

Prologue

The Tears of Generations

Hamdesa Tusso

I am an Oromo who was born and raised in the Rift Valley, around Arsi-Nageelle and Shashamanne area. I represent the third generation in my family whose lives have been dramatically affected by the ongoing conflict in Ethiopia. My grandfather, Ulla Tulle, was gunned down in one morning on a wedding occasion at the foot of Mt. Duro. With him, five persons (family members and neighbors) also perished. My grandmother lost her first son, Bariso, in that onslaught; however, she managed to run away with four of her remaining children who were too young to comprehend that dramatic event. The government confiscated the entire cattle and property of the family and that of relatives and neighbors.

My grandmother was my first history teacher on the subject of the conquest and subjugation of the Oromo and many other population groups in the periphery of the Ethiopian Empire. The wound, which remained in her soul, was indelible in my memory through her tears over the slaughter of her son, Bariso. It was agents of the government who undertook this act of atrocity. It was done under the pretext that my grandfather had failed to pay taxes. This took place during 1930s, about four decades after the Oromos were conquered by Emperor Menelik II. This was the period in which the colonial administration employed various drastic pacification measures. One such method was eliminating the leadership among the Oromos. It happened to be that my grandfather was a leader in his community.

My father, one of the four children who escaped death due to the courageous act of my grandmother, grew up in terror and was further terrorized as a peasant under the regimes of Emperor Haile Selassie and the Derg. In the district of Arsi-Nageelle, the entire land, with a few exceptions, belonged to Her Imperial Majesty, Etege Menen. In addition to numerous unfair and abusive obligatory duties, the peasants of the colonized subjects had to endure in Haile Selassie's

Arrested Development in Ethiopia

Ethiopia. My father, as the government policy demanded of all subjects on the royal family owned lands, had to pay taxes to Haile Selassie's government as well as to the office of Her Imperial Majesty. Yet the West embraced Emperor Haile Selassie as "the wise and modernizing Emperor."

The Derg emerged claiming to be a pro-peasant, socialist government. The then socialist world embraced it as a truly revolutionary regime which cared about equality and socialist justice. However, in due course, the Derg emerged as one of the most brutal regimes in the world. Among its chief cruel policies toward the peoples in the periphery of the Ethiopian Empire, was the resettlement of the new *naftanya* (colonial settlers) to the South, the imposition of price controls on the agricultural goods of the peasants, and most of all, the introduction of forced villagization on Oromo peasants of the generations of my father and his children. Indeed, this scorched earth policy was meant to achieve the ultimate goal of the colonial conspiracy: to complete the final dispossession of the Oromo people of their resource, their national identity and cultural heritage!

The educated Oromos who, for the most part, represent the first generation literate segment in the Oromo society, did not fare any better. The Derg systematically and indiscriminately persecuted Oromo professionals and intellectuals through intimidation, imprisonment, torture, and physical liquidation.

In 1991, between May and July, I witnessed the dawn of a new era, the rise of the Tigrean power. Also, I witnessed in disbelief the coronation of Meles Zenawi and his Tigrean cohorts, the successor of the Derg, by the West as "the new agents for democracy and protectors of human rights" in the new political order of the post Cold War Ethiopia. On May 22, I learned from National Public Radio (U.S.) about the flight of Col. Mengistu Hailemariam from Addis Ababa. Like many who were following events in the Horn of Africa, I was taken by surprise by that extra-ordinary development in Ethiopia. After a few days, the U.S. State Department announced that it was hosting a peace conference in London, UK, on the political future of Ethiopia.

This announcement excited me for several reasons. First, on May 6, I had organized a colloquium on the same general topic hosted by the Institute of Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia—the idea came from the course I was teaching about the conflict in the Horn of Africa at the time. The participants included the representative of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), the representative of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the representative of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the representative of the Embassy of Ethiopia in Washington, D.C., the representative of the U.S. State Department, and the representative of the USSR Embassy in Washington, D.C. A dialogue format was selected for

the discourse. Professor Christopher Mitchell, an internationally recognized scholar on deep-rooted conflicts, served as the moderator. Three other colleagues from the faculty of George Mason University joined him in asking questions designed to facilitate dialogue. It so happened that the same parties would be invited to attend the London Peace Conference about two weeks later. At the London Peace Conference, Mr. Herman Cohen, Assistant Secretary for Africa, U. S. State Department, was the convener of the peace talks. The representative of the Soviet Union attended the conference as an observer.

Second, the London Peace Conference was significant in that peoples of the periphery of the Ethiopian Empire were represented for the first time in a major international arena since the conquest which took place during late 19th century and early 20th century. At least symbolically, the presence of the OLF at the conference was a historic event. It would be recalled that in 1941 when the British expelled Italy from Ethiopia, Oromos wanted to be given a chance to rule themselves; however, it was the London government which surrendered them to Emperor Haile Selassie against their will. Indeed, the event was a clear demonstration that the attempts by the successive Abyssinian regimes to obliterate the Oromo nation from the political landscape did not succeed.

Third, the U.S. played a pivotal role in the incorporation of Eritrea by Emperor Haile Selassie. Fourth, the involvement of the U.S. government in the peace process gave new hope because there prevailed an expectation that the U.S., freshly freed from its preoccupation with the Cold War, might ensure some measure of democratic process and might provide a new source of legitimacy for the peoples of the periphery.

Finally, I was invited to attend the London Peace Conference as consultant to one party in the conflict. I flew out of the Dulles Airport in Virginia on May 27 overnight and arrived in London in the morning. By the time I reached my destination in London, the conference was already over. On that evening, I watched on CNN the dramatic announcement by Mr. Cohen that the U.S. had already unilaterally endorsed the TPLF to enter Addis Ababa and take charge. All of a sudden, the mood changed from that of hope to a new level of anxiety for peoples of the periphery. Having witnessed the hope that the Peace Conference would usher in a new era of equity and mutual respect for the various national groups in Ethiopia was dashed, I flew back in a mental condition of alarm and anxiety. Having witnessed the beginning of a new drama unfolding, I gave a speech in Minneapolis entitled, "The *utuba* has fallen: Will the Oromo create their own or remain a *galtu*?"

Now I wish to explain the two metaphors, *utuba* and *galtu* which were used as the central pieces relative to symbolic representation of the realities as I conceived them at the time of that speech. The term *utuba* in Oromo language

Arrested Development in Ethiopia

is the central pillar that holds up the roof—of course, we are thinking about a traditional wooden house in an African setting for which grass is used as a cover. In such a house, there are other *utabas* which play subsidiary roles in upholding the structure. The term *galtu* (also an Oromo term) is used to describe a person who cannot make it on his own; instead he becomes dependent on another person. For example, a *galtu* cannot build his own house, cannot have his own farm; thus he becomes a dependent on someone else. He survives by providing some sort of service for the family on which he depends. More importantly, his very survival always depends on the mercy of that family.

Now placing these metaphors in the context of the politics in the Ethiopian Empire, I conceived the term *utuba* to represent the Amhara power structure which had played pivotal roles in the Abyssinian political landscape. The Amhara rulers, although they promoted Amhara dominance in all manners, somehow deflected the image of Amhara control by insisting that all peoples in the empire were Ethiopians and identification with any ethnic group was a "tribalistic" tendency and as such a manifestation of political "backwardness." Even more seriously, such notions were castigated as anti-unity of Ethiopia and not to be tolerated. The Amhara rulers were able to lure the educated class of the subordinate nationalities, for the most part, through varied forms of reward system (e.g. intermarriage, high posts, feudal titles, acceptance to the social class, etc.). They also, as we will discuss later in this work, employed brutal repression to crush anyone who manifested any semblance of challenge to their power.

Thus such a twin system of control—reward and punishment—provided the aura of security of the Ethiopian state, and projected an illusion that the political system in Ethiopia would be a viable one. In particular, the minds of the educated elite of subordinated nationalities were pacified by this twin system of control. Therefore the question in 1991 was, now that Amhara power has collapsed, what will keep Ethiopia together?

The metaphor *galtu* has a particular significance to the Oromo in their history of a century old colonial experience. Since a *galtu* ranks higher than a slave and a servant, how would he represent the social position of the colonized population? However, this metaphor represents the experience of the peoples of the periphery (i.e. their subordinate status) in some fundamental ways.

First, it is to represent the psychological and social condition of the educated elite of the subordinate nationalities. Because of their relatively higher status in the social order due to their formal education and socialization, they, for the most part, escaped the brutality perpetrated against the peasant class. However, they remained the classic *galtu*, perpetually dependent psychologically, culturally, and socially. They were the psychologically castrated class of the Oromo society. During the last century, the social phenomenon of *galtu*

has been haunting the Oromos. Indeed, towering personalities such as General Gobana Daci played a crucial role in the conquest of the Oromos (he surrendered them to Emperor Menelik II, but the latter showed his gratitude by eliminating the General himself once the war of conquest was won). Gobana came to symbolize the ultimate Oromo quisling. Fitaurari Habte Giorgis who served as Minister of War during the reign of Empress Zawuditu, while Teferi Mekonen was still a political novice, refused, according to some accounts, to take power when the opportunity presented itself. Then there is the history of the Bale armed movement which rekindled Oromo nationalism and a quest for self-determination. There too, it was Oromo generals such as Jagama Kello and a few others who helped defeat the movement.

Second, toward the late 1980s, the TPLF began, in some vague manners, preaching about "unity based on equality" in the new Ethiopia to be ruled by the TPLF. Yet in 1990, it created the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO) out of prisoners of war for the purpose of undermining the legitimacy of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Oromos in the Diaspora and at home universally condemned this move. As the London Peace Conference was adjourned abruptly and unilaterally by the American host of the Peace Conference, dashing any hope of creating some kind of equitable system of government for the post Derg Ethiopia, this author flew back from London thinking "who and which Oromo group will be the new Gobanas—the new *galtus*!" Little one imagined that Meles Zenawi would create a ceremonial presidency and recruit a highly educated Oromo, Nagasso Gidada, and of all things, a former supporter of the OLF, as his highest point of deception in creating an illusion of participation by the peoples of the periphery in the post-Derg Ethiopia.¹ Neither did one conceive that Oromos would universally reject the OPDO and label it as a *matanne*. *Matanne* in Oromo language refers to an object which does not possess the necessary structural qualities to stand on its own strength; instead, it attaches itself and crawls, so to speak, around a stronger object to accomplish its major functions. Metaphorically speaking, in the Oromo worldview, this represents the ultimate form of dependency.

Thus my choice of the term *galtu* as metaphor was conceived to represent these complex realities. In the Oromo notion of social realities, both of these metaphors, *galtu* and *matanne* signify in some clear ways dependence, lack of self-confidence, and lack of accountability. However, the designation of the term *matanne* to represent the relationship between the TPLF and OPDO illustrate a much stronger social disapproval on the part of the Oromos towards the rulers and their PDO's (People's Democratic Organizations).

There was another episode, a symbolically powerful one which I still vividly remember from that week—it was the tears of the fourth generation! During

Arrested Development in Ethiopia

that week, upon returning from London, I talked to a lot of people about the political development in London as well as in Addis Ababa about the future of Ethiopia. During the same week, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), with the support of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), was marching into Addis Ababa routing the remnant of the Derg soldiers.

One evening, I was discussing these rapidly unfolding events with a young Oromo woman. I will call her Shaggitu. She was a refugee awaiting a decision from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service on her application for political asylum. All of a sudden, she broke into tears. I was lost as to what to say. She kept on crying, louder and louder. What confused me was the fact that she was, for all intents and purposes, an apolitical person. After sometime, I asked her why she was crying.

She calmed down and softly began talking. "You don't understand, you don't understand!" she replied. Her voice started to rise again. "You will never understand what will be happening to the people in Ethiopia," she added. "You are lucky; you were outside during the Red Terror!" she continued. Then she carefully explained to me her thesis. She said, "You see, the Derg was a minority political group. It was not accepted by the people. So in order to be accepted, it killed so many and destroyed so much. Then she went on. "You see, this group is another minority. So, they are going to kill so many and cause so much damage to impose themselves on the people."

Shaggitu had direct traumatic experience with the Derg. As a teenager, she lived in Addis Ababa during the years of the Derg. The Derg killed her older brother during the Red Terror. She almost lost her own life when the agents of the Derg raided her apartment one morning to capture her brother who was eventually killed. Her father died of stroke as the result of the stress he had experienced from the tragic loss of his son and the mounting social turbulence during the Red Terror. He left behind ten children and a widow who did not have much education. Suddenly, Shaggitu's world collapsed before her watchful eyes. Just like my grandmother, she sustained emotional scars from the legacy of violence during the brutal years of the Derg.

The Red Terror was a violent conflict between three political entities—the Derg, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), and MEISON (the All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement). Essentially, the central issue in the conflict was who would have exclusive control over political power in the post Haile Selassie Ethiopia. All the three political organizations, for the most part, were controlled by the Amharas.²

For the Oromo students, the Red Terror had a special significance in two major ways. First, since the leaders of these contending political organizations (the Derg, EPRP, Meison) were very conscious of the fact that Oromos were

the majority, each perceived that any organization that would gain Oromo support would be in a more advantageous position to attain the goal of winning supremacy in the a new political order.

Second, the ghost of the Oromo Liberation Front was increasingly looming over the political landscape of the empire. Consequently, Oromo students became suspects by all three groups, leading to the targeting of Oromo students either for recruiting them for one's political organization or eliminating them through physical liquidation.³

The tears of Shaggitu represent the tears of the fourth generation of Oromos whose lives have been dramatically shattered as the result of conquest and colonization. Indeed, Shaggitu's predictions came true. The Tigrayans, once they took over Addis Ababa, imposed themselves through sheer military might and violence. The rise of Tigrayan power has had profound ramifications for the Oromo society. The TPLF, the successor of the Derg, systematically aborted the internationally advertised elections of June 1992, successfully purged all the genuine Oromo organizations, and then declared war on the Oromos. Meles Zenawi is now conducting genocide against the Oromos in his wars from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. In his war with Eritrea, he has been using Oromo peasants as cannon fodder.⁴

As if controlling some thirty million Oromos in Ethiopia is not enough, he has recently occupied half of Somalia. His agents, "as agents for democracy and protectors of human rights," in the new political order in post-Cold War Ethiopia, have penetrated the heartland of Kenya to terrorize Oromos, even those who are Kenyan citizens.⁵

Early studies about Ethiopia have been exclusively about the Abyssinian kings and the power based Orthodox Church, the deadly rivalry among them, their conquest of the periphery, and their intrigues with the external powers. The conflict which dominated the scene during the 1960s and early 1970s, was essentially between the young educated *habasha* intellectuals and the old upper class represented by the Emperor, the nobility, and the Orthodox Church. The major story that grabbed the attention of the international community during the 1980s, for the most part, was about the conflict between the Amhara dominated regime in Addis Ababa and the two Tigrayan political organizations (TPLF and EPLF). Now in the 1990s, the major story of the conflict in the post-Derg Ethiopia is about the new conflict between two Tigrayan groups—TPLF of Tigray and the Eritrean government in Asmara.

The personal narrative I have attempted to present here can be told by hundreds and thousands of other families in the periphery of the Ethiopian Empire. I relate this personal narrative in the hope of making a point: the population in the periphery in Ethiopia comprises about 70 percent; yet the analysis which

Arrested Development in Ethiopia

predominates the social scene in Ethiopia has been almost exclusively about the Abyssinian core and it is usually exclusively about the machinations of the Abyssinian ruling class.

In my view, this historically skewed treatment of the political development in the Ethiopian Empire, invariably in support of the narrative of the Abyssinian core at the expense of the overwhelming majority populations in the periphery, has created a distorted view of the realities of the ever-raging conflict in the collapsing empire of Ethiopia. As the African proverb goes, "When elephants fight it is the grass beneath the feet which suffers." I believe the record will show that it has been mainly the people in the periphery who have been the grass beneath the feet of the giant elephants in the struggle for exclusive power in the Ethiopian-state. It seems that *habashas* have managed to dominate the international scene by effectively occupying the two opposing positions in the universe of the ongoing social conflict. In one category, the winner campaigns in the world arena for recognition and in another category, the loser runs around the world as the victim asking for sympathy.

To be sure, as a student of social conflict I readily recognize resolving deep-rooted social conflict such as the one in Ethiopia will be an arduous and complex undertaking if there will ever be some reasonable and just resolution. However, it is my strong view that any new attempt to make peace in that overheated, complex social order has to be preceded by assembling reasonably representative and accurate information which could result in some sound diagnosis. Thus far it is very clear, at least from my point of view, that the analysis of social change in Ethiopia has missed the mark by a significant margin (this may be an understatement of the problem).

Ethiopian studies not only ignored the story of the majority in the periphery—the bloody conquest, the subsequent subjugation, and the perpetual exploitative relationships between the core and the periphery—they even failed to sufficiently recognize the deadly inter-group conflict within the Abyssinian core which has been driving the political discourse in the empire. The level of ignorance and the extent of mis-diagnosis on the part of external powers about politics in Ethiopia has been just as stark, and to some extent, even worse than that of the Ethiopianists. It is hoped that in some small way this work will reflect, the social realities' perspective from the periphery of the deep-rooted and protracted social conflict in Africa.

Notes

1. The Oromo view relative to the ascendancy of Nagasso Gidada to the ceremonial presidency in the post-Derg Ethiopia was well captured by the title commentary by Tadesse Fida which appeared in Urjii, an Oromo paper in Addis Ababa. The

title read, "What a joke? In the ascendancy of Nagasso Gidada to [Presidency], the Oromo nation has been disgraced." See *Uryii* Vol. II, No. 24 (August 29, 1995), p. 7.

2. The conflict during the Derg, particularly the Red Terror, has been well covered by different authors. One source comes from the members of the participants themselves. (See Tola, 1989; Tadesse, 1993; 1998. See also Wolde Giorgis 1989:31-34).
3. I have collected valuable information over the years through interviews from Oromo students and professionals who lived in Ethiopia during the Derg on this aspect of the conflict.
4. See "Atrocities and abuses against Oromo in Kenya" a detailed report inserted in a Press Release issued by Oromia Support Group, August - October 1999, No. 29; See also Said Wabera, "Town tense as trader Is killed," 15 August 1999.
5. See David Hirst, "In Tsorona, On the Eritrea-Ethiopia Border," *The Guardian*, 18 May 1999. For a summary of a first hand account as related by conscripted Oromos in this war see "Fighting talk: Students and captured soldiers tell of forced conscription and horrors of battle", Sagalee Haaraa, Oromia Support Group Newsletter, No. 28 (May-July 1999), pp. 4-5.

Arrested Development in Ethiopia

Edited by
Seyoum Hameso and Mohammed Hassen

The Red Sea Press Inc.
Publishers & Distributors of Third World Books
P.O. Box 1982 P.O. Box 48
Trenton, NJ 08607 Asmara, ERITREA