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CELEBRATING OROMO HEROISM AND COMMEMORATING THE OROMO MARYTRS' DAY

(Guyya Gootota Oromiyaa)

Asafa Jalata,
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
The Oromo Community of Atlanta, Georgia, April 24, 2010

I am very pleased to be invited today to reflect on the Oromo martyrs' day in a foreign land, far away from Oromia. Every nation is proud of its heroism and commemorates its heroes and heroines who bravely fought for its liberation and national independence. So what is heroism in the context of the Oromo national struggle? Why do we celebrate Oromo heroism in general and the Oromo martyrs' day in particular? Who were and are our patriots who deserve our recognition and commemoration? Are these heroes and heroines only political leaders or all Oromos who have paid necessary sacrifices for the liberation of our people and our country? In my discussion, I try to answer all these questions.

Oromo Heroism

Oromo history demonstrates that the Oromo people had been heroic when they were organized under the *gadaa* system of government. Between the third and fourth *gadaa* grades (i.e., from 16 to 32 years), Oromo boys became adolescent and initiated into taking serious responsibilities, including protecting the security of the Oromo country. The ruling group had responsibility to assign senior leaders and experts to instruct and advise these young men in the importance of leadership, organization, and warfare.

Young Oromos also learned songs, parables, proverbs, cultural and historical maps, and other social skills that they could use in public speech to praise the living and dead heroes or to criticize and ridicule. In order to promote patriotism, Oromo heroes and heroines were praised and others criticized through public speech in Oromo society. Oratory, the art of public speaking, was highly valued in Oromo society; "the forms of delivery, the wit of the speaker, his tone of voice, his posture, eye contact and ability to command the attention of the audience" were skills to be honed and admired.

Young men were trained to become junior warriors by taking part in war campaigns and hunting large animals. They also learned the practical skills of warfare, military organization, and fighting so that they could engage in battle to defend their country and economic resources. That was why through series of offensive and defensive wars, they could establish a sovereign Oromia until the last decades of the 19th century, when European powers such as Great Britain, France, and Italy had changed the balance of power between the Oromo and Habasha peoples.

The alliance of European imperialism with Ethiopian colonialism and the introduction of modern weapons led to the defeat of the Oromo nation. In this way, after trying for many centuries and facing many defeats, Amharas and Tigrayans colonized the Oromo. They have also maintained their domination of Oromo society with the help of successive hegemonic powers. By hiding these historical facts, successive Ethiopian regimes and society have depicted the Oromo as coward; they claimed that "and Amhara mato galla yinadal." This means one Amhara can defeat hundred Oromos. These colonialists have tried their best to hide the bravery of our people by characterizing them as coward despite the fact that they have been using our people as firewood in building and maintain the Ethiopian Empire.

Since most Oromos did not learn their real history, they do not know about Oromo bravery. There are Oromos who do not believe in themselves and who do not participate in the Oromo national struggle. There are still Oromos who fight for their dangerous enemies, and sometimes against their own nation. There have been thousands of Oromos who fought for Amhara or Somali or Tigray state elites. People who do not know their history and culture are dead people, and there are many Oromos who are psychologically and morally dead and serve their national enemy at the cost of our people. Most members of OPDO are such Oromos.

Politically conscious Oromos who clearly understood the lies and propagandas of the Ethiopian colonial elites had rediscovered Oromo nationalism and heroism. These nationalists believed that serving their nation at whatever cost including giving life could reinvent the greatness of our nation. Such nationalists created the Macca-Tuulama Self-Help Association in the early 1960s and the Oromo Liberation Front in the early 1970s. Since we are proud of these heroes and heroines, we follow their footsteps. The history of patriotic Oromos has been written by blood and nobody can erase it from the record of Oromo history. These patriots invited us by sending us cards that were written by their blood. How many of us accepted the call and responded positively? Most of you are here because you have accepted the invitation. Furthermore, you honor them, and you are proud of their bravery and deeds.

Heroism in the context of the Oromo national struggle is to sacrifice ones energy, knowledge, economic resources, and even life whenever it is necessary for the liberation and independence of the Oromo nation. Only a few Oromos engage in such heroic act when the majority of the Oromos are passive. Heroic Oromo individuals have never hesitated to serve their people at whatever cost even if it requires giving life by defying suffering and death. I can mention thousands of examples. You may also do the same. Not celebrating these patriotic Oromos and ignoring the Oromo national struggle are tantamount to walking on their blood and trashing our national objectives.

Oromo Heroes and Heroines

Who were Oromo heroes and heroines who sacrificed their precious lives for the liberation of their people? Today, who are Oromo heroes and heroines? All Oromos who ensured the survival of the Oromo nation and its culture and history by paying ultimate sacrifices at whatever cost were our heroines and heroes. In the context of the Oromo national struggle, all Oromos who have fought for the liberation of the Oromo nation and Oromia are our patriots. Because of the sacrifices in their precious lives, energy, knowledge, and economic resources, the Oromo nation and Oromia were resurrected from the graveyards of history. Our enemies tried their best to destroy our name, history, culture, worldviews, language as well as our humanity. They buried our history and disconnected us from the global community

Thanks to the sacrifices, commitment, and hard work of our heroes and heroines, our name, history, culture, worldviews, and humanity were recovered and we have appeared on the global stage as the Oromo Diaspora. Thousands of Oromos had given their lives to make these events reality; thousands of them have been imprisoned, tortured, raped, and suffered to achieve these victories for us. We only mention the names a few of our heroes and heroines since we cannot list all of their names at this time. We even do not know all of their names at this historical time. It is the historical responsibility of this generation to continue the Oromo national struggle and to protect our achievements and to fully achieve the objectives of the Oromo national movement led by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and other Oromo liberation fronts.

That is why to politically and financially support the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) is absolutely necessary. Without the OLA, we do not have a political space to stand on in this cruel and corrupt world. Recognizing this, all enemies of the Oromo people attempt to destroy the OLF and the OLA.

Reasons for Celebrating the Oromo Martyrs' Day

There are four major reasons why we commemorate this day. First, this day allows us to remember those Oromo heroines and heroes who sacrificed their lives to restore Oromo culture, identity, and human dignity that were wounded by Ethiopian colonialism. In other words, this Commemoration assists us to recognize the dialectical connection between martyrdom, bravery, patriotism and *Oromummaa*. Until Oromo heroes and heroines created the OLF and maintained its survival by paying ultimate sacrifices, Oromo peoplehood, culture, language, and history were dumped into the trashcan of Ethiopian history. These heroes and heroines had clearly understood the significance of Oromo culture, history, language, and identity in building *Oromummaa* and victorious consciousness to consolidate the Oromo national struggle for achieving Oromian statehood, sovereignty, and democracy.

Second, this commemoration day reminds us that Oromo liberation requires heavy sacrifices, and those who have given their lives for our freedom are our revolutionary models. Such patriots created a dignified history for our nation. Third, this day reminds us that we have historical obligations to continue the struggle that Oromo martyrs started until victory. Fourth, this celebration helps us recognize that Oromo heroes and heroines are still fighting in Oromia today. Overall, those Oromo patriots who by luck have survived and continued the difficult and complex struggle deserve recognition and respect for what they have done for their people. We must protect them from lies and propagandas of the internal and external enemies. Without the persistent efforts of our patriots, the multiple enemies of the Oromo nation would have destroyed the OLF a long time ago. This does not mean that we do not criticize them when they make mistakes. It is the responsibility of Oromo nationalists to develop constructive criticisms to strengthen our national movement.

The Oromo leaders and members of the OLF, who ignited the fire of *Oromummaa* or Oromo nationalism, whether dead or alive, have been the foundation and pillar of the Oromo national movement. They left their families, wives, husbands, houses, professions, and children by choosing Oromo human dignity and freedom. By making these kinds of difficult choices, they confronted suffering and death. Consequently, they opened a new historical chapter in our history and showed to us new possibilities by taking risky and courageous actions. Today, Oromo heroes and heroines are engaged in the Oromo struggle; members of the OLA, Oromo activist students and other activists are our contemporary heroes and heroines who are intensifying the struggle. All Oromos all over the world who demonstrate their support and sympathy for the Oromo national struggle by contributing whatever they can for these brave men and women are also engaged in patriotic and brave activities.

We Oromos in the Diaspora should follow the footsteps of the fallen and surviving Oromo heroes and heroines by contributing anything we can to support the Oromo national struggle. If the fallen Oromos had paid with their lives to liberate us, how can we fail to contribute our time, money and expertise to liberate our beloved country, Oromia? How can we sleep when our mothers, daughters and sisters are raped in Oromia? How can we be at peace when genocide is committed on our people? Since our people live under Ethiopian political

slavery and since no country supports the Oromo struggle, we must fulfill our historical obligations by supporting the Oromo national struggle.

Conclusion

Our martyrs lost their lives while dreaming and fighting for freedom, justice, democracy and development of their people and their country. They recognized that agitating, educating, organizing, and mobilizing a colonized and dehumanized nation for liberation requires courage, determination, bravery and self-sacrifice without fear of suffering and death in the hands of the enemy and their collaborators. We have moral and national responsibilities to achieve the objectives for which our heroines and heroes sacrificed their lives. The Oromo national movement is a very dangerous project. Tens of thousands of our people have been imprisoned, tortured, raped, and received all forms of abuse from successive Ethiopian governments in general and that of the Meles Zenawi in particular. The Tigrayan-led government has been systematically targeting and killing all Oromo leaders and those who have potentials of leadership while promoting the most despicable elements of Oromo society and the children of colonial settlers as leaders of the Oromo nation.

While commemorating our fallen heroes and heroines, we must also remember our current ones who are engaging in the bitter struggle and those who are suffering in Ethiopian prisons. We must double our support for the OLA that is engaging in implementing the missions of the fallen Oromo heroines and heroes in Oromian forests, valleys, mountains, and Ethiopian garrison cities. We should sustain the spirits of our fallen heroes and heroines by taking concrete actions every day. It is our national responsibility to educate, mobilize and recruit passive or unconscious Oromo individuals to join the Oromo national movement. Such actions must start in families by educating and training children; husbands and wives must teach one another and their children the essence of *Oromoummaa*. The spirits of our heroes and heroines require that all of us must be grass-root leaders who engage in a systematic struggle to fight those agents of the enemy or those misled individuals who undermine the Oromo national struggle intentionally or unintentionally.

All Oromo nationalists must be cadres, teachers, students, leaders, followers, fighters, financiers, ideologues, organizers, defenders and promoters of the Oromo cause. We should not keep quiet when certain individuals attack our organizations, leaders, communities and Oromo peoplehood to satisfy their troubled ego or their masters. If we do some of these activities in our daily lives, the spirits of our fallen heroes and heroines will survive through our actions. I believe that our living patriots are building on the achievements of our fallen heroes and heroines will liberate their people and country by any means necessary.