

THE STRUGGLE OF THE OROMO TO PRESERVE AN INDIGENOUS DEMOCRACY

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This paper explores the essence of the *gadaa* system (Oromo democracy) and how and why the Oromo people are struggling to preserve and develop this indigenous democracy, written records of which go back to the sixteenth century. It also explains the essence and the main characteristics of Oromo democracy that can be adapted to the current condition of Oromo society in order to revitalize the Oromo national movement for national self-determination and democracy and to build a sovereign Oromia state in a multinational context. The paper also demonstrates that this kind of struggle is an uphill battle because the Oromo people are the colonial subjects of the Ethiopian state, and they do not have the freedom of association, organization, and expression. Furthermore, it asserts that this struggle is truly a difficult one in the twentieth first century as the process of globalization is intensified and regional and local cultures are being suppressed under the pressure of dominating cultures.

The Oromo people are the largest ethnonational group in Ethiopia today. They are estimated at 40 million of the 80 million people in Ethiopia alone. Although they are the largest population group, they are a political minority because they have been the colonial subjects of Ethiopia since the last decades of the nineteenth century. The Oromo do not have any genuine political representation; they have been ruled by the successive regimes of the Amhara-Tigray ethnonational groups that have been supported by Western powers (see Jalata, 2005a; Holcomb and Ibssa, 1990). Prior to their colonization, the Oromo people for many centuries were independent and organized both culturally and politically using the social institution of *gadaa* to maintain their security and sovereignty. The historical legacy of Oromo political leadership is the sovereignty of the Oromo people experienced under the *gadaa* government and an egalitarian framework. The design of *gadaa* as a social and political institution worked to prevent exploitation and political domination in Oromo society. Consequently, under the *gadaa* system Oromo society enjoyed relative peace, stability, sustainable prosperity, and political sovereignty despite low technological development.

Being assigned to the status of colonial subjects and second-class citizens by the Ethiopian state, the Oromo cultural and political resistance to Ethiopian colonization never halted. Various Oromo groups continued to challenge Ethiopian settler colonialism to regain their freedom and independence. There were numerous local uprisings in different parts of Oromia (the Oromo country). All of these forms of resistance took place without a central national organization. Scattered Oromo resistance movements continued until the 1960s, when all the struggles merged to form the Oromo national movement. The brutality and depredation of colonial rule did not crush the Oromo human spirit,

erase their cultural memory, or dampen their commitment to individual and collective resistance to colonial domination.

A few elements of the Oromo educated class clearly understood the impact of Ethiopian colonialism on Oromo society by familiarizing themselves with Oromo history, culture, values, and various forms of the Oromo resistance to Ethiopian colonialism. These elements facilitated the emergence of the Oromo national movement by developing *Oromummaa* (Oromo culture, identity, and nationalism). The emergence of the Macca Tuulama Self-Help Association (MTSA) in the early 1960s and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in the early 1970s marked the development of *Oromummaa* and its national organizational structures. Since the 1980s, by replacing the main organization's Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology *Oromummaa* has emerged as the central political ideology of the Oromo national movement led by the OLF.

THE OROMO UNDER THE *GADAA* SYSTEM

Recorded history demonstrates that between the sixteenth and the mid-seventeenth centuries, all of the Oromo people lived under one *gadaa* administration (Baissa, 2004: 101; Jalata, 2005: 20). In the *gadaa* republic, the Oromo people were organized around political, economic, social, cultural, and religious institutions. According to Lemmu Baissa (2004: 101),

Gadaa government comprised a hierarchy of triple levels of government: the national, the regional and the local. At the pan-Oromo level, the national government was led by an elected luba council [leaders] formed from representatives of the major Oromo moieties, clan families and clans, under the presidency of the abba gadaa and his two deputies . . . The national leadership was responsible for such important matters as legislation and enforcement of general laws, handling issues of war and peace and coordinating the nation's defense, management of intra-Oromo clan conflicts and dealing with non-Oromo people.

By the mid-seventeenth century, with an increased population and extended territorial possessions, different Oromo groups started to form autonomous *gadaa* governments (Baissa, 2004; Jalata, 2005a). While establishing autonomous local governments, the Oromo groups formed alliances, federations, and confederations to maintain their political and cultural solidarity and to defend their security and interest from their common enemies (Bulcha, 1996: 50; Etefa, 2008). The case of the Tuulama Oromo group demonstrates that “autonomous local governments were answerable to the overall *gadaa* of the main branch” (Etefa, 2008: 21). However, as some Oromo branches moved to far-flung regions and interacted with other peoples and as they settled and engaged in farming and trade, they developed class differentiation that gradually led to the transformation of the *gadaa* system into the *moottii* system (autocratic kingdom).

Constant wars led to the evolution of the abba dulas (military leaders) to hereditary *moottiis* (leaders) in northern and western Oromia. In other words, the emergence of class differentiation and the rise of the Oromo kingdoms suppressed the *gadaa* system in some parts of Oromia. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the Oromo people were ill equipped to unite and defend themselves effectively from the

Ethiopian colonial system mainly because of the decentralization of *gadaa* and the emergence of the *moottii* system. However, it was the Ethiopian colonial state that effectively suppressed the *gadaa* system in most parts of Oromia. Despite the internal challenge and the external attack on the *gadaa* system, the system has been the foundation and pillar of Oromo society with its principles remaining as the hallmark of the Oromo nation.

THE ESSENCE AND MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF *GADAA*

Gadaa has three interrelated meanings: it is the grade during which a class of people assumes politico-ritual leadership, a period of eight years during which elected officials take power from the previous ones, and the institution of Oromo society (Legesse, 1973; 2006). The *gadaa* system has the principles of checks and balances (such as periodic transfer of power every eight years and division of power among executive, legislative, and judiciary branches), balanced opposition (among five *gadaa* grades), and power sharing between higher and lower administrative organs to prevent power from falling into the hands of despots. Other principles of the system have included balanced representation of all clans, lineages, regions and confederacies, accountability of leaders, the settlement of disputes through reconciliation, and the respect for basic rights and liberties.

There are five *gadaa* grades; each has different names in different parts of Oromia as the result of the population expansion of the Oromo and their establishment of different autonomous administrative systems. For example, in central Oromia, these five grades are called *itimakko*, *daballee*, *foollee*, *dorooma/qaondala*, and *luba*. Oromo males are involuntarily recruited to both age-sets and generation-sets or *gadaa* grades. Male children join age-sets as newly born infants. Males born in the same eight-year period belong to an age-set. But they enter into the system of *gadaa* grades forty years after their fathers, and since one grade is eight years, fathers and sons are five grades apart. Male children can join advanced grades at birth, and may join men or old men who are considered to be members of their genealogical generations. Older men mentor young males in teaching rules and rituals, but the former treat the later as equals since there is no status difference between the two groups in a *gadaa* class (or grades).

Between the third and fourth *gadaa* grades, boys become adolescent and initiated into taking serious social responsibilities. The ruling group has responsibility to assign senior leaders and experts to instruct and council these young men in the importance of leadership, organization, and warfare. Young men are also trained to become junior warriors by taking part in war campaigns and hunting large animals; they learn the practical skills of warfare, military organization, and fighting so that they can engage in battle to defend their country and economic resources. As Paul T. Baxter (1978: 177) notes, the Oromo have used age-sets because generation-sets “cannot be an efficient means to mobilize troops, and a quite distinct organisation based on closeness of age . . . exists for that purpose.”

The rule of law is the key element of the *gadaa* system; those leaders who violated the law of the land or whose families could not maintain the required standard of the system were recalled before the end of their tenure in the office. *Gadaa* leaders implemented the laws that were made by representatives of the people; Oromo

democracy has allowed the Oromo people through their representatives to formulate change or amend laws and rules every eight years. The *gadaa* system accepted the Oromo people as the ultimate source of authority and believed nobody was above the rule of law. *Gadaa* officials were elected by established criteria by the people from the *qoondala* grade and received rigorous training in *gadaa* philosophy and governance for eight years before they entered the *luba* grade (administrative grade); the main criteria for election or selection to office included bravery, knowledge, honesty, demonstrated ability to govern, etc.

Today some aspects of *gadaa* still exist in some Oromo regions. In the Boorana Oromo community, for example, the *Gumii Gaayyo* (the assembly of multitudes) brings together almost important leaders, such as living *Abba Gadaas* (the president of the assembly), the *qaallus* (spiritual leaders), age-set councilors, clan leaders and *gadaa* councilors, and other concerned individuals to make or amend or change laws and rules of every eight years. In August of 1996, the 37th *Gumii Gaayyo* Assembly was held to make, amend, or change three kinds of laws that the Boorana Oromo classifies as cardinal, customary, and supplementary laws (Huqqa, 1998). The *Gumii Gaayyo* assembly has a higher degree of ritual and political authority than the *gadaa* class and other assemblies because it “assembles representative of the entire society in conjunction with any individual who has the initiative to the ceremonial grounds,” and “what *Gumii* decides cannot be reversed by any other assembly” (Legesse, 1973: 93). However, under the Ethiopian colonial system, the surviving *gadaa* does not have the sovereignty it used to have.

During the *gadaa* era, Oromo women had the *siqqee* institution, a parallel institution to the *gadaa* system that “functioned hand in hand with *gadaa* system as one of its built-in mechanisms of checks and balances” (Kumsa, 1997: 119). If the peace between men and women was broken, a *siqqee* rebellion was initiated to restore the law of God and the moral and ethical order of society. The *gadaa* and *siqqee* institutions greatly influenced the Oromo value system in pre-colonial (pre 1880s) Oromo society. These two institutions helped maintain *saffu* (Oromo moral codes) in Oromo society by enabling Oromo women to have control over resources and private spaces, social status and respect, sisterhood and solidarity by deterring men from infringing upon their individual and collective rights. Recognizing the importance of the *gadaa* system, Oromo nationalists are struggling to restore the system.

THE STRUGGLE TO REVITALIZE *GADAA*

Some core Oromo nationalists assert that without refining and adapting some elements of the original Oromo political culture of *gadaa*, the Oromo society cannot fully develop *Oromummaa* necessary to achieve national self-determination, statehood, and democratic governance. Recognizing that Oromo identity and peoplehood are an expression of Oromo culture, some Oromo nationalist scholars have started to study the cultural and religious foundations of Oromo society to understand the whole essence of Oromo society. Such scholars believe that studying, understanding, and restoring the original Oromo political institutions by refining and adapting them to contemporary conditions are practical steps towards unifying and consolidating the Oromo national movement.

These nationalists have already started to develop *Oromummaa* ideals based on original Oromo cultural foundations.

The Oromo national struggle has initiated the Oromo cultural movement initiated based on the following Oromo concepts: *Oromummaa*, *gootummaa* (bravery and patriotism), *walabummaa* (sovereignty), *bilisummaa* (liberation), *gadaa* (popular Oromo democracy), *nagaa* (peace), and *kao or kaayyo* (prosperity and peace). Furthermore, core Oromo nationalists assert today that all concerned Oromos should participate in revitalizing the Oromo national movement by applying some elements of *gadaa*, aiming at establishing a future Oromia state, sharing sovereignty with others, implementing internal peace within the Oromo society, and promoting peace with Oromia's neighbors. They also note that the Oromo national struggle has now reached at a level where it requires mass mobilization and participation in order to succeed. In this mobilization, they recommend the struggle to use the ideology and principles of *gadaa* democracy enshrined in *Oromummaa* to mobilize the entire nation spiritually, financially, militarily, and organizationally to take coordinated political and military actions.

Also, a few Oromo scholars suggest that Oromo political organizations need to use Oromo political wisdoms and experiences in order to reach the national organizational capacity and to throw off the chains of Ethiopian colonialism. They also recommend that after bringing together *gadaa* experts and Oromo intellectuals who are familiar with the Oromo democratic traditions, the Oromo national movement should start to formulate procedures, strategies, and tactics for building a national assembly with supreme authority called *Gumii* Oromia. At this national *Gumii*, they suggest representatives of all Oromo sectors, all serious and independent Oromo liberation fronts and organizations should carry out their national obligations. This national *Gumii* must be modeled after the *Gumii Gaayyo*:

In Oromo democratic traditions, the highest authority does not reside in the great lawmakers who are celebrated by the people, nor the rulers who are elected to govern for eight years, nor hereditary rights, nor the age-sets and age-regiments who furnish the military force, nor the *abba dula* who lead their people in battle. It resides, instead, in the open national assembly, at which all *gadaa* councils and assemblies . . . active and retired are represented, and *warra Qallu*, the electors, participate as observers. The meetings that take place every eight years review the conduct of the ruling *gadaa* council, punish any violators of law, and remove any or all of them from office, should that become necessary. In such sessions, a retired *abba gadaa* presides. The primary purpose of the meetings of the national assembly, however, is to reexamine the laws of the land, to reiterate them in public, to make new laws if necessary, and to settle disputes that were not resolved by lower levels in their judicial organizations (Legesse, 2006: 211)

The *Gumii Gaayyo* is an expression of the exemplar model of the unwritten Oromo constitution. Reframing and transforming the unwritten Oromo constitution into a new national constitution based on Oromo democratic principles require absolute commitment from Oromo nationalists and their organizations. As Asmarom Legesse (2006: 255) asserts, "Oromo democracy is not perfect: if it were, it would not be democratic. Like all democratic institutions, it is the product of changing human thought

that must always be re-examined in relation to changing historic circumstances.” The underlying assumption is that by establishing the National Assembly of *Gumii* Oromia, Oromo nationalists and organizations of the Oromo national movement aim to frame a written Oromo constitution by adapting older Oromo political traditions to new circumstances while also learning from other democratic practices. Those who promote the idea of building *Gumii* Oromia recommend that the Oromo national movement needs to address three major issues. The first issue is to further develop *Oromummaa* to its fullest capacity by overcoming its unevenness and deficiencies. This will strengthen the Oromo national organizational capacity.

Between the time when the Oromo were colonized and until Oromo nationalism emerged, Oromoness primarily existed on personal and the interpersonal levels since the Oromo were denied opportunities to form national institutions. Expressed Oromoness was targeted for destruction; colonial administrative regions established to suppress the Oromo people and exploit their resources. As a result, Oromo relational identities have been localized and not strongly connected to a collective Oromo national identity. The Oromo were forcibly separated from one another and prevented from exchanging goods and information with one another for more than a century. They were exposed to different cultures (i.e., languages, customs, values, etc.) and religions and adopted an array of them. Consequently, today there are Oromos who have internalized these externally imposed regional or religious identities because of their low level of political consciousness or from their political opportunism. The Oromo people who did not develop national political consciousness confuse clan, regional or religious politics with Oromo national politics.

Historically, Oromo political weaknesses mainly started to emerge as Oromos in some parts of Oromia moved away from belonging to one gadaa republic to forming autonomous *gadaa* governments. These weaknesses and the emergence of class stratification in western, central and northern Oromia resulted in the development of the *moottii* systems (kingdoms). Some of these leaders had collaborated with the Abyssinian/Ethiopian colonial system rather than defending the interest of the Oromo people during the second half of nineteenth century. Overcoming these political weaknesses by building Oromo national organizational capacity is only possible when *Oromummaa* as a national vision is accepted, energizes and unites the entire Oromo nation. As an element of culture, nationalism, and vision, national *Oromummaa* has the power to serve as a manifestation of the collective identity of the Oromo national movement.

The basis of national *Oromummaa* must be built on overarching principles that are embedded within Oromo traditions and culture and, at the same time, have universal relevance for all oppressed peoples. The main foundations of national *Oromummaa* are rooted in the rights of individual and collective freedom, justice, popular democracy, and human liberation, which are built on the concept of *saffu* (Oromo moral and ethical order) and are enshrined in *gadaa* principles. As the ideology of the Oromo national movement, national *Oromummaa* enables the Oromo to retrieve their cultural memories, assess the consequences of Ethiopian colonialism, and give voice to their collective grievances. National *Oromummaa* enables the Oromo people to form alliances with all political forces and social movements that accept the principles of national self-determination and multinational democracy in promotion of a global community that will be free from

oppression and exploitation. Therefore, *Oromummaa* is seen as a complex and dynamic national and global project.

As a national project and the central ideology of the Oromo national movement, *Oromummaa* enables the Oromo to mobilize diverse cultural resources, interlink Oromo personal, interpersonal and collective (national) relationships, and assists in the development of Oromo-centric political strategies and tactics that can mobilize the nation for collective action empowering the people for liberation. As a global project, *Oromummaa* requires that the Oromo national movement be inclusive of all persons operating in a democratic fashion. This global *Oromummaa* enables the Oromo people to form alliances with all political forces and social movements that accept the principles of national self-determination and multinational democracy in promotion of a global humanity that will be free of all forms oppression and exploitation. In other words, global *Oromummaa* is based on the principles of mutual solidarity, social justice, and popular democracy.

The foundation of *Oromummaa* must be built on overarching principles that are embedded within Oromo traditions and culture and, at the same time, have universal relevance for all oppressed peoples. Although, in recent years, many Oromos have become adherents of Christianity and Islam, the concept of *Waqaa* (God) lies at the heart of Oromo traditions and culture. In Oromo traditions, *Waqaa* is the creator of the universe and the source of all life. The universe created by *Waqaa* contains within itself a sense of order and balance that is to be made manifest in human society. Although *Oromummaa* emerges from Oromo cultural and historical foundations, it goes beyond culture and history in providing a liberative narrative for the future of the Oromo nation as well as the future of other oppressed peoples, particularly those who suffer under the Ethiopian Empire. Those Oromos who endorse and glorify Ethiopianism and clan/regional politics are undermining *Oromummaa* in order to enjoy power and material benefits at the cost of the Oromo nation and other peoples.

Without recognizing the centrality of *Oromummaa* for the national struggle, the Oromo cannot develop a victorious consciousness that equips them with the knowledge of liberation. *Oromummaa* as an intellectual and ideological vision places the Oromo man and woman at the center of analysis and at the same time goes beyond Oromo society and aspires to develop global *Oromummaa*. Understanding Oromo society with its complex democratic laws, elaborate legislative traditions, and well-developed methods of dispute settlement, the Oromo national struggle can present a new perspective for African politics. The Oromo and other oppressed peoples can ally with one another on regional and global levels by exchanging political and cultural experiences and re-creating the ideology of pan-Africanism from “below” and global mutual solidarity based on the principles of popular democracy and an egalitarian world order. *Oromummaa* challenges the idea of glorifying African monarchies, chiefs, or warlords that collaborated with European slavers and colonizers and destroyed Africa by participating in the slave trade and the project of colonization.

Those African(ist) scholars who degrade African democratic traditions just as their Euro-American counterparts devalue the Oromo democratic system and consider indigenous Africans such as Oromos primitive and “stateless.” Challenging the view of Euro-American racist and “modernist” scholars, Asmarom Legesse (2000: 30) asserts that

since monarchy was in decline in most Europe, and the transition to democracy became the epitome of Europe's highest political aspirations, admitting that some varieties of democracy were firmly planted in Africa in the 16th century when in fact they were not fully established in Britain, the United States and France until the 17th or 18th century would have made the ideological premise of the 'civilizing mission' somewhat implausible. The idea ... that African democracies may have some constitutional features that are more advanced than their European counterpart was and still is considered quite heretical.

The second issue deals with the necessity of building a strong national movement that will lead to the formation of an independent Oromia state that can share sovereignty with other peoples. As other nationalisms, Oromo nationalism has two edges, one cutting backward, and the other forward. The Oromo national movement should reconsider Oromo culture and history, and recognize its negative aspects and avoid them. As the formation of different autonomous *gadaa* governments and the emergence of the *moottii* system contributed to the defeat of the Oromo people in the second half of the nineteenth century, the political fragmentation of Oromo society will perpetuate the defeat of the Oromo nation in the twenty first century. Without coordinating and consolidating the Oromo national movement, the Oromo cannot effectively confront and defeat the Ethiopian colonial system.

The third issue is that while consolidating the Oromo national movement, it is necessary to build political alliances with other peoples who are interested in the principles of national self-determination and multinational democratic rule. Although the priority of the Oromo national movement is to liberate Oromia and its people, the movement has moral and political obligations to promote social justice and democracy for other peoples who have suffered under the successive authoritarian-terrorist governments of the Ethiopian Empire. Therefore, the Oromo movement needs to build a political alliance with national groups that endorse the principles of national self-determination and multinational democracy. A democratic Oromia should play a central role in a multinational democratic state because of its democratic tradition, the size of its population, geopolitics, and abundant economic resources. The Oromo national movement should demonstrate to Oromo society and their neighbors that the Oromo nation is serious about statehood, sovereignty, and democracy for the Oromo as well as others. Let us now consider the regional and global challenges to the restoration of Oromo democracy.

REGIONAL AND GLOBAL CHALLENGES

The *gadaa* system was mainly suppressed by the alliance of Ethiopian colonialism and global imperialism. Western powers, mainly Great Britain and the United States, have given external legitimacy to the Ethiopian state, which has been engaging in colonialism, state terrorism, and cultural destruction of indigenous peoples (Jalata, 2005a and 2005b). Successive Ethiopian regimes used Christianity to link themselves to Europe and North America to consolidate their powers against the colonized population groups, mainly the Oromo. In addition, between 1974 and 1991, the Mengistu regime utilized a "socialist"

discourse to ally itself with the former Soviet bloc and to consolidate its state power. Currently, the Meles government uses a “democratic” discourse to make its rule acceptable in the world and also to obtain financial and military assistance from the West while engaging in state terrorism (Jalata, 2005a: 229-252). Since 1992, the Meles government has focused on attacking the Oromo national movement led by the OLF and transferring Oromia’s economic resources to Tigrayan elites and the Tigrayan region. The regime started its criminal actions by denying political space to the Oromo people when it “closed more than 200 OLF campaign offices and imprisoned and killed hundreds of OLF cadres and supporters ahead of the elections scheduled to take place on 21 June 1992” (Hassen, 2002: 28). Furthermore, the regime focuses on developing Tigray and its human potential primarily at the cost Oromia and its population (Adunga, 2006). In 1992, the Meles regime claimed it was imprisoning 22,000 OLF members, supporters, and sympathizers in concentration camps at Didheesa in Wallaga, Agarfa in Bale, Blate in Sidamo, and Hurso in Hararge (Hassen, 2002, 32). Credible sources estimated that between 45,000 and 50,000 Oromos were imprisoned in these concentration camps from 1992 to 1994 and 3000 of them died from torture, malnutrition, diarrhea, malaria, and other diseases (Pollack, 1996: 12).

This regime has banned independent Oromo organizations, including the OLF, and declared war on the Oromo people. It even outlawed Oromo journalists and other writers and closed down Oromo newspapers (Hassen, 2002: 31). The regime also banned Oromo musical groups and all professional associations. It primarily uses its puppet organization known as the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO) to terrorize, suppress, and exploit the Oromo people. While terrorizing millions of Oromos, the Meles regime has established a political marriage of convenience with the governments of Kenya, Djibouti, Sudan, and some Somali warlords in order to deny support and sanctuary to Oromo refugees, the Oromo national movement and to extend its terrorist activities in the Horn of Africa. This terrorist regime maintains political repression, tight control of foreign aid and domestic financial resources, and direct ownership and control of all aspects of its militarized colonial state, including security and military institutions, and judiciary and other public bodies.

Emboldened by the external support it receives from the West, the current authoritarian-terrorist regime of Ethiopia is using terror to govern the colonized regions, such as Oromia, Ogadenia, Sidama, Gambella, as well as conducting recurrent wars on its neighbors, such as Eritrea and Somalia. The Meles regime also uses the media to attack the OLF and all self-aware Oromos in order to destroy any possibility of independent Oromo national leadership and to deny the formation of an Oromo political voice. It has targeted officials and members of the MTSA accusing them of being linked to the OLF and protesting Oromo students. Government security men closed the office of this association in Finfinnee, confiscated documents and properties, and imprisoned the chairperson, Diribi Demissie, vice-chairman, Gamachu Fayera, and other officers on May 18, 2004. According to *Human Rights Watch* (2005b: 1-2):

In July 2004, the Ethiopian government revoked the license of the venerable Oromo self-help association Macca Tuulama for allegedly carrying out ‘political activities’ in violations of its charter. The police subsequently arrested four of the organization’s leaders on charges of ‘terrorism’ and providing support to the OLF.

The four were released on bail in August but were arbitrarily arrested a week later.

Furthermore, governmental authorities consolidated quasi-government institutions known as *gott* and *garee* from a pre-existing system of local government to maintain tight political control in Oromia; they “imposed these new structures on . . . communities and the *garee* regularly require them to perform forced labor on projects they have no hand in designing. More disturbing, regional authorities are using the *gott* and *garee* to monitor the speech and personal lives of the rural population, to restrict and control the movements of residents, and to enforce farmers’ attendance at ‘meetings’ that are thinly disguised OPDO political rallies” (Human Rights Watch, 2005a: 2). The Meles government has continued to eliminate or imprison politically conscious and self-respecting Oromos.

After being jailed and released from prison after six years, Seye Abraha, the former Defense Minister of the regime who participated in massacring and imprisoning thousands of Oromos, testified on January 5, 2008 to an audience in Virginia, U.S., that “*esir betu Oromigna yinager*” (“the prison speaks Afaan Oromoo [the Oromo language]”) and noted that “about 99% of the prisoners in Qaliti are Oromos.” According to *Human Rights Watch* (2005a: 1-2),

Since 1992, security forces have imprisoned thousands of Oromo on charges of plotting armed insurrection on behalf of the OLF. Such accusations have regularly been used as a transparent pretext to imprison individuals who publicly question government policies or actions. Security forces have tortured many detainees and subjected them to continuing harassment and abuse for years after their release. That harassment, in turn has often destroyed victims’ ability to earn a livelihood and isolated them from their communities.”

Imprisoned Oromos and others are subjected to different forms of torture. Former prisoners testified that their arms and legs were tied tightly together on their backs while their naked bodies were whipped. There were prisoners who were locked up in empty steel barrels and tormented with heat from the tropical sun during the day and from the cold air at night. There were also prisoners who were forced into pits so that fire could be made on top of them (Fossati, Namarra and Niggli, 1996). State terrorism is employed to discourage the Oromo from participating in their national movement; such terrorism manifests itself in the form of war, assassination, murder, castration, burying alive, throwing off cliffs, hanging, torture, rape, poisoning, confiscation of properties by the police and the army, forcing people to submission by intimidation, beating, and disarming citizens.

The methods of killing also include burning, bombing, cutting throats or arteries in the neck, strangulation, shooting, and burying people up to their necks in the ground. State sanctioned rape is another form of terrorism used to demoralize, destroy, and to show that Tigrayans are a powerful group that can do any thing to the Oromo; Tigrayan cadres, soldiers, and officials have frequently raped Oromo girls and women (Fossati, Namarra and Niggli, 1996: 10). Most Oromos who were murdered by the agents of the Ethiopian government were denied burial and eaten by hyenas. For instance, in 2007, the

Meles militia killed twenty Oromos and left their corpses on the Mountain of Suufi in Eastern Oromia. Furthermore, the regime has mobilized ethnonational minority groups such as the Somalis, Afars, Konsos, and Gumuz to kill and terrorize the Oromo. For instance, in the last week of May, the Gumuz militia terrorized the Oromo by murdering women, children and others in the administrative region of Wallaga (Voice of America, the Afaan Oromo Program, May 25, 26, 27, and 2008).

The regime has conducted fraudulent elections several times and has achieved recognition from the international community. Hence, the international community has ignored the principles of democracy and human rights. After the fraudulent May 2005 elections, the Meles regime killed more than 193 demonstrators and imprisoned thousands of them in Finfinnee and other cities because they peacefully opposed the vote rigging carried out by the regime. Today nobody knows for sure how many people the regime killed or imprisoned in the rural areas since it did not allow the reporting of such information. *Human Rights Watch* (2005a: 1) notes that in “Oromia, the largest and most populous state in Ethiopia, systematic political repression and pervasive human rights violations have denied citizens the freedom to associate and to freely form and express their political ideas.” Against the backdrop of such incessant crimes against humanity, the only choice the Oromo people have is to intensify their national struggle in order to recreate Oromo statehood and sovereignty that they had once enjoyed under the *gadaa* republic.

CONCLUSION

The Oromo national movement needs to refine and adapt some central aspects of the Oromo democratic heritage in order to facilitate a fundamental transformation in Oromo society. Retrieving the best elements of Oromo democratic traditions and establishing a politico-military organization are necessary to overcome the current political challenge the Oromo nation faces from the current Ethiopian government, its Oromo clienteles, and its global supporters which are all hindering the reemergence of Oromia statehood, sovereignty, and democracy. Refining and adapting the central elements of Oromo democratic traditions and developing national and global *Oromummaa* can help the Oromo nation to attain internal unity and peace and external solidarity with regional and international powers that recognize and accept the principles of national self-determination, sustainable development, regional and global peace, and multinational democracy. The survival of the Oromo nation requires restoring the *gadaa* system, consolidating the Oromo national struggle, and mobilizing the entire Oromo nation to dismantle the Tigrayan-led Ethiopian terrorist government and to recreate a sovereign Oromia state that can be an integral part of a sovereign multinational democratic state in the Horn of Africa.

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