into a new light, that is, it looks at the role it plays in covering up or "obscuring the real power" behind the Abyssinian domination of the surrounding peoples (Holcomb personal communication May 20, 2009).

Ethiopianist scholars who reject the premise of *The Invention of Ethiopia: the Making of Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa* will have to come to terms with what I have found: the fact that primary sources solidly confirm the validity of Sisai Ibssa's thesis of dependent colonial state. May his soul rest in peace! He blessed us with a rich legacy of provocative and inspiring scholarship, which is destined to shape the debate about the future of Oromia.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Bonnie Holcomb for her extensive comments and suggestions, which helped me to improve the quality this article.
2. Mohammed Hassen, "Menelik's Conquest of Harar, 1887, and its Effect on the Political Organization of the Surrounding Oromo up to 1900" in *Working Papers on Society and History in Imperial Ethiopia,* edited by D.L. Donham and Wendy James (Cambridge University, 1980), pp. 227-246. I have also drawn on my earlier work and the works of others on Harar: Mohammed Hassen, "The Relations between Harar and surrounding Oromo

between 1800-1887," BA Thesis, Haile Selassie I University, 1973; Richard Caulk, *Between the Jaws of Hyenas" A Diplomatic History of Ethiopia (1876-1896),* edited and with an introduction by Bahru Zewde, (Harrassowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden, 2002); Martial De Salviac, *An Ancient People, Great African Nation The Oromo*, Translation from the original French Edition by Ayalew Kanno (East Lansing: Michigan: self published, 2005), Bairu Tafla, ed. *Asma Giyorgis And His Work History of the Galla and the Kingdom of Sawa* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden GMBH, 1987).

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Sisai Ibssa and the Oromo Question: Remembering a Committed Revolutionary

Bereket Habte Selassie

A Chance Meeting that led to a Lasting Friendship

When I first met Sisai Ibssa, I had just come back to Washington, DC to rejoin my family. It was a warm afternoon in late August 1977. I came out of the Library of Congress where I had passed the day doing research for a book I had planned to write. I had been away for two years, mostly serving the Eritrean liberation cause, in and out

Journal of Oromo Studies, Vol. 18, No. 1 (July 2011), pp. 151-168.

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of the war zone. I needed to take a cab because I was in a hurry to meet with the Chairman of the African Studies Department of Howard University. I had been accepted to teach African law and politics, and my meeting was to discuss details of the terms of service.

I remember waiting for a few minutes on a street corner on the western end outside the Library of Congress, and hailed a taxi. The cab stopped and I got into it to find that the driver was a *Habesha*—a term I used for both Eritrean and Ethiopian highlanders. The man asked me in English where I was headed; I said Howard University. Almost immediately, he smilingly asked me if I was a student there. Answering in Amharic, I said I had just joined the faculty. That brought out his famous, infectious laughter, accompanied by an apology, saying that he thought maybe I was a graduate student, because he knew other *Habeshas* who were doing graduate studies there, including a couple of friends of his.

I said, no need to apologize; I was a student once not so long ago.

With another hearty laugh, he said that he was a graduate student at American University, but had interrupted his studies.

"What subject?" I asked and also queried why he interrupted them. Economics, he told me, adding that he had interrupted his studies because he was involved in a political movement.

Before we reached the gates of Howard University's main campus, off Georgia Avenue, Sisai Ibssa and I had become well acquainted with each other and had agreed to exchange phone numbers. I liked him. What impressed me most of all was his candor and willingness

to tell me about himself more openly than is usually the case with a typical highland Ethiopian.

As I got out of the cab I asked him how much I owed him.

"Nothing," he said; he never charged fellows from his part of Africa. I insisted; but he was adamant in refusing to take the money. I thanked him, but was curious to know what political movement he was involved in, and that was the last question I asked him.

"The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF)," he said without a moment's hesitation. We exchanged names and contact information and parted company.

It was not to take long before Sisai and I met again, this time over coffee at Kramerbooks, a bookstore in downtown Washington, in the Dupont Circle area. During that first and long meeting, Sisai spoke volubly about the case of the Oromo for self-determination from the "Abyssinian Empire." I told him about my time in Harar as an exiled Mayor of a city, that I could not leave without the permission of the Governor General, and that the experience was instructive to me about the plight of the Oromo in the periphery of the empire. When I told him that, he said with an ironic tone that we were fellow victims of the empire.

Our future friendship and collaboration was partly shaped by the sense of sharing of a common fate as subjects of the empire. But the friendship, that developed later and lasted until his sudden death in August 2005, was based on his frank and open character, as well as on a humanity that transcended politics. This aspect of his nature came out during his interaction with non-Oromo, including Amhara, friends who were openly opposed to

his cause. He was able to distinguish between politics and human relations; and he had many Amhara friends.

In order to understand Sisai Ibssa's life of struggle and the fate of the Oromo movement, it is necessary to discuss, briefly, the politics of self-determination. One question frequently asked by many, including Oromo nationalists, is why the Oromo people should not be supported in seeking the same right that the Eritrean people have achieved. The same question has also been asked by Somalis in the case of the Somali people residing in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia. Indeed, during the twenty five years that Sisai and I met, argued and collaborated, particularly when I was an active member of the North American segment of Eritreans for liberation, Sisai and most of his Oromo comrades used to say that they saw no difference between the two cases: that the Oromo people as much as the Eritrean people were oppressed people fighting for their freedom. Sisai wholeheartedly supported the Eritrean cause, even at the time when he was a member of the Ethiopian Students Union of North America (ESUNA), before he left that organization to stake his position demanding a separate Oromo nation.

Sisai always attended Eritrean fund-raising events, and I reciprocated as much as possible, attending Oromo events, whenever I was in town. He introduced me to many of his Oromo comrades, including Lubee Birru, who happened to be his nephew. I learned a great deal about Oromo history and culture through conversations and discussions with some of these Oromo intellectuals. Lubee in particular seemed to me to be a walking encyclopedia of Oromo culture. He attended graduate classes at Howard University for a few years, and I benefited from his presence on the Howard campus, picking

his brain on a number of issues related to the Oromo cause. He was highly informative on current issues; he was second only to Sisai in terms of enlightening me on such issues. The section on the Oromo struggle found in my book, *Conflict and Intervention in the Horn of Africa* (1980) benefited much from these conversations. Lubee also became a close friend.

The contrast in personality was often a characteristic that I used as fodder when I wanted to tease Sisai, in response to his own endless teasing of me. (His teasing was an expression of his affection; I realized that I was not the only target of such teasing). Their personality variance was obvious. Where Sisai was combative and effervescent, Lubee was calm and seemingly laid back. But his quiet demeanor was misleading; for behind that quiet surface there is a shrewd and tenacious mind. In fact, Sisai and Lubee complimented each other in temperament, and I thought they agreed on everything until Lubee decided to serve as ambassador of the government of Meles Zenawi during the short-lived collaboration of the OLF and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (1991-1992). Sisai did not agree with that collaboration, for reasons that will be explained below. In anticipation of the explanation below, I will say that Sisai was absolutely convinced that there needed to be a "divorce" of the Oromo from the Ethiopian empire. That was the kernel of his philosophy of the doctrine of self-determination.

The Oromo and the Politics of Self-determination

The Horn of Africa is one of the sub-regions in the world where the issue of self-determination of oppressed

peoples has been tested. The sub-region has been an arena of ongoing conflicts for over half a century. Complicated by the intervention of external forces, at issue are two conflicting principles—the territorial integrity of what is often identified as a nation-state, and the self-determination of groups within recognized state boundaries. The two principles are generally recognized under international law. [See Article 1(2) of the U.N. Charter, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the 1966 International Covenants, especially Article 1, among other international legal instruments].

Territorial integrity of a designated state is self explanatory; self-determination, on the other hand, has been the subject of dispute. When it has been invoked by an aggrieved group struggling to assert its autonomy, identity, and cultural heritage, territorial integrity has invariably prevailed against it, thus resulting in the denial of basic human rights of minorities. That in turn has tended to precipitate armed struggle with the consequent human suffering.

In the context of post-colonial African history and politics, the tension between the two conflicting principles was resolved, on the face of it, by the 1964 Cairo Resolution of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). That resolution recognized the colonially inherited borders of Africa; the colonially fixed borders would thenceforth define African nation statehood, including the border between Ethiopia and Somalia. Only two states opposed the resolution—Somalia and Morocco: the first because it foreclosed Somalia's claim of the Ogaden; and Morocco because it had laid claim on Mauritania. Somalia's President Aden Abdullah argued that the resolution ignored the right to self-determination

of those Somali who were within the colonial borders, pointing out the uninterrupted history of Somali resistance to the British, the Ethiopians and the Italians. The implication was that the Somali were unique in the continent, so that they should be the exception that proved the rule. The impassioned words fell on deaf ears: Africa had decided; its mind was made up, and was not to be confused with exceptions. Period!

On the other side, there was the Eritrean claim. The logic of what came to be known as the "OAU Principles" should be applicable to all cases of people whose territory had been created by colonial history, which was precisely the claim of Eritreans: Eritrea having been created by Italian colonization. Yet, in their case, global and regional politics conspired to deny them a hearing at the council of nations assembled both in New York (at the UN), and in Addis Ababa (at the OAU). The convergence of US strategic and geopolitical interest in the Red Sea basin, and Emperor Haile Selassie's territorial ambition operated to deny Eritreans their claim. Thus denied diplomatic redress, Eritreans resorted to armed struggle, which was to last thirty years. The resort to armed struggle was not limited to Eritrea. Both Somali and Oromo nationalists took up arms in pursuit of their claim to self-determination up to, and including secession. In the case of the Oromo, the declared aim, expressed by the OLF was to establish the state of Oromia, in clear opposition to the "OAU Principles."

Sisai Ibssa derisively dismissed the Cairo Resolution as immoral and unjust. He would later author a book, with Bonnie Holcomb, *The Invention of Ethiopia: the Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa* (1990), making the case that Ethiopia is a colonial empire

state, and that the struggle of the Oromo is a struggle of a colonized people against an African colonial empire.[1]

Nations and Nationalities—Lenin's Authority

In the midst of this claim and counter claim, Marxist, or more accurately, Leninist theory was bandied about by the contending sides. The Mengistu regime, the *derg*, which had become Marxist overnight, applying Soviet praxis on the issue of nations or nationalities within a multi-ethnic state, sought to vitiate all legitimate claims to self-determination by reference to Stalin's formula of distinction between nations and nationalities. Whereas the Oromo claimed that theirs was a nation, the *derg*'s ideologues, using Stalin's formula, denied this claim, stating that the Oromo are not a nation, but a nationality within a larger nation-state; and that they were not entitled to self-determination up to and including secession. The curious fact is that Lenin clearly and unambiguously wrote asserting the principle that oppressed nations within a multi-ethnic nation have the right to self-determination, up to and including secession. (See V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Moscow Publishing House, 1964, vol. 22 pp 143-147). Sisai studiously applied Lenin's precept and tenaciously held to it when confronting *derg* supporters, as well as other Ethiopian organizations, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP) in particular. On the issue of Oromo self-determination, all centrist Ethiopians (notably the Amhara) sided with the *derg* in its rejection of the Oromo claim. This rejection, Sisai argued, gave the lie to the false claim of the *derg* that they were Marxists. His argument applied with equal force to the EPRP.

Sisai Ibssa and the OLF

The OLF is the latest organized expression of a united pan-Oromo national movement. The OLF first announced its program in October 1974 in Finfinneee (the old Oromo name for Addis Ababa) and amended it in June 1976. After outlining the history of the Oromo people, the program analyzes the recent struggle of the Oromo nation. Addressing the standard Marxist question of who were friends and who were enemies in the struggle, the program answered the question as follows: the enemies included the Ethiopian colonial regime, the Oromo feudal class, the "neo-Gobanists," and international imperialism. The term 'neo-Gobanist' was coined after Ras Gobana—a celebrated Oromo general who helped Menelik in his imperial expansion—to describe traitors of Oromo cause. The friends included the Ethiopian working class, which "is viciously exploited by the alliance of state capitalism and imperialism," and the peasantry. Again, adopting standard Marxist ideology, which was all the rave at the time, the program lists the petty bourgeoisie, patriotic elements, revolutionary intelligentsia, members of the armed forces, and other oppressed nations, as supporters of the struggle. The overall objective of the struggle, according to the program, was "the realization of national self-determination for the Oromo people and their liberation from oppression and exploitation in all their forms," ultimately leading to the establishment of "a people's democratic republic of Oromia."

Between Politics and Personal Life

As often happens in the life and struggle of political organizations, the OLF and other component groups of the Oromo liberation movement faced may trials

and tribulations. These were brought about by substantive disagreements and factional fights which were at times masked as ideological struggles. As in other cases, conflicting ambitions and clashing personalities were inevitably involved. Sisai was often frustrated by these conflicts, but he never despaired and, to my knowledge, never thought of abandoning the cause in pursuit of his own personal or professional life.

Apart from politics we often talked about our respective personal lives and interests. He came to my house frequently and knew my family well. In fact he was fond of my daughter Finot whom he took to the Kennedy School for Special Children on at least two occasions, when I could not do it due to my absence. Finot liked him so much she often asked about him many years after she last saw him.

Sisai was a very engaging person and with his good looks and cheerful personality could "get any woman he chose," as a mutual friend put it. But apart from being consumed by politics, my friend Sisai tended to be very selective. I was personally aware that his tumultuous political life apparently stood in the way of the kind of stable "family life" that potential spouses wanted. Clearly, even when he was deeply in love, the way that he thought politics had to be carried out consistently prevailed over personal love. His sacrifice was a measure of his dedication to his cause.

The Oromo Cause in Relation to Other Movements

Sisai was many things; but he was above all a strategic thinker—a far-sighted one at that. Some friends thought that his Oromo nationalism was, at times, in conflict with

the cause of peace and harmony among the peoples of the Horn of Africa. His response to such criticism was that peace must be based on justice: that no stability imposed by force that did not take justice into account can last long. He firmly believed that the Ethiopian state, built by conquest of the Oromo and other nations and nationalities by the superior arms of Menelik, is a colonial state; and that a new and just dispensation must be based on recognition of this historical fact. The logical conclusion of this is that the Ethiopian state must be restructured or dismantled. The book which he and Bonnie Holcomb wrote develops this thesis in detail. I was asked to review early drafts of that book and encouraged them to get that thesis into the public sphere. Sisai has also written many articles on this issue. During our long association, we discussed the implications of his thesis for the future of the peoples of the region.

One important result of our association and continued discussions was the international conference we jointly organized and convened at Howard University, in Washington DC in August 1984.

COHAC and the Emerging Political Forces

The ad hoc committee that organized the conference was known by the acronym COHAC—Committee to Organize a Horn of Africa Conference. The conference was co-sponsored by my department, the African Studies Department of Howard University, and the Institute of Policy Studies, where, at the time, I was an Associate Fellow. It was a well-attended three-day conference that involved presentations by scholars and activists concerned with the Horn of Africa. The main liberation

movements—the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF)—were represented by official delegates. There was also a special session devoted to invited delegates of the governments of the region, including the Ethiopian government, represented by ambassadors. The Ethiopian Embassy in Washington, however, declined the invitation. Indeed, after the conference, the Ethiopian Charge d' Affaires wrote a stinging letter to the President of Howard University, complaining that the University opened its doors and made its facilities available to terrorists and troublemakers. The Academic Vice President called me the following day to say that the response he gave the embassy was that there is in America such a thing as a First Amendment right; and that was the end of the matter, as far as he was concerned.

When I told this to Sisai, he broke out into his uproarious laughter and reveled in what we had achieved. The success of that historic conference, which represented the first meeting on the same program of the broad diversity of political groups active at the time in the Horn of Africa, would not have been achieved without the wise counsel and organizational talents and dedication of Sisai. He was part of the process from its inception to its last moment. He identified some tactics employed by a few participating groups that appeared designed to derail the effort, unravel agreements previously reached, manipulate certain panels, etc. He offered some very effective strategies for defusing potential difficulties and keeping preparations on track. It was then that I learned of his many sides, including his strategic

mind. The degree of his involvement and contribution to the success of COHAC was shown by the massive attendance of Oromo residents of the Washington DC area as well as others who came from as far as Minnesota. To Ethiopians who believed that there was no such thing as an Oromo movement, the massive presence of the Oromo at that conference, with the logo of the wide sycamore (odaa) tree, the symbol of Oromo democracy, visible everywhere in the hall, was incontrovertible evidence.

The OLF, Ethiopia and Eritrea

Fast Forward... to 1991

For Sisai, a real moment of truth came when the OLF became a partner with the EPRDF government. The OLF and TPLF had experienced an uneasy relationship throughout the years of struggle ending in the defeat of the *derg* and the installation of the EPRDF government in 1991. The Eritrean leadership was instrumental in creating a modus operandi between the OLF and TPLF, and mediated between them to the point of reaching an agreement of collaboration in a post-*derg* government. The Oromo movement was divided on the issue of collaboration, with a faction led by Sisai and others being critical and skeptical about the project. I happened to be present at the meeting in Senafe, Eritrea, in June 1991 where Meles Zenawi, representing the TPLF (as the senior partner of the EPRDF), and Leenco Lata, representing the OLF, met under the aegis of the EPLF, with Isaias acting as chief mediator. Though not privy to the secret negotiations, I met both Meles and Leenco before and after their meetings. As a result of the agreement they reached there, and following other negotiations on

power-sharing, the OLF participated in the July Conference at Addis Ababa out of which emerged the framework on which the future federal government would be based.

It was a "marriage of inconvenience" without a ***wass*** (guarantor), to put it in the language of domestic law. The Oromo agreed to go along on the understanding that there would be a fair and equitable power-sharing. There was, meanwhile, the question of the future of the OLF army, which the EPRDF wanted to disband or absorb into its own larger army. I have no clear information as to what the rank-and-file of the OLF forces thought of the partnership; but there was division among its leadership on a range of issues, including power-sharing. And there was a general agreement among them about resisting the disbanding of the OLF armed forces. That became the real sticking point and armed clashes occurred in which TPLF forces decimated the OLF forces driving the remaining few to remote corners of the country.

In any case, in 1992, one year after the partnership agreement, the OLF withdrew from the government. Unfortunately, I did not see Sisai at the time to hear his view; but I later learned that he was opposed to the partnership and his concerns were confirmed when the partnership failed, hoping that the OLF would thenceforth chart out a clear Oromo strategy of Oromo liberation, unencumbered by problems arising out of power-sharing with the "adversary."

The role of the Eritrean government armed forces in the feud between the OLF and TPLF during their short-lived partnership is not clear. Some Oromo believe that Eritrean military units were involved in the armed clashes between the OLF and TPLF armed forces, a charge that I doubt until convinced by evidence to the contrary. But

this raises the Eritrean government's role in the internal politics of the OLF, about which Sisai was not sanguine, and I will end this paper with Sisai's last communication to me on this issue.

Sisai and the Role of the Eritrean Government

In a letter he wrote to me on May 15, 1999, Sisai spoke of "the situation in our region…heading in a very dangerous direction." He complained about Eritrea's belief in maintaining the integrity of the Ethiopian Empire as it is presently constituted, including Oromia within it. In his view, "[Ethiopia], despite 'democratic' trappings, retains and will continue to retain, all the internal structural features of an empire where in order to survive one dominant power holds the other components under its control." This, he maintains, is the essence of Ethiopia. Referring to the book he co-authored with Bonnie Holcomb, he contends that the power dynamic of Ethiopia will not change; "the empire cannot be democratized."

Complaining about the Eritrean government's decision to support the OLF's demand for power-sharing within the Ethiopian empire, Sisai reminds me of points he had made to me in an earlier discussion that there would be conflict between Eritreans and a TPLF-controlled government. It is worth reproducing the main points in this regard. He wrote:

> Let me put it in writing to remind you what I have said to you in previous discussions: Oromos in state power in Ethiopia would be more dangerous to Eritrean survival than any other group. Why do I say this? It is because that

> state is not their instrument, it is not their creation. They cannot express their solidarity with Eritrea through that device any more than the Tigray could. Actually, less. That state machinery is fashioned to serve the interests of empire and of the real Ethiopians, the Amhara/Tigray for whom it was built. Oromo holding power in that empire will unconsciously get caught up in managing that state, keeping it intact, staying in power against traditional enemies, keeping programs and currency afloat, etc....I sense that the Eritrean government is planning to build Ethiopia with Oromo at the center. That is wrong."[2]

He ends the letter by informing me that he had talked to a high-ranking official of the Eritrean government who had promised him never to arm any segment of the Oromo (especially the OLF, that the government favored) until the Oromo become united among themselves. But apparently, the Eritrean government did not keep its promise. Sisai believed that in effect the Eritrean government's support of the OLF to the exclusion of the Gumi (Oromiyaa Liberation Council) was really a way of dividing the Oromo. He ends the letter by reiterating his main point that only a united Oromo can become strong, and a strong Oromo is the best ally and the best neighbor of Eritrea.

I can hear his voice from beyond the grave, saying to me as he said at the end of his letter, "I would hate to be on the other side of the aisle from you on this crucial issue." My response: "I promise, dear friend, that I will stay faithful to our common cause."

Notes

1. His and Holcomb's book contains his position that, by housing the OAU in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia played a strategic role in Africa under the patronage of the United States, "to the revised formula for corporate control of former colonies sponsored by the United States in the name of independence." They go so far as to state that the Resolution on Territorial Integrity was authored, proposed and orchestrated by Haile Selassie and his U. S. advisors and that it "guaranteed that the economic basis for continued colonial exploitation would be preserved in the former colonies of Africa..." Holcomb and Ibssa (1990:271-72, see also 227).
2. Personal communication, Letter dated May 15, 1999 from Sisai Ibssa to Bereket Habte Selassie.

Examining Sisai Ibssa's Organizational Work on Oromo National Unity

Abarra Tafarra

The purpose of this paper is to take a close look at Sisai Ibssa's contribution to the Oromo national liberation struggle, as an activist and an organizer. It focuses on tracing his efforts to establish the United Liberation Forces of Oromia (ULFO). It was Sisai's aim to find a model for unity grounded in traditional Oromo principles of collaboration. I will examine his exhaustive efforts and bring them into the public record since commitment to Oromo national unity was a central aspect of Sisai's long-held beliefs, ideas, and conviction. The material presented here derives from my many conversations with him and my collaborative work

Journal of Oromo Studies, Vol. 18, No. 1 (July 2011), pp. 169-212.

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with him for the same cause in the same organizations stretching over two decades.

The Oromo Question as a Colonial Question

Sisai's work to establish ULFO as a way of building unity among Oromo forces demonstrates his consistency over the course of his life. He was in his late 20s when he concluded that the Oromo could not develop as a nation or as a people until they were liberated from the Ethiopian colonial system. He never wavered from that position. He identified both the forces that held the Oromo in subjugation as a people and the unique social capacities that they needed to revive from their heritage and develop them in order to be free.

I learned from several conversations I had with Sisai that his convictions about the colonial status of the Oromo were reached when he was in the Ethiopian student movement in the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. In the early days, Sisai participated in the struggle for justice and democracy in both the African-American and the Ethiopian contexts. He became actively involved in the Ethiopian Students Union in North America (ESUNA) until he encountered what he termed "Ethiopianist" forces within the Ethiopian student movement who were unwilling to recognize or acknowledge the role of the Ethiopian state in holding in subjugation peoples such as the Oromo, Eritrean and Somali[1]. That position provided the impasse that he reached with his peers in the Ethiopian student movement (ESUNA) and led to his departure. When his colleagues in ESUNA were not willing to explore the implications of a search for the ultimate solution in the struggle for freedom, democracy and justice

for all oppressed peoples within the empire, he discovered that a fundamental difference existed between him and the "Ethiopianists" within the student movement.[2]

The experience in ESUNA led to an intensive study of the process that created the Ethiopian state.[3] Sisai had come to the conclusion in the 1970s that it is only possible to attain justice and democracy for all peoples within the Ethiopian empire through decolonizing that empire state. From the mid-1970s, he championed the national liberation struggles of the Eritrean, the Ogadeni, and also of his own, the Oromo people. Since within the ESUNA he could not find support or an appropriate opening to push for achieving a lasting solution for the Oromo problem, he decided to participate exclusively in an Oromo organization. He helped to establish an independent Oromo organization, later on known as Union of Oromo Students in North America (UOSNA) whose purpose was to struggle for the Oromo people's national liberation. In that organization he was able to devote attention to the culture, the democratic heritage of the people and their traditional democratic institutions. From the time he formally withdrew from ESUNA in July 1976 he committed his life and all that he had to the Oromo national liberation struggle.

Championing Oromo Independence

As a charter member of an independent Oromo student organization from 1974, he served in different capacities in the leadership and operated in the forefront, promoting and introducing the Oromo people to the Western world. Those few Oromos managed to develop an organ called *Waldhaansso* for Union of Oromo in North America (UONA) and a pamphlet called *Sagalee*

Waldhaansoo which they periodically issued. For those few people at that time, they completed a huge job. Sisai bore responsibility for the largest chunk of the scholarly work. He led from the belief that the Oromo nation can achieve peace when its population is informed, educated and well organized.

Starting from that time, he worked on organizing and writing in order to bring an awareness of this cause to Oromos, while bringing the Oromo issue into the public domain. He participated in international and national forums regarding Oromo and East African nations like Eritrea, the Ogadenis, Somalia and Sudan, beginning with presentations to the annual international gatherings of student associations of Eritrea, Oromo and Tigray. These experiences eventually led to participation in scholarly conferences at universities (Michigan State and University of California Santa Barbara) and to membership in the African Studies Association. Generally speaking, Sisai took this route, believing that if the question of the Oromo, who were the largest ethnic group in the Ethiopian empire, was to be resolved, that would encourage others—other colonized nations within the empire in addition to the Oromo—to take steps to resolve their own subjugation.

In the 1970s, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) was in its formative stage, developing on a parallel path. Through the UONA, Sisai was one of the leaders who helped to introduce the OLF to the Western world. UONA was an independently established association with its own program, constitution and by-laws. But Sisai disseminated the OLF program of 1976, playing a great role in the tedious work of retyping, editing and formatting it into booklet form and distributing

hundreds of copies in North America. In part due to Sisai's significant contribution, UONA entered into a working relationship with the OLF. The collaboration was grounded in their common objective to liberate the Oromo people from Ethiopian colonialism by establishing an independent democratic Oromia based upon the indigenous democratic heritage of the Oromo people. Sisai interpreted this objective to mean that the Oromo people sought to live democratically alongside their neighboring nations in peace and mutual respect. The efforts to organize and help the Oromos were daunting since at that time there was no available material that reflected a true history written about them by non-Oromos. Sisai describes the period by saying "Our small study groups and political education programs grew to form a Committee to Organize Oromo Studies in 1986. Finally an Oromo Studies Association was born in 1991 [the year that the by-laws were formally adopted] from this determined effort. In the same way our cultural committee used to organize cultural shows for our congress and Oromo National Day gatherings. This effort has given way to young Oromo artists who came forward in North America. We introduced these to the larger community and then took off our hats to them. These are just examples of how a small beginning can bear fruit."[4] He believed that if the Oromos were to be liberated, the first task they had to undertake was to acquire self-knowledge, that is, be informed and then to get organized. With his colleagues, he worked hand-in-hand with the OLF dedicated to this cause.

According to Sisai's account, during that time up to late 1980s, there were very few Oromos represented in the Diaspora, especially in North America. Later on he

wrote about this, "Our size did not deter us then nor did the political size and name of Ethiopia frighten us. We armed ourselves to expose the emptiness of the ideology of Greater Ethiopia and to challenge the empty claims of 3000 years of shared history."[5] He virtually gave up on pursuing his own career, and was able to make a significant contribution in this respect. During this time, in 1985, UONA voted to become a "mass organization" of the Oromo Liberation Front. Sisai was the sole dissenting vote, having issue with the structure of the OLF and arguing that the two organizations continue working side by side to accomplish their shared objective.

The London Conference & OLF's Year in the Transitional Government of Ethiopia

When the OLF, without officially informing UONA, or any Oromo organization working within or alongside the OLF, attended the London Conference convened by the United States in May 1991 to consider the future of Ethiopia after the departure of the *derg* government, a glaring gap was created in the relationship between UONA, with Sisai as one of the prominent leaders, and the OLF leadership. The disparity between OLF and other Oromo groups was exposed publicly when the other major partners called to the London Conference, the EPLF and the TPLF, advised their constituencies and invited their members and supporters to contribute/give ideas on how to go forward. As far as Sisai and other leaders of the UONA knew, the OLF arrived in London empty-handed, without any concrete proposal, preparation or negotiating position.

Once OLF representatives had disembarked in London they tried by phone from London to reach individuals to join them. Sisai compared the approach to issuing invitations to a "tea party." And the London Conference ended without serious discussion of the Oromo position or effective negotiations on the part of the OLF. The outcome of that conference was to put the TPLF at the top of an upcoming arrangement for replacing the *derg* in state power. The OLF was asked to join a coalition government.[6] Leenco Lata, who represented the OLF in the conference and served as OLF Deputy Secretary, later wrote, "the military campaign to overthrow the Derg was spearheaded by the northernmost Tigrinya-speaking Abyssinians. Although they had no long range interest in a dignified Oromo participation in the affairs of the Ethiopian state, their short range interest forced them to seek temporary alliance with Oromo forces"[7]

Here is the point where Sisai's simmering disagreement with the OLF leaders erupted. In *Kindling Point* No 27, July 1991 under the title "On the London Tea Party"[8] he warned them that they were not doing the right thing in allowing themselves to be used as backdrop in re-forming a colonial state that held no pretense of becoming representative:

> Herman J. Cohen seemed to enjoy issuing ultimatums to those **he** had invited to his tea party in London, "No democracy, no cooperation,' he warned at the closing press conference. H**e** certainly did not treat his guests democratically, even after they cooperated with him fully. There were no talks among the invited parties. Representatives of the strongest groups in the empire **were** used by Cohen to serve as mere scenery

> behind him **as** he announced the unilateral U, S. decision to recognize the EPRDF. Welcome to the New World Order.

Especially important to Sisai was to focus on the process by which the OLF related to their supporters during this transition. In his opinion it was a very serious matter with regard to the future of the nation for the leading organization to consult with the people in whose name it was acting. According to Sisai this was the minimal thing that they had to do. In response to his challenge, the OLF representatives gave various reasons for the lack of consultation, such as, they did not have time, they were not brought into the process early enough, etc. But, in Sisai's view, the reasons did not justify what he saw as the OLF's neglect of the people.

Sisai's other objection was that what the leaders actually did and said at that conference, when sitting to represent the people, that contradicted the strategic OLF program, though they had it with them in writing. His grievance was that these leaders did not try to reconcile what they did at that meeting with the objectives they were publicly committed to represent on behalf of the Oromo people. Sisai did not believe that going into the coalition government was the right thing to do. His dilemma was whether to publicly oppose the OLF actions immediately or not. After a serious discussion, Sisai and his colleagues decided to adopt a wait-and-see attitude, that is, to give a chance to the leadership of the OLF to turn a bad situation in a positive direction. He argued that there were some ways in which the OLF could take advantage of the situation they were in. For example he suggested that it would be a positive move to use this chance of being in the country to make direct

contact with the people, operating as a legitimate force, to revitalize the OLF as a grassroots organization, putting it on a more solid footing. Organizing the people while in-country following two decades of exile, in Sisai's view, could enable the OLF to include Oromos from different walks of life and from different sectors within a united national liberation organization.

At UONA DC chapter monthly meetings in early 1991 when I was present, Sisai warned that it would be a serious failure of the OLF for the leadership to focus on going for power or to start competing with the TPLF for power. Beginning with direct negotiations, the OLF chose to join in drafting the Transitional Charter and then joined the Transitional Government along with the TPLF and other forces. The Eritreans negotiated for independence and did not join the charter or the transitional government. According to Leenco Lata, who participated in the meetings where the Transitional Charter was drafted, "the EPLF offered to host a meeting in Sana'afe, Eritrea, in late June, to prepare the grounds for the July Conference. The outcome of the meeting was the draft of the Charter, some of whose provisions, by indicating a radical departure from Ethiopian political practice, served to raise OLF hopes of witnessing the beginning of the end of domination. In the deliberations during the drafting of the Charter, the EPLF played an important role to see to it that as many OLF concerns as possible were accommodated. They further enhanced OLF confidence in the EPLF."[9] So the EPLF was "hosting" rather than participating as a stakeholder in the creation of the Charter, and therefore aloof, playing the role of constantly persuading and assuring the OLF to accept all terms with the confidence that the EPLF

would stand behind them. Eritreans, however, were not subject to any of the Charter's terms.

The OLF's decision to join the Transitional Government of Ethiopia transformed it from an underground liberation front to an organization that worked with legal status, its operations in the public realm. The OLF gained recognition and subsequent momentum because people identified it with the Oromo people's quest for freedom and liberation. The Oromo people's will to join the struggle caused them to join the OLF in great numbers. Initially these were the positive results to be gained from OLF's joining the transitional government. On the other hand, Sisai's insistence at the time was that if the timeframe were used tactically and strategically to achieve significant communicational and educational work, the struggle for the liberation could take a positive advantage by laying the groundwork for self-sufficiency. But as events proved, many OLF leaders stepped into high offices in the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) while the issue of active organization of the Oromo struggle at the grassroots, which had been identified by Sisai as a high priority, was neglected.

The matter of building a well-established Oromo liberation army was also undermined. Even the Oromo army that had existed at the time that the OLF leaders took office in the TGE was eventually encamped according to a design of the TPLF with which the OLF representatives complied, trusting assurances issued by EPLF and the USA. In retrospect this move allowed the TPLF army to become the national army and thus take over the control of the former empire. This development enabled the TPLF to turn Ethiopia quickly back into an empire. From the perspective of UONA leaders, the OLF was

working on two issues simultaneously, 1) to appease the TPLF by upholding the Transitional Charter and 2) trying to answer to the Oromo people who were demanding the liberation of Oromia. UONA viewed the strategy as contradictory and hence self-defeating since it was impossible for the OLF at the same time to satisfy the TPLF and respond to the demands of the Oromo people.

Paris Peace Conference and its Aftermath

When the majority of the leadership of the OLF left the Transitional Government in 1992 and joined the struggle, Sisai thought that the moment could serve as a transition to a genuine new start. Instead, even though they left the Transitional Government declaring that they were responding to the demands of the Oromo people, OLF leaders immediately began a campaign to return to the Transitional Government by way of a different arrangement through the assistance of Western powers, specifically the United States, German and Norwegian authorities. OLF leaders met secretly with these governments. The members of UONA, an organization that was still officially part of the OLF as a mass organization, heard about the negotiations from outside sources—such as from Ethiopians, Eritreans, Americans, Europeans and through mass media outlets—rather than through discussions with the OLF leaders and members themselves who were officially their partners and comrades.

This situation created mistrust within the struggle. The breach was aggravated when OLF leadership participated in the Paris Peace Conference. This decision required OLF to cooperate with Abyssinian forces

who openly rejected the Oromo people's right to self-determination. Sisai concluded that the OLF was on a wrong track. The OLF defended their choices and their strategy, asserting that they had the right to pursue that road without referring to any members or partners. This pattern of proceeding in the absence of communication with colleagues or partners further damaged relations between UONA and OLF.

Sisai asserted the position that any route to "democratizing" an empire would not and could not work. He argued that unless the empire were decolonized, the rulers would use any advantage or discrepancy in power to undermine the process before democracy could function under the protection of the rule of law. The premise was that no empire will voluntarily relinquish power. Sisai pointed out that the OLF in cooperating in the TGE in 1991-2 had already attempted to pursue the route of seeking democracy within the context of an intact empire. In the attempt many people seeking to express their democratic rights by calling for Oromo liberation were arrested, tortured and killed by the TPLF; some were expelled from the country. The effort was extremely costly and yet it failed to succeed in advancing democratization. Even acknowledging the effort to participate in democratizing an empire did not result in a democracy, explanations for the failure differed among Oromo. In Sisai's opinion, there was no justifiable reason to come out from Ethiopia and then immediately to turn around to pursue the same route which failed when compatriots could not agree on why it failed.

Struggle over Revision/ Interpretation of the OLF Program

Following the failure of the Paris Peace Conference, the OLF, especially the Foreign Office, started secretly to revise the OLF program, eliminating and downplaying the very component that had brought UONA and the OLF to work together, that is, the goal to establish a democratic republic of Oromia. A new document[10] was prepared for the State Department and US Congress. Sisai and his colleagues in UONA Washington DC chapter, who came across this closely-held document in 1993 before it was publically released in 1994, challenged the leadership of the OLF Foreign Office to explain the clandestine position papers and accused them of deserting the objectives of the struggle.

The most contentious component of the briefing booklet by OLF- was that it depicted the purpose of the Oromo Liberation Front as an organization seeking voluntary association with any Ethiopian organization[11]. Sisai's argument was that this kind of fundamental alteration of the program that shifted the OLF's role away from serving as a Front uniting all Oromo forces behind the one goal of liberation into a political force available to ally with Ethiopian groups even prior to uniting or consolidating Oromo forces around their shared objective. For Sisai, this move changed and contradicted the OLF program in such a fundamental way that it was a deal breaker. Sisai's adamant position was that to change the program of any organization, let alone an organization that claims to champion democracy, organizational procedure must be followed. It is not something to be accomplished secretly by individuals acting in isolation. Then it was publicly revealed that as

early as February 1992 the OLF had issued a "statement on current situation in Ethiopia," a version also given to a US Congressional hearing reflecting similar departures from the program." No other nationality in Ethiopia has forged close cultural, historical and blood ties as has the Oromo people with almost all the nationalities in Ethiopia. These bonds between Oromo and other nationalities, built as they are over several centuries, are unbreakable."[12] For Sisai and other UONA members this statement amounted to a rejection of the colonial status of the Oromo. The bond between the Oromo and the Ethiopian empire is a colonial bond established by force and destined to be broken in order for the Oromo to flourish. His position was that all the people who sacrificed their lives for the Oromo cause were committed to breaking this colonial bond to create a relationship of mutual respect and democracy based on cooperation among independent neighbors.

Debate over the Organization of the Oromo National Liberation Struggle

The disagreement between Sisai and the OLF leadership centered around the way the OLF leaders wanted to organize the people for the struggle. Sisai believed that the struggle for the national liberation of Oromia can succeed only if it is able to rally Oromo from every walk of life—from every identifiable sector, i.e., representing gender, age, professions, religions, and other social groups. Observing the OLF leaders in Washington, DC operate on a day-to-day basis, Sisai became convinced that the OLF was not committed to or even open to developing such a model. In fact they seemed committed

to recruiting rank-and-file sycophants rather than critical supporters. Sisai was concerned that the OLF demand for ideological uniformity and unquestioning loyalty from such a huge population—made up of people with widely differing experience, different religions, from different landscapes—would not prepare the Oromo society for self-determination. Sisai felt that at issue was the matter of uniting the Oromo people into a coordinated force capable of self-government. The members of UONA shared this view. This particular impasse—fundamental differences regarding an appropriate model for organization—created the point at which UONA decided to leave the OLF, renouncing its 'mass organization' status and reasserting its independence. UONA formally withdrew from working with the OLF as its mass organization at the UONA Congress of July 1994. The resolution of the July, 1994 UONA Congress reported: UONA declared that "hereafter UONA would work with all Oromo of any sector to bring together a formidable national liberation organization."[13]

Pursuing an Inclusive Model for Oromo Unity

Sisai continued to work on creating an inclusive model for reaching Oromo unity, that is, to bring together diverse Oromo forces. By "forces" he meant any organized portion of the Oromo population. His position was that this approach would accelerate the process of achieving liberation or the right to self-determination. In leaving the OLF he stated that to achieve the unity of the Oromo, the preferred way to approach the destination we want to reach was to create an understanding among Oromo political organizations while not under-

mining the diversity of opinion that exists within the Oromo society.

Starting in 1994, Sisai began in earnest to pursue Oromo unity, saying that "achieving what we want and designing our own future can be guaranteed a) if all sectors of the Oromo society participate in all the developments that affect them, b) if representatives to any constituent assembly come from all sectors of the society, c) if the outcomes are approved by a majority vote of those represented, d) if the forces in charge are intimately aware of the composition of the nation they lead and see to it that the constitutional assembly is broadly representative of that composition, and e) if the gathering is rooted in the Gada political tradition which bound Oromos of the pre conquest time"[14] He underscored that since the differences among Oromos are minimal, and the commonalities to build on are great, we Oromo have to be fearless in discussing our differences together. " First, we should recognize that Oromia is one nation and the Oromo people today are a mixing bowl of diverse interests, diverse skills and many religions. Then we know that Oromia lost its freedom as a nation not as interest groups, regions or religious affiliation. Hence the struggle for freedom is not the interest of one sector or interest group, but the collective demand of the total Oromo people."[15]

Sisai and his colleagues decided to focus and work on the practical matters of planning and building unity among Oromo nationals. They made clear that the OLF would be included within any framework of unity. After a couple of years of planning, consulting, and working on this unity issue, a "Seminar on Oromo Self-determination and National Unity" was conducted on August 2

and 3, 1997 in metropolitan Washington D.C. It was a unity conference called among those organizations that recognized the following:

> The seminar participants assessing the issue of national unity recognized that: a) the Oromo people are conscious and united more than ever before regardless of persistent attempt by enemy forces to sow discord within the Oromo people to portray them as disunited in order to satisfy their sinister motives of perpetuating divide and rule policy of colonization; b) there is absence of effective communication and dialogue among Oromo liberation forces; c) the Oromo liberation forces lack coordination of efforts that could have effectively and fully mobilized the material and human resources for the liberation of Oromia.[16]

At that time, it was started by inviting only the political organizations because Sisai knew that it would be very hard to bring all types of organizations together at one time. He did open the event with a public forum to which all types of organizations were invited to participate. But on the issue of forming a unity of purpose, the initial discussion was limited to invited political organizations. OLF was invited along with UONA, Gurmuu Saba, Oromo People's Liberation Front (OPLF), Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromiya (IFLO), Tokkichummaa (ATBUO), and Ijaarsa Bilisummaa Saba Oromo (IBSO). The initial conference was very fruitful. All the invited groups sent representatives to participate except one. The OLF did not participate. The participants discussed openly the problems that the struggle

was facing, the achievements that the struggle had put on the record and how to move forward.

At the end of the meeting, they issued a memorandum of understanding, declaring that unity of purpose is a pre-condition for the success of the Oromo national liberation struggle. And they also underlined that in the Oromo struggle when we say "*bilisummaa*," in the Oromo language, it refers to the decolonization of the Ethiopian empire and creating an independent Oromia, stating:

> The concept of self-determination, in the Oromo case, shall be understood as independence (Bilisumma). It means: a) politically, the Oromo people determine their destiny without any external imposition, b) economically, the Oromo people have abundant resources to sustain their nationhood, and oppose dispossession and alienation from full control of their resources; c) ideologically, the Oromo people can draw upon their indigenous Gadaa system as it fits the current reality of the Oromo people for their outlook, liberation and self-governance.[17]

The participants expressed disappointment that the OLF did not take part in this 1997 seminar, noting no group, on its own, could liberate Oromia or bring the Oromo cause to its desired end. The meeting agreed to call an all-inclusive conference and formed a task force to organize such a conference within one year. The effort would be known as QYT (Qopheessituu Yaaii Tokkkummaa) which means the Group/Task Force to Prepare for Unity conference. Sisai was elected as Chair of the Task Force.

The Toronto Accord of 1998

The QYT worked throughout the year to plan an all-inclusive conference which was called to meet in Toronto Canada in August 1998. They brought a proposal for how to go forward on the issue of unity. In the Toronto conference not only political organizations gathered, other community and religious organizations took part as well. The Oromo Community Organization in Toronto and the Islamic League in Toronto, for example, participated in the conference. Together, the civic organizations and the political organizations who participated talked about a framework of general agreement which later came to be known as the ***Toronto Accord***. In the Accord they spelled out the guiding principles for the struggle of the Oromo people, the norms which all Oromo participants should follow, and the objectives that they have to pursue. The primary objective was reiterated to be the liberation of Oromia. Here they agreed to bring in all political organizations and all sectors of the Oromo people. All accepted the Toronto Accord and also they signed an agreement to call a final meeting within one year to form an organization called *Gumii Bilisummaa Oromiya (GBO)* or Oromia Liberation Council.[18]

The participants also agreed to put out publications for the members and agreed upon the organ of the unity group—*Mandiisuu*. After the Toronto meetings, a couple of months later, the first issue of *Mandiisuu* was circulated, specifically addressing issues that had come up at the meeting.

After one year's preparation of the program and the constitution, the follow up meeting was held in Toronto in 1999. Those political organizations who remained

together at that time adopted a constitution and a working program, which in principle adopted most of its core points from the Toronto Accord. They elected an executive committee and elected Sisai the Chair. The groups present were Ijaarsa Bilisummaa Saba Oromo (IBSO), Democratic Union for Liberation of Oromia (DULO) (UONA had changed its name to DULO in the meantime), Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia (IFLO), Oromiyaa Peoples Liberation Front (OPLF). Gurmuu Saba had combined with DULO. All groups constituted themselves as Gumii Bilisummaa Oromiya (GBO) which in English means Oromia Liberation Council, signed the constitution, agreed on the program, and completed the meeting with a determination to work for the realization of the objective for which the unity movement was created.

At the organizational meeting in Toronto, the structure of how the umbrella group would operate was discussed and agreed upon. Different departments were set up, such as one for raising funds (Finance Department), another on continuing to sharpen and debate the issues to educate the members (Publication Department), one for establishing connections and understanding within the Oromo public and with potential allies (Public Relations Department), and so forth.

Challenges to Implementation of Unity Model

Soon after it was established, Gumii Bilisummaa Oromiya through its delegates, started to campaign on the issue of unity, on bringing together the organizations, on creating understanding within and between organizations who had been working against each other, address-

ing the issues raised in the conference and especially rearticulating the objective of the struggle. This was done through publishing ***Mandiisuu*** and through holding public discussion forums in different cities. Problems began to appear, however, participation lagged, departments remained empty, and membership fees were not paid on time or not paid at all.

Seeking to understand the reasons for lack of participation, Sisai concluded that the absence of the OLF in this group created a perception that their attempts at unity could not be successful. They perceived that the OLF, apart from this unity effort would be in a position to negotiate with outside forces, international agencies and governments to undermine whatever work GBO put in.

The new GBO group faced a difficult logistical challenge. Leaders of the participating organizations were located at great distances from one another. Some of these groups had historically tried to compete with the OLF. They lacked experience in coming together and working together under an umbrella organization. This required trust and the delegation of authority. The situation made Sisai revise his thinking about how to address the issue of unity within the structure among GBO member organizations that had already agreed in principle to work together and also with the others who remained outside the GBO framework. In Sisai's opinion, the exclusion of civic groups (those organized around community, religion, scholarship, women, youth, and musicians) was a missing element in the ultimate advance toward overall unity as well as the absence of OLF and Tokkichummaa. While he believed that despite the obstacles, the establishment of GBO represented progress, he acknowledged that it alone cannot achieve the all-encompassing

unity which involves and builds on the strengths of all forces. Subsequently, he began intense discussions with the leadership of GBO organizations and also engaged colleagues and prominent Oromo nationalists who belonged to Oromo organizations outside of the unity umbrella. His behind-the-scenes lobbying campaign, particularly his reaching out to people who had different opinions, created a propitious condition for the launch of the ULFO.

The Beginnings of ULFO

At the end of 1999 and beginning of 2000, Sisai made contacts with the OLF leadership to launch serious discussion about the necessity of unity, of standing together against the common enemy, and of capitalizing on the common denominators that Oromo have. These discussions took place at a time that the Ethiopian and Eritrean regimes were gearing up for and perpetrating a border war which was devastating for the Oromo. Sisai pointed out that the absence of a united Oromo voice on this and other major issues contributed to catastrophic consequences for the Oromo people. These exchanges continued as informal communications, confirming that Sisai and the OLF leaders disagreed on the kind of unity that was being pursued. It appears the OLF was looking for unity conceived in the notion of a top-down structure. According to Sisai, the unity that the OLF advocated during that time was to bring all under the flag of OLF as a vanguard front This model was unacceptable not only to Sisai but to his colleagues in DULO who had tried unsuccessfully to work through that model as a 'mass organization' of OLF. Moreover, Sisai argued, the top-down arrangement the OLF followed was not in-keeping

with Oromo culture or tradition. Sisai's position vis-à-vis that of the OLF leadership was that OLF did possess invaluable experience and human capital they could bring to the unity effort, but their authority and privileges must be within the existing framework and in proportion to their capacity. They had to come into partnership with others, not demand that others come in under them.

Finally a third party country, Eritrea, made itself available to assist as a facilitator to bring Oromo forces together. A meeting was designed to include all independent Oromo political organizations, including the OLF. Sisai played a big role in bringing this about. He personally knew one of the active Eritrean facilitators very well from ESUNA days and continued to keep in touch after the Eritrean Student Movement was launched. Sisai demanded of this third party facilitator that if Oromo go this route, officials of Eritrea should be neutral regarding the Oromo deliberations, not participating in the internal affairs of the Oromo groups. Sisai said to one of the facilitators:

> During the process of these Oromo political organizations coming together, facilitate them, give a place to meet, provide all logistical support you can, but do not try to influence the outcome. Let the Oromos come together to decide on their own what they want, how they work together, and then respect the decision that they make about how to work together.[19]

Only when the Eritreans agreed to remain neutral did Sisai decide to participate via this route.

Within one year and as a direct result of Sisai's indefatigable efforts, an initial meeting of four politi-

cal organizations, i.e., GBO, OLF, Tokkichummaa, and IFLO, was called in July 2000 in Eritrea. I would like to emphasize that since my purpose in this paper is merely to talk about Sisai's role, I will wait for some other time to discuss the important role other Oromo organizations' leaders played in the process of ULFO formation.

Reconciliation of OLF and IFLO and Preliminary Discussions, July 2000

The meetings were preceded by a major breakthrough in bringing the leaders of IFLO and OLF together for reconciliation after years of acrimony and outright violent conflict. Sisai's intervention was a crucial factor in bringing them together. The leaders of IFLO and OLF were ready for peace and took the opportunity the meeting provided them to discuss their long-standing animosity, acknowledge the harm they had been doing to each other. They issued a declaration[20] never again to resort to armed conflict to resolve their differences. They also asked the Oromo people to forgive them for the blood that was shed, lives lost, properties destroyed and setback caused to the Oromo struggle during the two decades of civil war. This development had a profound impact on the Oromo population.

A changed atmosphere created the ground for the OLF to sign the Consensus 2000 agreement. OLF and Tokkichummaa were agreeable to the role of the outside facilitator. Within the OLF, younger leaders came to take serious positions, openly debating formerly sensitive issues. And second only to the third party facilitator, it should be recognized that it was the OLF leadership who also helped in logistically organizing the conference that resulted in the formation of ULFO, finding

a meeting place, assisting in the transportation of the delegates, etc. All those things made the event possible. At that time the leadership within the OLF believed that unity of purpose would help the Oromo struggle to move forward.

At the meeting, the four organizations discussed how to move forward, signed a declaration of intent to form a unity which embraces all the forces who are struggling for the Oromo cause, and sent out a call to bring in all independent Oromo organizations together within two months as of that July meeting, i.e., September 2000.

The Birth of ULFO at a Unity Conference, September 2000

In September 2000, the organizing meeting for a new unity effort took place as planned. Six organizations, Gumi Bilisummaa Oromiyaa (GBO), Oromiyaa Peoples Liberation Front (OPLF), Oromo Liberation front (OLF), Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromiya (IFLO) Adda Tokkummaa Bilisummaa Ummata Oromoo (ATBUO) (Tokitchuma), and Ijaarsa Bilisummaa Saba Oromoo-1 (IBSO-1) came together and signed an agreement called Oromo Consensus 2000 asserting the following,

> Hence, the liberation of Oromia being the main goal and acknowledging the necessity of coordinating efforts politically, militarily and diplomatically we, the fronts and organizations for the liberation of Oromia: - Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromiyaa (IFLO), Oromiyaa Liberation Council (OLC), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), Oromo People's Liberation Front (OPLF), Oromo People's Liberation Organisation I (OPLO I), United

> Oromo People's Liberation Front (UOPLF) Hereby agree to form an umbrella organization known as United Liberation Forces of Oromia (ULFO). We have also agreed that this Consensus be our term of reference.[21]

This historical document had many features of the Toronto Accord of 1997. It articulated the objectives of the Oromo struggle, provided the guidelines that should be followed for carrying out the Oromo struggle, highlighted the norms that were derived from the Oromo political heritage that member organizations should be governed and abide by.

Once the agreement was signed, then the elections were held and the delegates swore faithfully to carry out the agreement. Sisai was elected as the spokesperson, General Waaqoo Guutuu as the chairman, Daoud Ibsaa and Jaarraa Abbaa Gadaa as vice chairs, Galasa Dilbo as secretary, and Jemal Hajii Ibrahim, as second secretary, and Abbagiddi was elected as third secretary.

Consensus 2000 stipulates that all political forces who are signatories to Consensus 2000 will abide by the agreement for six months until they come together to adopt a constitution, a short term program and working by-laws. A membership fee was designated and agreement was reached that all member organizations will pay membership fees to get things started. They agreed upon a banner of ULFO, a field equally divided among red, white and black stripes, an organ of ULFO to be named, *Daandii Bilisummaa,* with the purpose, to educate the public at large on the issue of unity and on the issues germane to the Oromo national liberation struggle. The spokesperson was to serve as editor. They also agreed the principle of the Oromo national liberation struggle is

bilisummaa Oromiya. There was an article added which later on created problems. That read, "All member organizations are autonomous." In the sense that Sisai viewed it, it meant that it is not proper to interfere in the internal affairs and operations of other member organizations. But others interpreted it to mean that outside of ULFO they were free to do anything they chose. This article was later cited as members sought to form union with political entities who did not support the Oromo cause.[22]

It was also agreed that gradually, the armed forces, then affiliated and encouraged by one or the other of these participating groups, were to be integrated into one national army. It was planned that these armed forces will be independent from the political control of any single group with the idea that a genuine national defense would become politically neutral—free from any particular kind of politics.

Launching the ULFO Agreements

Sisai regarded the establishment of ULFO as a serious engagement. He also understood that it needed a workable format. Members agreed to mobilize widely among the Oromo populations abroad in order to educate Oromos about this newly-created umbrella organization, creating ULFO branches in North America, Europe, Australia, Middle East, and Africa, particularly, Oromia. At the beginning, the issue of publicizing the newly-created umbrella organization was mostly done by the spokesperson. He traveled through the cities of North America. He put together an Editorial Board for *Daandii Bilisummaa* with representatives nominated by the member organizations. He began to publish *Daandii Bilisummaa* periodically. At this time ULFO did not have the financial capac-

ity to back him, so most of the expenses incurred were from his own pocket and from his organization.

As a result of Sisai's inclusive approach, within a short time, ULFO became popular, almost synonymous with *unity*. Oromos all over the world, back home in Oromia and abroad, including those people who are singing, musicians, artists, started to call for and to say and to sing, "Unity! Unity!" Sisai Ibssa contributed a great deal to this phenomenon. The call for unity had touched a felt need among Oromo and a prompted a willingness to participate that had been dormant.

As it turned out, however, there were immediate challenges to the implementation of the ULFO program. Although the ULFO was gaining wider acceptance among the Oromo public, there is was reluctance within the rank and file membership in some ULFO organizations. These members, caught between loyalty to ULFO and to their own organization, believed that their organization should retain the capacity to lead all the way to the liberation of Oromia. These members raised several questions around membership numbers, how membership is calculated, which group is greater, older, or more active than the other. Also the issues of using the ULFO banner or the OLF banner and of organizational autonomy[23] became discussion points of the day. Among ULFO member organizations, only a few paid membership fees, few provided delegates to work in all departments. Some members gave one person to work at one place, but not in others, some sent unqualified people.

Another problem arose with raising funds to finance ULFO. All member organizations were self-supporting and wanted to keep the finances for themselves. They

were reluctant to go out to raise funds specifically for ULFO; they resented watching generous gifts go to ULFO that might have gone to their own organizations. Wherever Sisai traveled people were willing to give money to help in any capacity for ULFO. Many did not want to give to any organization except ULFO. Consequently the financing of ULFO conflicted with constituent organizations' self-interest.

When ULFO was established, member organizations sent their leaders, people who could represent them well and were authorized and capable of producing results. Later on, member organizations sent delegates to do ULFO's work who had no mandate or clear information about ULFO, how it came about, what its functions were, or what needed to be accomplished. Not empowered, delegates found it increasingly difficult to resolve controversial issues. It took months to make a decision on simple issues because even when a delegate was authorized to serve in the assigned position, personal interests and intense loyalty to the constituent organization took precedence over the potential contribution one could make to ULFO. This kind of behavior inevitably obstructed the progress that ULFO might have made.

Logistics, such as that for calling the first Council of Leaders meeting, posed difficulties. Some of the leaders could not make themselves available, given that they lived on different continents. Consequently, ULFO Council of Leaders meetings were postponed repeatedly. This development resulted in preventing the ULFO from producing a specific short term program, the constitution or the by-laws to govern different departments and branches which were to be created as initially planned.

The work of ULFO was crippled within the time span of 18 months.

Due to these setbacks, some member organizations argued that ULFO should step back from trying to adopt the totality of Consensus 2000 and instead limit its goals. One of the articles within the Consensus declared that the ULFO was committed to create dialogue among member organizations to prevent negative propaganda campaigns against one another. Pointing out that since the goal of halting the hostility and reducing the dissemination of falsehoods against each other is almost achieved, these argued that the ULFO could be seen as already having successfully accomplished its work.

This argument continued that the ULFO could not deliver on its objective forging Oromo unity to the extent that was originally intended, therefore, ULFO should declare that since it was able to mobilize a great many people within one year, bring the independent Oromo organizations together, and create the idea of unity, it had succeeded in forming a practical umbrella operation. This camp asserted that the ULFO could not bring to fruition the ideal and turn it into something which was functional.

Coping with Setbacks to Unity

Sisai observed that ULFO was a victim of its own success. By mobilizing such a huge population behind the idea of unity within months of the organizing conference, it also created a backlash from the rank and file of the pre-existing political organizations. Consequently, Sisai shifted to focus by trying to break through the specific forms of resistance to ULFO's development, seeking means to remove the tendency of existing organizations

to undermine the ULFO, and confronting one-by-one tactics that were brought into play which damaged the ULFO. When the Council of Leaders continued to resist coming together to ratify the program, he concluded that they did not want the vision of the ULFO to be realized and were creating reasons to oppose it. It took five years before the Delegates Assembly was successfully called to establish the ULFO with a constitution and program. This was accomplished by constant pushing on Sisai's part. It is significant to note that during this period, Sisai was hospitalized with a massive heart attack in January 2004 while on a trip to advocate for the ULFO in the Pacific Northwest.

Initially the primary resistance was located within the management of the OLF in North America. Then a split within the OLF placed ULFO's secretary and vice chair into different camps. Removed from his position within the OLF, the ULFO secretary became unavailable to attend ULFO's deliberations. Consequently the official record of the proceedings and the wording of the carefully-crafted collective decisions of the inaugural meeting were not forthcoming, creating a significant obstacle for ULFO.

The period between 2001 and 2005 was a serious trial for the ULFO and for Sisai personally. After the splintering of the OLF, the remaining ULFO organizations were not participating wholeheartedly to secure the status of the ULFO either. Sisai was very attentive to this shortcoming, saying that if the OLF, as an important member organization of the ULFO, is overwhelmed by the crisis of its internal division and is also flirting with and contemplating work with others outside of the ULFO, the remaining five members should redouble

their efforts to strengthen the ULFO. Doing so, Sisai believed, would upgrade the ULFO and, through moral persuasion, could force the OLF back to the unity fold. He discovered that the remaining ULFO members were not entirely free from pursuing their own parochial interests. Some disappeared from contact and some complained about the absence of others. In Sisai's opinion, none of the others who committed to the objective of the liberation of Oromia contributed enough to carry out the agreement they signed in 2000. This includes all members. Even in the Gumii organization there were people who said: "Why do we waste our time and our money with the ULFO?" Within this period IBSO I left the ULFO and joined the Coalition of Ethiopian Forces. The Council of Leaders condemned the action of the IBSO I leaders because it was done openly. But other Oromo organizations appeared to pursue the same course clandestinely holding talks with the Ethiopian government in different cities in North America and giving priority to underground discussions with Ethiopian political opposition groups.

In Consensus 2000, the right to negotiate or to make alliance with Ethiopian forces is not clearly spelled out. The ambiguity created a problem. The objective of the ULFO is clearly specified, however, i.e., that the ULFO is the umbrella for organizations who believe in the liberation of Oromia. When the leaders of IBSO I decided to join the Coalition of Ethiopian Forces, the ULFO unanimously determined that the actions of this group were incompatible with the objective of the ULFO and suspended its membership, leaving the matter of whether or not to expel IBSO I from ULFO to the Delegates Assembly. The necessity of finalizing and ratifying

a program, a constitution and a set of by-laws was more urgent than ever before.

ULFO Constitutional Meeting April 2005

After much effort and the postponement of many meetings, the ULFO Delegates Assembly meeting was called to be held on April 11-13, 2005, preceded by a public forum on April 9-10 organized by the Spokesperson. The meeting took place in Washington, DC. It should be noted that during the drafting of the program and the constitution of the ULFO many problematic issues were revealed. Some major organizations started arguing in favor of replacing "the liberation of Oromia" with a more encompassing phrase "self-determination." The reason for this, as Sisai understood it, was political expediency. Adoption would enable ULFO's constituent organizations to determine their own specific political objectives.

During ratification, the program calling for *bilisummaa* specified as "liberation" or "independence" in 2000 was changed to a call for "self-determination" in 2005. Self-determination includes but is not limited to liberation. In the debate over this matter, the people who were arguing to use the term "self-determination" appeared to step away from a public commitment to "liberation" in order to allow member organizations to interpret the term.

For the constitution also, the majority of the delegates voted to change the objective of the organization to 'self-determination.' Then came the issue of 'proportionality,' that is, some organizations demanded that the number of ULFO delegates be apportioned in propor-

tion to each organization's resources, membership size, capacity and experience. The OLF also raised again the issue of a banner/flag for ULFO. Although it had been agreed and accepted by a majority vote in 2000 that all member organizations would champion the ULFO banner, by 2005 use of the ULFO banner was challenged by the head delegate of the OLF who unequivocally said that the OLF would not accept the ULFO banner as a banner of unity. They resisted the idea that any article concerning a common banner should be included in the constitution. Another central question was whether ULFO member organizations had the right to enter into association with organizations outside of ULFO while retaining good standing in ULFO.

Sisai realized the group insisting on the right to associate with other organizations was already working with groups outside of ULFO. He perceived that their plan was to adjust ULFO in such a way that they would be able to freely join Ethiopian organizations whether those organizations supported the Oromo national liberation struggle or not. As chair of the assembly, he managed to create some kind of middle ground that would accommodate the needs of these members:

- Regarding the issue of forging alliance with non-ULFO members such as Ethiopian forces, he proposed, and it was agreed, that ULFO members are free to form alliances, but only with those who clearly uphold the Oromo people's right to self-determination.
- On the question of proportionality, he suggested that proportional representation be linked to proportional responsibility, such as work load and payment

of dues. ULFO Delegates Assembly accepted this suggestion in principle, but referred the matter to the Executive Committee to study the numbers and the other capacities to propose wording for the by-laws.

- When the delegates of OLF threatened to walk out of the Delegates Assembly over their refusal to accept the ULFO flag, Sisai suggested that organizations who wanted to uphold the ULFO banner continue to do that, according to the agreements reached in Consensus 2000, and that the OLF be permitted to use its own banner. Discussing the issue, the assembly agreed to determine the Oromo people's preference for any flag or banner and inserted that choice into the articles of the constitution in the future.

These concessions were made to keep the delegates of the OLF in ULFO. The delegates appealed to the leaders of the OLF that in light of these compromises, they should go to their members and mobilize the OLF rank and file to support ULFO in order that ULFO become a viable umbrella organization.

Another issue that Sisai and a few other ULFO members took seriously was the challenge of incorporating civic associations into a national unity movement. Sisai indicated that since the political organizations rally only a certain sector and a small percentage of the Oromo population, the ULFO can serve as a vibrant umbrella organization only if civic associations—youth associations, women's' associations, academic or professional associations, etc.—were brought into the ULFO. Some kind of representation should be worked out and discussed at a certain level so that the ULFO will have a larger involvement of grassroots forces to move the

liberation struggle forward. This notion was rejected by the OLF delegates, first, during initial discussions formulating the draft program and then when it was brought up during the meeting. The OLF delegates opposed it arguing that civic associations should come under the OLF to serve as 'mass organizations.' The other member organizations did not support it at that time because they did not see a mechanism for bringing civic associations into a political structure or working on an overtly political agenda which was not part of their specific legal mandate for working in their host countries as registered non-profit organizations prohibited by law in the United States and Canada from engaging in political work. They argued that UFLO itself could not bring in the civic associations.

The political organizations existing at that time came together, ratified both the constitution and the program and elected their leaders. Daoud Ibsa of the OLF was elected chair, Jarraa Abbaa Gadaa of FIDO [formerly IFLO] was elected vice chair, Abdulsalam Husien of ATBUO as secretary, Sisai Ibssa of GBO as spokesperson. They agreed to call an executive committee meeting within weeks to work on the by-laws and continue to work on ULFO in a committed fashion. Right after the Washington DC Delegates Assembly, even though the work of moving the ULFO forward faced new obstacles, Sisai was pleased that, at long last, ULFO was on a firm foundation and was poised to accomplish its purpose.

In Closing

In an explanatory note prepared for *Daandii Bilisummaa*, after the Delegates Assembly of April 2005, Sisai offered the following explanation of ULFO:

Consensus 2000 is a concurrence reached among six organizations at the summit meeting of September 20, 2000. The United Liberation Forces of Oromia (ULFO) was formed to bring about the unity of purpose and to target the objectives for which all these groups are organized: *Bilisummaa*

How could we do that?

a) We agreed that our conflict is not an irreconcilable conflict nor is it antagonistic.

b) We also reached an understanding that to achieve the independence of Oromia the scattered Oromo forces must collaborate to fight the enemy as an Oromo force not as sectors.

c) We recognized that Oromo is one people as a nation, but diverse in interests; we also realized that the participation and cooperation of all sectors of our society are required to end the journey. And we recognized that when they act independently they remain to be a sector, but when they associate they become a nation.

d) We also realized that the principle of Gada, that all are equal under the law, is acceptable because it was the major guiding principle of our heritage in the past and shall remain to be our guiding principle in the future. The government of free Oromia shall come into existence by the consent of the people.

> So the question of putting these ideas into action, as I said above, is to create the capacity to bring all those whose objective is *bilisummaa* under one umbrella as an alliance of forces. Hence ULFO is an alliance of Oromo forces whose objective is to construct an ideological and organizational basis to achieve the self-determination of the Oromo people.

But while his hope was still high, within weeks of writing this passage, Sisai was struck in July 2005 with a condition that turned out to be fatal. He died on August 20 2005. His last written correspondence was two letters written on July 26, 2005, one to Gumii and the other to ULFO, requesting that he be replaced and that the work of the organization go forward to accomplish the unity of the Oromo nation.

What do these events reveal about Sisai's conceptualization of unity? I have gone into considerable detail in this account in order to examine the challenge faced in devising a mechanism for Oromo national unity. Though Sisai was committed to bringing different forces together to form an inclusive organization, he knew that there was no proven formula by which all different sectors can be embraced. From the outset Sisai was committed to incorporating all sectors of the Oromo society into this process of building unity. He found that the process could not be carried out without the participation of the political groups. Yet, as I have recorded, the political organizations struggled mightily even to sit down together. Although there appears to be very little, if any, real difference among them, they failed to come up

with a working agenda based upon an underlying objective. So the task is still not done. Even though the effort of those years taught Oromos and those in political organizations to believe that unity is necessary for advancing the Oromo cause, the mechanism for creating a viable unity has eluded them. Yet, if Sisai were alive today, I have no doubt that he would continue to challenge all Oromo as individuals and as groups to continue to identify and to overcome obstacles—whether personal factors, organizational loyalties or some other—to find ways to work together on what they agree in order for the Oromo people to achieve national liberation, the goal to which he dedicated his life.

Notes

1. Sisai told me that he was shocked by absence of individuals from among the so-called progressive Ethiopianists of those days who would recognize the right of the Oromo people for self determination. He told me that he was surprised when one of his ESUNA colleagues claimed that an organization not headed by an Amhara does not represent Ethiopia.
2. In *Bakakkaa,* 1976, a publication of UOSNA, Sisai explains the reasons for leaving the Ethiopian Student Movement were these fundamental differences. He vows that thereafter he would engage himself in working for Oromo people's national liberation struggle.
3. A full examination of the position he espoused was presented in a book that he and Bonnie Holcomb published on this subject titled, *The Invention of Ethiopia: The Making of a Dependent Colonial State in Northeast Africa.* Trenton, NJ: the Red Sea Press. In it they assessed Ethiopia's place in the global economic system and defined Ethiopia as a dependent colonial state.

4. Sagalee Waldhaansoo Volume XXII No 1, April 1998 p.12
5. Sagalee Waldhaansoo Volume XXII No 1, April 1998 p 12
6. It is unreported but likely that the other parties who participated in the conference – the EPLF, the TPLF and the US State Department, led by Herman Cohen – understood that without formally including the Oromo, who represent the majority population in the country, the effort would not appear inclusive.
7. Leenco Lata; "Seize the Moment or Perish" in *Daandi Bilisummaa* P. 40 Volume II number 2 July 2005.
8. *Kindling Point* No 27, July 1991.
9. 1994 Lata, Leenco, "The Making and Un-Making of Ethiopia's Transitional Charter," paper presented as part of the Panel titled, "Assessing Ethiopian Democracy," at the African Studies Association Annual Conference, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, November 6. This paper was later published with the same title in Asafa Jalata (ed.) Oromo Nationalism: the Ethiopian Discourse. (Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press,1998).
10. "The Oromo Quest for Democracy and Stability in the Horn of Africa" a briefing booklet issued by the Oromo Liberation Front, USA Office, May 1994.
11. "The OLF specifically recommends and urges the Clinton administration, the UN and international community at large to recognize the inalienable right of the Oromo people to freely and without limitation negotiate with other peoples of Ethiopia to constitute an acceptable form of state government structure (Briefing Booklet by the OLF USA office May 1994, p. 24).
12. These revelations were published in ***Ejerssa***, an occasional circular of Politics, Culture, Arts, News and Views: published by UONA-Metropolitan Washington DC Chapter, Volume II, No 2 June 1996.

13. Resolution of July 1994 UONA Congress.
14. The Oromo Commentary, Volume II, No. 2: 17-18, December 1992.
15. ***Daandii Bilisummaa*** Volume I, Number 3:11 December 2004.
16. Memorandum of Understanding, QYT, August 3, 1997, Washington DC.
17. Memorandum of Understanding, QYT August 3, 1997, Washington DC.
18. Of the political organizations who participated in the seminar in Washington DC in 1997, representatives of Tokkichummaa pulled out at the beginning of the meeting. The reason that they gave was that their higher leadership did not have enough information about this undertaking and that technically the people who represented them earlier in that formative gathering did not have the mandate to continue.
19. The demand Sisai verbally presented to Eritrean official Yemane Gebereab in 2000 during their meeting in Washington DC in my presence. I was the third participant at the meeting.
20. It was a two-page document titled, "Declaration of Peace and Reconciliation Between Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia (IFLO) and Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) dated July 24, 2000 and bearing the seal of both organizations.
21. Oromo Consensus 2000 is a document issued from Asmara, Eritrea by the United Liberation Forces of Oromia in both English and afan Oromo on September 20, 2000. It is composed of the following sections: Prelude, Objective, Guiding Principles of ULFO, Course of action, Policies, The structure of the United Liberation Forces of Oromia (ULFO).
22. Oromo Consensus 2000 the ULFO document of agreement refers to autonomy only vaguely.

23. In the ULFO agreement document called Oromo Consensus 2000 the issue of autonomy is stated as follows; "To strengthen the relationships among the Oromia liberation Forces based on autonomy, tolerance and mutual assistance." Some constituent organizations interpreted the autonomy clause to allow them to make alliance with other Ethiopian organizations. Others interpreted that the objective of ULFO, i.e., the liberation of Oromia, overrides forging any alliance with an Ethiopian force that opposed the right of Oromo to seek liberation.

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Book Reviews

Contending Nationalisms of Oromia and Ethiopia: Struggling for Statehood, Sovereignty, & Multinational Democracy

By Asafa Jalata, Global Academic Publishing, Binghamton University, (2010) $34.95. 229 pp.

This book aims to explain why the quest for self-determination and development projects supported by foreign aid has failed to bring about multinational democracy, stability, and economic development in northeast Africa. Previous studies accept the history of the region and the regional polities as a given and tend to ignore indigenous knowledge and participation of local actors in proposing solutions to the seemingly intractable political and socioeconomic problems. In *Contending Nationalisms of Oromia and Ethiopia*, Asafa Jalata, Professor of Sociology, Global Studies, and Africana Studies at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, re-conceptualizes the major historical events and players in the context of changing regional and global realities and proposes the adoption of indigenous Oromo democratic institutions and principles as an

alternative to existing exploitative and oppressive global political and economic systems.

Using interdisciplinary research approaches, Jalata analyzes the contending nationalisms of Oromia and Ethiopia. He considers the nationalism of the Tigray and Amhara, whose elite have controlled state power since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as state or oppressor nationalism, and the nationalism of Oromo people and other peoples—colonized and oppressed majority—as oppressed nationalism. The author states that "Oppressor Ethiopian nationalism of the Amhara and Tigrayan peoples has been used in creating and maintaining the Ethiopian Empire and in keeping the Oromo and others as colonial subjects" (p.1). Ethiopian nationalism aims to control and destroy any political dissent that it perceives as a threat to the economic and social powers of the Abyssinian oligarchy and denies the Oromo and other peoples in southern Ethiopia their right to self-determination. In contrast, the author argues that the goal of the oppressed Oromo nationalism is to give the Oromo nation an ideology of liberation and a program for self-determination and sovereignty "by radically transforming the Ethiopian colonial state and its racist political structure and by promoting a multi-national democracy" (p.1). With this formulation, Asafa posits that a successful democracy will end Abyssinian colonial domination and oppressor nationalism. To prevent that from happening, the current Ethiopian minority regime relies heavily on brute force to keep dissidents at bay and itself in power.

The book also elucidates why racism, contrary to the prevailing wisdom, can exist between peoples of the same color. The author refers to black-on-black racism in which Habesha (Abyssinians) strive to erase their Africanness or

blackness by claiming a Middle Eastern Semitic linguistic and cultural heritage. Based on myths and legends, Jalata argues, the Habesha claim moral and racial superiority over indigenous Africans, whom they considered as the "scum of the earth." The elites misuse religious institutions and texts to claim divine provenance for their political power to rule over Oromia and the southern regions of Ethiopia. Jalata shows convincingly that Habesha racism has resulted in evictions, forced assimilation, and extermination of non-Habesha ethno-national groups, and concludes that skin color is not a necessary determinant of racism. It is because of this black-on-black racism, Jalata maintains, that Ethiopia has thus far failed to transform itself from an archaic empire into a viable democracy.

The book benefits from nearly a decade of research and extensive knowledge of the subject on the part of Jalata. The chapters were previously published in scholarly journals, but Jalata coherently weaves them into a single volume in a way that is accessible to readers without prior knowledge of the region. Unlike many books written by Ethiopianist scholars who distorted history to justify the prevailing political order, Jalata courageously addresses the volatile and explosive issues directly, in order to seek a better system of governance for the people in Ethiopia. He refutes the widely-held view of Ethiopianist scholars and authorities that considers Ethiopia a sovereign, legitimate, and stable country. Instead Jalata shows that "Ethiopia" is a state built on the ideology of "Ethiopianism" which was constructed to represent the interest of the Amhara-Tigray elite and ensure their control of political power and resources in Ethiopia.

According to Jalata, the failure of socialism and capitalism to serve the cause of social justice and democracy

movements in northeast Africa is a major reason for the persistence of poverty and injustice. He argues that the solution to these problems is not likely to come from external ideologies. He calls for the application of *gadaa* (the indigenous African political system of the Oromo society) principles for constructing a democratic state in today's Oromia and in the region. These include the principles of checks and balances, separation of power, balanced opposition modeled on *gadaa* grades, and a national assembly based on the *gumii gayyoo* or the *gadaa* assembly. In Africa, where democratic practices predate some Western democracies, Jalata contends, the application of local solutions to local problems based on local knowledge merits serious consideration, especially in view of the failed endeavors of the global North to impose its version of democratization on the global South. Jalata has a dream that those democratic aspects of *gadaa* that can be universalized and integrated into our world's global system.

As a book written by an admitted Oromo political activist, one would expect *Contending Nationalism of Oromia and Ethiopia* to be partial in its analysis. Yet Jalata also provides a sober critique of the Oromo national movement that he has known closely. The book is an essential addition to the body of knowledge on politics and societies in northeast Africa. Asafa Jalata's latest book is not just a book of symptoms of the problems of contending nationalisms of Oromia and Ethiopia, but one that addresses their root causes directly. It is a must read for those interested in new ways of thinking about workable solutions to political and economic problems in northeast Africa.

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Mutilating Khalid: The Symbolic Politics of Female Genital Cutting

By Charles G. Steffen. (Trenton, NJ: The Red Sea Press, 2010). $ 29.95. 227 pp.

In this deeply moving book, historian Charles Steffen "examines one of the most remarkable cases of 'female genital mutilation' ever to be prosecuted in a United States court." From the first to the last page, the book deals with a succession of events that turned upside down the life of Khalid M. Adem, a young and promising Oromo national, who is currently serving a ten year sentence in the Georgia State Penitentiary for a crime he never committed. His case is a miscarriage of justice carried out in the name of a higher cause—fighting against the savagery of female genital mutilation that is practiced in Ethiopia in particular. A brief background is necessary to provide a backdrop to the outrageous charge leveled against an Oromo immigrant who came to the United States to seek education and a better life but found himself in a nightmare that has darkened his future.

Khalid M. Adem was born in 1975 to an Oromo business family in Addis Ababa. Unfortunately, his family's business was confiscated by the Ethiopian military regime on the pretext that Khalid's father was a supporter of the Oromo Liberation Front (p. 11). Khalid arrived in the United States in 1991 and lived around Washington, DC with a relative and continued his education. He moved to Atlanta in 1993 and applied for political asylum which was denied in 1995. This became the basis for his deportation later. The denial of his asylum claim forced Khalid to quit his education at the DeKalb College and to continue working and living in Gwinnett County, suburban of Atlanta. There he met and started a relationship with Fortunate Dube, a young Zulu immigrant from South Africa, who arrived in the United States in 1978. The couple got married only a few months before Khalid was deported to Ethiopia in 1997. As a naturalized citizen of the United States, Fortunate flew to Addis Ababa, where the couple "celebrated their marriage Oromo-style" (p. 12). After ten weeks in Addis Ababa, Fortunate returned to Atlanta and struggled to sort out the legal issues surrounding her husband's immigration status. In April 1998, Khalid was permitted to return to the United States as a permanent resident. Their daughter, Amirah J. Adem was born on September 8, 1999. This happy turn of events was followed by rapid and tragic collapse of their marriage. In 2000 Fortunate filed for divorce and "demanded sole custody of Amirah because she claimed that Khalid was planning to steal the child and smuggle her back to Ethiopia" (p. 13).

During the divorce battle, Fortunate claimed that Khalid wanted to circumcise his daughter because of his blind belief in his people's barbaric tradition of female

genital mutilation, which is not practiced in her Zulu culture in South Africa. Through an intense internet search Fortunate discovered that female genital mutilation was a powerful weapon that could be harnessed to buttress her case against Khalid. Then in January 2003, Fortunate dropped a bomb shell, claiming that Khalid had carried out mutilating his daughter without her knowledge. It was Fortunate's mother, Joyce Dube, a pediatric nurse at Grady Hospital in Atlanta, who first examined the girl and confirmed that she had been circumcised. Thus what started as a bitter divorce battle was transformed into criminal prosecution of Khalid in 2003. Khalid was charged "with cutting off his two year old daughter's clitoris with a pair of scissors," an accusation he vehemently denied. Countless people who read the story in the papers, heard it on radio, or saw it played out on television responded with a collective shudder of disbelief and revulsion" (p. 1). The sensational and intense local and national coverage of Khalid's case "generated a political storm making suburban Atlanta the local stage on which powerful global forces assembled" (p. 2) to attack female genital mutilation worldwide. Reading this compelling book, brought back to me the memory of the time when our culture was characterized as barbaric. The author accurately states that the intense media coverage of Khalid's case appeared to immigrants from the Horn of Africa as an attempt "to resurrect images of a 'Dark Continent' of savages and bloody rituals, and of barbarism and sexual monstrosities" (p. 3). Indeed many of us felt, at the time, that our African cultural heritage was under direct assault. "When a crime calls forth the intense emotional and visceral response that the [Khalid] Adem case did, it is safe to assume that we have

entered the volatile realm of symbolic politics" (p. 3). Thus *Mutilating Khalid* explores the symbolic politics that surrounded the Adem case, showing how prosecutors, judges, reporters, politicians, and activists set out to mold the public's image of Khalid and to appropriate his symbolic value for their own particular purposes. As a result of their efforts, Khalid came to personify a dark and forbidding world at odds with women's rights, family values, and enlightened modernity.

Knowing Khalid personally as a decent and well-behaved young man, I was truly horrified with the charges leveled against him and his arrest in 2003. I had hoped that justice would prevail in the court of law because the charge against him was not based on tangible evidence. After all, "Fortunate said she had no idea when, where, or how her husband managed to carry out his threat to have Amirah circumcised" (p. 19). I have studied Oromo history and culture for almost three decades and from my own Oromo cultural background, I have never heard of a man circumcising a girl. In Oromo culture, only elderly women with experience and training perform circumcision on girls between the age of five and seven, but never on a two year old baby. In fact, there is a strong cultural taboo that prevents the presence of a father or any man at the time of female circumcision. Glory A. Kilanko, Nigerian female activist, and a 29-year "veteran of international women's rights and human rights movement" from her office in Decatur, suburban Atlanta, embarked on her own investigation and concluded that the case against Khalid wasn't credible. She asks: "How could eighteen months go by without Fortunate noticing that the daughter she bathed, diapered, and potty trained every day had been 'mutilated' (p. 122).

It appears that Amirah was circumcised most likely in 2001. Khalid Adem had no motive for doing what was unimaginable in the Oromo cultural universe—circumcising his two-year daughter. After the couple's separation in 2000, Khalid had access to his daughter only in the presence of her mother. If Khalid did not do it, then who circumcised Amirah? Khalid's lawyer argued that it was Fortunate herself, who had the motive for doing it—bittersweet revenge against Khalid, who "...had spurned her" and had the technical support of her mother, Joyce Dube, a pediatric nurse by profession (p. 188). The jury did not buy that line of argument. As a result of the sensational media coverage of his case, Khalid had already been convicted in the court of public opinion. The jury that found Khalid guilty was unable to rise above the conviction that had been reached in the court of public opinion.

Charles Steffen, professor of American history at Georgia State University, has no ideological axe to grind about Ethiopian culture, which was used as a pretext for establishing Khalid's "guilt," or any other issue at stake in this case. Professor Steffen was attracted to Khalid Adem's case by the media coverage it generated and the miscarriage of justice that followed. His goal in writing this book was the search for truth. What he has shown through meticulous interviews and research demonstrates that justice was not served in the case of Khalid Adem. He successfully establishes that the media coverage galvanized women's and human rights organizations from Atlanta to New York to Nairobi and "prompted the Georgia General Assembly to enact a legislation criminalizing 'female genital mutilation.'" It was under this legislation that Khalid Adem was prosecuted, found guilty and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. With

few exceptions, the powerful individuals, who rallied around Khalid's case, were inspired by a strong desire to stop the practice of female genital cutting from which millions of girls and women around the world suffer. However, their ideological passion convinced them to use this case as the first prosecution of female genital mutilation in the United States regardless of the weak evidence on which it was based. Unfortunately, in the process they demonstrated that, though Khalid Adem was accused of mutilating his daughter, it was in fact he who was mutilated through a miscarriage of justice. Hence the apt title for the book under review.

What strikes the reader throughout this powerfully written book is the fact that it was not only Khalid who was on trial, but his own cultural background from Ethiopia, which was used as a pretext, justification and rationalization for his conviction. Even Judge Seeliger, who presided over the divorce case of Khalid and Fortunate "expressed the opinion that the testimony presented at the divorce case, including the cultural evidence of female circumcision practices in Ethiopia, did not prove Kahlid's guilt beyond reasonable doubt" (p. 28). And yet a "Gwinnett County jury of seven women and five men found Khalid guilty of one count of aggravated battery and another count of cruelty to children. The judge sentenced him to ten years in prison plus five years of probation. As Steffen put it,

> So many groups had an interest in the outcome of the Adem case, and all of them justified their involvement in terms of a higher cause. Yet in the end, Khalid's story was not about crime punished, order restored, rights affirmed, or justice

> served. It was about the blinding force of symbolic politics (p. 204).

This book is captivating from the beginning to the end. It is a must-read for those who are from the Horn of Africa and eastern Africa and anyone interested in the issue of female genital mutilation, women and human rights, the issue of newly arriving immigrants, and the issue of fairness and justice for the poor in the court of law in the United States. Thanks to the scholarly work of Professor Charles Steffen, probably a next immigrant who will be wrongly accused of mutilating his daughter will not suffer the fate of Khalid Adem in a court of law in the United States.

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