

**The Ethiopian State and the Future of the Oromos: The Struggle for ‘Self-Rule
and Shared-Rule’**

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I. Introduction

In the historical continuum that informs the ‘making and remaking’ of modern Ethiopia, while the second half of the 19th century had been shaped by the wars of incorporation and state formation on unequal terms, in many major ways, the second half of the 20th century has been shaped by class and national struggles intended to end the existing asymmetrical relations. In the other words, while the wars of the 19th century were for the ‘making’ of modern Ethiopia, the struggles of the 20th century have been for the reversal of the same historical process that created the multi-ethnic polity of Ethiopia. To put more specifically, the class and national/ethnic struggles of 1960s and 1970s that precipitated the revolutionary upheaval of 1974, the various struggles that led to the change of regime in 1991 and the ongoing struggles for self-rule and democracy are all part of the ‘re-marking’ of Ethiopia on equal terms.

A closer look at the nature of the perennial struggles for the ‘remaking’ of Ethiopia clearly shows the centrality of the competing ethnic nationalists claims for an equitable share of power and resources under the command of the state. (Merera 2002) A further closer observation also shows that the same way the regional autonomy formula of the military regime, which was informed by and presented as a socialist project failed to address the competing claims, the present regime’s ethnic based federal setup, which is designed along a liberal democracy trajectory appears to be failing to produce the desired result. That means, what is being implemented, as democratization and shared rule by the new regime to address the demands and claims of the country’s diverse communities seem to be leading to a dead-end. The central problem is the contradictory actions of the regime, its democratization and decentralization policy on paper and centralization in practice, which has failed to make a major departure from the country’s past autocratic/authoritarian political trajectory. Hence, democratization in a manner that ensures both self-rule and shared-rule in the Oromia region, which is the focus of this study, is a classical case in point, in terms of the degree of failure of the regime’s policies and the continued struggle for real autonomy and democracy on the part of the local population.

This study explores and assesses the democratization experiment in Ethiopia by weighing against the demand of the Oromo people for self-rule and shared-rule on the one hand, and the promises made on paper by the government in power on the other. As such, the central argument of this study is that the top-down approach of the ruling-party, which is inspired by its hegemonic aspiration, is seriously impeding the hoped for democratization process and the demand for shared-rule as well as self-rule thereof by multitudes across the country. The study also discusses the role of the Oromo people in the democratization of the Ethiopian state and society in the interest of all.

II. The Creation and Evolution of the Modern Ethiopian State and the Incorporation of the Oromos on Unequal Terms

2.1. Oromos Own Expansion

The southern march of imperial Ethiopia had been preceded by centuries of Oromo penetration into ‘historic Ethiopia’. To be sure, ample historical records demonstrate the northern march of Oromo, at least, as of the second half of the 16th century. And,

by the turn of the 18th century Oromo penetration into the Abssinian heartland was clearly visible and the elite produced by this group of Oromo were playing a dominant role by making the ruling houses of Gonder, Wallo, Gojjam and Shewa. In what appeared to be the culmination of the ascendancy of the Oromo elite, it was able to dominate 'historic Ethiopia' during much of the 'Era of the Princes'. In fact, a clearly stated central mission of Tewodros was to end the supremacy of the Oromo. The Yejju princes who dominated the imperial politics at Gondernand later produced political wizards like Taitu, king Michael (Mohammed Ali) who fathered Iyassu who destined to briefly controlled the empire created by Menilek and king Takle-Haymanot of Gojjam were all products of Oromos penetrated 'historic' Ethiopia centuries before the onset of the reverse expansion to the south in the second half of the 19th century. Consequently, during the time of expansion the Oromo elite stood both sides of the fence – part of the conquerors and the conquered, which makes the Oromo history - a dual history.

2.2. Incorporation of Bulk of the Oromo Population on Unequal Terms and the Beginning of Dual History

When the process of the creation of a modern multi-ethnic empire-state (1) started by Tewodros around the 1850s, historic Ethiopia had been under feudal anarchy for over eighty years and central authority existed only in name (Getahun, 1974; Bahru, 1991; Teshale, 1995). The dream of Tewodros was to unite historic Ethiopia by ending both feudal anarchy and the supremacy of the Oromo elite during the period. In fact, although the then dominant mobilizing factors were religion and region, Tewodros was the first modern Ethiopian ruler who explicitly recognized the ethnic factor in his project of empire building and consciously challenged the supremacy of the Oromo princes over the Abyssinian kingdom. Thereafter, ethnicity was to become one of the key factors in the *modus operandi* of the Ethiopian State, although it remained as an undercurrent up to the 1960s. (2)

After a brief period of Yohannes's rule from 1872 - 1879, a new power centre emerged in Shewa under the leadership of Menelik. It was this new power centre, though peripheral to historic Ethiopia that destined to transform profoundly the history, geography and demography of the Ethiopian State by the turn of the 20th century (Donham & James, 1986; Bahru, 1991; Teshale, 1995).

Shewan expansion started in Shewa itself with the Oromo of Shewa (Bahru, 1991) and rapidly extended to the rest of the south. One kingdom after another and one independent principality after another succumbed to the vast Shewan army. And, outnumbered, out-gunned and mostly divided, some of the local people submitted peacefully while others put up heroic but futile resistance (Getahun, 1974; Bahiru, 1991; Addis Hiwot, 1975). Menelik's campaign successfully tripled the size of the empire and brought in not less than several dozens of ethnic groups of diverse languages and cultures.

The core of the power élite of the emerging empire-state was the Shewa Amhara élite who successfully incorporated and assimilated the Oromo élite of Shewa with its three-pronged ideology of Orthodox Christianity, Amhara cultural ethos and Ethiopian unity with Shewa as its centre. Once the task of incorporating the Oromo élite of Shewa into the emerging politico-military structure was accomplished, the

conquest of the other regions became far easier and the whole expansion took less than a quarter of a century, as access of the Shewan army to European firearms dramatically changed the balance of force. The role played by firearms appeared decisive, especially from the Oromo nationalists' perspective (3) (Asafa, 1993; Holcomb & Sisai, 1990).

Outside of Shewa, Menelik and his generals extended the war of conquest to the west, east and south. Menelik won a decisive victory in 1882 at the battle of Embabo, in today's Western Oromia. This opened western Oromo lands whose rulers submitted one after another with little or no resistance. Four years later (1886), Arsi fell despite tenacious resistance by its population. The fall of Arsi allowed Menelik's army to march southeast to capture the eastern city-state of Harar at the battle of Chelenquo in 1887. The conquest of these regions gave Menelik access to real wealth - coffee and gold among other things - which significantly enhanced his political position and military might in the then emerging modern empire state of Ethiopia (Getahun, 1974; Addis Hiwot, 1975; Bahru, 1991). And, for a century to come the Shewan Amhara elite, the embodiment of Orthodox Christianity, Amharic language and the Abyssinian cultural values, dominated multi-ethnic Ethiopia in a manner hitherto unprecedented in the country's long recorded history.

After the creation of the empire state was completed, the creation of 'one Ethiopian nation' continued under what was then termed *Makinat* (pacification and/or colonization). *Makinat* involved evangelization of the local population, institutionalization of a new system of political control, and imposition of a new political class, culture and language on the indigenous population such as the Oromo. And as the result, new centres of political and military control, generally known as *Ketemas* or garrison towns were mushroomed across the South. (4)

As part of the same process, cultural subjugation was carried out through Amharization, which accorded the Amhara culture pride of place as national culture and the Amharic language the *lingua franca* of the Ethiopian state (Addis Hiwot, 1975; Teshale, 1995). The imposition of the Amharic language became increasingly critical over the years as it became the sole language of the court and administration and non-Amharic speakers such as the Oromos had to depend on interpreters. It also became the language willy-nilly to be learned at school and later the medium of instruction for students below the secondary level, which negatively affected the employment opportunities for non-Amharic speakers. The cumulative effect of all these measures was exacerbation of ethnic domination that left a permanent grievance in the memory of the subjected peoples of the South where the bulk of the Oromo population live. (Getahun, 1974; Teshale, 1995).

Here, one of the more enduring, repressive and damaging parts of the 'nation-building' measures was the imposition of a new type of political control in the newly conquered regions of the South (Getahun, 1974). The conquest had been bloody and the fate of millions was left to the mercy of the conquistadors. The subjected peoples paid very dearly in land, produce and the corvée labour imposed on them. The land of the indigenous people was forcefully taken away and given to the military and quasi-military administrators and the soldiers under their command (Addis Hiwot, 1975; Gebru T., 1996).

Furthermore, to grab the new opportunities created in Oromo areas and much of the South, the élite and the surplus population from the North flocked to these areas as administrators, court officials, soldiers, interpreters and priests. An alien system of rule known as a *neftega* (settlers) system of political, military and economic control through the intermediary of the gun was imposed on the southern peoples. (Markakis, 1974; Teshale, 1995). Notably, this was a vastly different system from that applied in the North, underscoring the North-South dichotomy in the country's political economy until the democratic upsurge of 1974.

Seen in a comparative perspective, the Shewan expansion and the resultant politico-economic consequences were far more brutal and devastating in the south than in the north. In the north, it was the issue of re-unifying regions, which had been part of the Abyssinian polity for centuries, and peoples who shared the Christian tradition and Abyssinian cultural ethos for millennia (Getahun, 1974; Markakis, 1974; Addis Hiwot, 1975; Teshale, 1995). In the South, it was the issue of mostly bringing into the emerging empire-state new lands and new peoples on unequal terms. For the South, the outcome was a dual oppression: national as well as class. So here we have the North-South dichotomy: one polity but two markedly different systems. (5)

In this regard, Addis Hiwot presents the following picture:

After the creation of the multi-national empire-state by the Shewan feudal principality, especially after the conquest and the effective occupation and incorporation of the south, southwest and southeastern areas, a classical system of feudal serfdom was established. An extensive process of land confiscation and the enserfment of the indigenous peasants took place. The religious, cultural and linguistic differences between the feudal conquistadors and the process of enserfment gave a still more brutal dimension; the aspect of national and religious oppression accentuated the more fundamental aspect of class oppression. (Addis Hiwot, 1975: 30f)

As Addis Hiwot has correctly observed, oppression was very severe, and can be equated to 'internal colonialism', a term preferred by Oromo and Somali nationalists with the agenda of separation and adopted by several Oromo and non-Oromo academics (Donham & James 1986; Holcomb & Sisai, 1990).

In a nutshell, Haile Sellasie, who emerged as a real successor to Menelik, despite his Oromo blood, continued the 'nation-building' process on a much more naked and narrow ethnocratic basis, which further deepened national inequality among the varied ethnic groupings of Ethiopia, which in turn later led to the rise of ethnic-based liberation movements (Teshale, 1995; Gebru T., 1996).

III. The Rise of Modern Oromo Nationalism and the Struggle for the Right to Self-determination

By 1960 the imperial regime began to show visible signs of decay, which had created a better condition for the forces of change to emerge. As Bahru (1991: 209) summed up the events of the day: 'Opposition to the regime ... had many facets. Peasants rebelled against increasing demands on their produce. Nationalities rose in arms for self-determination. Intellectuals struggled for their vision of a just and equitable order.' In the post-1960 period the new challenges against the regime increasingly began to take the form of either class or national struggles. To put more specifically, the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) began championing the common class

struggles against the imperial regime while the Eritrean and Oromo movements became the bearers of the national and/or regional struggles (Kiflu, 1993).

Ethnic nationalism in the Ethiopian context was engendered, as indicated earlier, in a century of political, economic and socio-cultural domination of the Amhara élite over others (Getahun, 1974; Addis Hiwot, 1975). It was shaped by the collective action of the marginalized ethnic groups against political domination, land alienation and cultural suppression in 1960s and early 1970s (Gebru T., 1977; 1996). As the ESM also recognized the multi-faceted injustice perpetrated against the marginalized ethnic groups, the national and class struggles against the imperial regime reinforced each other. In fact, political mobilization along class and national lines, which were to become the dominant forms of struggle in the post-1960 period, were largely the logical outcome of national and class oppression - the bedrock of most injustices under the imperial regime (Addis Hiwot, 1975; Markakis, 1987).

In the case of the Oromo, the first Oromo-wide movement was the Macha & Tulama Self-help Association. This organization, which is considered by many Oromos as the pioneer of modern Oromo nationalism has contributed immensely to the creation of self-awareness among the Oromo youth. Put differently, the fermentation of modern Oromo nationalism began among the Oromo élite, who were increasingly aware of their secondary status in the imperial regime's military and civilian bureaucracy in the first years of the 1960s (Olana, 1993; Merera 2002). Although their self-help association, the Matcha & Tulama, was quickly banned and its leaders either killed, imprisoned or deported to solitary confinement in remote areas, the idea lived on and later was taken up by Oromo students and the younger-generation intelligentsia, who totally radicalized the Oromo question by elevating it to the level of the demand for the 'right to self-determination...'. In fact, it was at this point in time (1970 - 1974) that the ideology of the colonial thesis took shape among the Oromo élite [see Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) Programme, 1976]. Consequently, the colonial thesis was destined to become the major underpinning of political mobilization for most of the Oromo élite to this date (Merera, 2002). After the Matcha & Tulama Self-help Association, the Bale Oromo resistance against land alienation and unbearable taxation served as an additional catalyst for the growth of modern Oromo nationalism (Gebru T., 1977 & 1996). And, the two movements together have served as the genesis of modern Oromo nationalism.

IV. Responses of the Imperial and Military Regimes to the Quest of the Oromos for Self-Rule

4. 1. The Response of the Imperial Regime to Oromo Self-Assertion

By mid-1960s, the Matcha & Tulama Self-help Association had begun to attract the Oromo elite of the day, which signalled to the imperial regime, both the possibility and the coming danger from Oromo nationalism. The Bale Oromo uprising had further raised the spectre of an Oromo-wide armed movement that could be supported by the Somalia Republic against the imperial establishment. In fact, the Bale uprising was a more sustained struggle and had a reverberating effect among the radical Ethiopian students in general and the Oromo intelligentsia in particular (Kiflu, 1993).

The response of the imperial regime to the emerging Oromo nationalism was both quick and brutal. The leaders of the Matcha & Tulama Self-help Association were herded to prison, where some died and others served long years of prison terms while the guerrilla fighters of Bale, outnumbered and outgunned, were forced to be disbanded and their leaders negotiated for minor posts. But, despite the ability of the imperial regime to suppress both movements, the seeds of modern Oromo nationalism had already been sown, and a more radical demand for the right to self-determination was soon to galvanize the Oromo intelligentsia and youth in 1970s, which partly contributed to the popular revolution of 1974 that ended an out of date autocracy.

4.2. 'Garrison Socialism' and State Response to Ethnic Nationalism: The Regional Autonomy Formula

The Ethiopian military with its own limitations as inheritor of imperial Ethiopia wanted to transform the country without making a major break with the country's imperial past regarding the national question, which had been the major source of crisis of the Ethiopian State. Not surprisingly, when they assumed state power in September 1974, Ethiopia's military élite had no well-thought-out political programme of any kind, except the vague motto of 'Ethiopia *Tikdam*' (Ethiopia First). But they moved fast with the winds of the day, and began to flirt with the civilian lefts' political agenda of a socialist revolution soon after their take-over of power. To this end, it immediately adopted socialism as the official ideology on 20 December 1974, both to capture the imagination of the revolutionary youth, who were to be sent to the countryside to organize the peasantry for the support of the unfolding revolution and to compete with the civilian left for revolutionary leadership.

According to the then prescription to be a revolutionary and to improve its socialist credentials, the military committee nationalized many private business firms throughout the country. Then came the March 1975 Land Reform Proclamation, which mostly addressed the main historical grievance of the varied ethnic groups in much of the South such as the Oromo. The decree on religious equality and the separation of Church and state in Ethiopia was also part of the new regime's response to the religious/ethnic inequality perpetuated under the imperial regime (Kiflu, 1993). However, a more programmatic and direct response to the rising demands of ethnic nationalisms came with the declaration of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) in April 1976. The regional autonomy formula was included in the NDR programme as part of building socialism in Ethiopia, which reads in part:

The right to self-determination of all nationalities will be recognized and fully respected. No nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism.

The unity of Ethiopia's nationalities will be based on their common struggle against feudalism, imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism and reactionary forces. This united struggle is based on the desire to construct new life and a new society based on equality, brotherhood and mutual respect. ... Given Ethiopia's existing situation, the problem of nationalities can be resolved if each nationality is accorded full right to self-government. This means that each nationality will have regional autonomy to decide on matters concerning its internal affairs. Within its environs, it has the right to determine the contents of its political, economic and social life, use its own

language and elect its own leaders and administration to head its own organs.

This right of self-government of nationalities will be implemented in accordance with all democratic procedures and principles Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC, April 1976).

On paper the NDR Programme was a radical proposal. However, after the departure of MEISON, which attracted a good part of the Oromo radical intelligentsia and was believed to be the main author of the NDR Programme, ethnic nationalism began to be portrayed as the most serious threat to the revolution. Furthermore, ethnic and regional movements began to be castigated as counter-revolutionary forces and the government's propaganda machine moved against them to complement the war of annihilation unleashed by the regime to destroy them altogether. The Eritrean movements, the Tigrayan, Oromo and Western Somalia liberation fronts had to face the military regime's much enhanced war machine, lavishly supplied by the Soviet Union military hardware (Dawit, 1989)

The regional autonomy programme was resurrected in the National Constitution of 1987, which provided a regional autonomy status, albeit, on paper, to some regions. Based on the new Constitution, the country's administrative structure was subdivided into 29 regions. Only a few of these, i.e. Eritrea, Tigray, Asab and Dire-Dewa were accorded the autonomous status, and even for them it was a regional autonomy of a very severely restricted sort (Asmalash, 1997). Constitutionally, the country continued to be a unitary state and the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) was the only legally recognized political party in the country. In fact, political malversation was evident in the elections that followed the declaration of the republic in 1987 in which mostly party members were 'appointed' to the national *Shengo*, and in areas such as Eritrea, the military officers filled the quota of the region (Merera, 1992). No less serious, in some areas, people were told to vote for party officials residing in Addis Ababa whose names they never heard of or for people they never seen. And, if anything, the regional autonomy formula of the military-turned-civilian élite fell considerably short of what the various forces demanded. The end result was yet another façade for soldiers' rule (Merera, 2002). In conclusion, from day one Ethiopia's inept military élite applied what can be termed a military method to solve all the country's societal problems, including the demand for national equality and self-rule.

The change of regime in 1991 and the reordering of the Ethiopian State that followed it initially appeared to accommodate the Oromo people's interests as a whole. However, the hope was very short-lived indeed. Following the OLF withdrawal from the T.G.E. as the result of the TPLF leaders' hegemonic aspiration as well as their arrogance emanating from its much enhanced military machine, the hope of building an inclusive political structure quickly gave way to open confrontation and new round of conflict.

V. The Post-1991 Experiments and the Oromo Question

5.1. The Promises Made in the Early Years

The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and its outer covering, the EPRDF assumed state power in May 1991 with triple promises: to create a nation-state of equals by ending ethnic domination and democratize the Ethiopian State and society by ending centuries of autocratic/authoritarian rule. (Merera, 2002). It has further promised to create peace and stability, which taken together hoped to bring about quick economic development and prosperity for all citizens of the country.

In what appears to be a practical implementation of the promises made on paper, a Conference to establish a Transitional Government was convened in July 1991, to which some two dozens political movements including four Oromo-based groups were invited. (6) With the benefits of hindsight, the interest of the TPLF/EPRDF to invite the Oromo movements seemed to be less for the genuine share of power and more for getting the much needed international legitimacy, as the Oromos constitute the single largest ethnic group in Ethiopia. Arguably, the Oromos were also highly needed both for neutralizing the multi-ethnic political organizations as well as the Amhara elite who were expected to pose a serious threat to the new regime. And, whatever the real motive of the TPLF leaders, a Charter for the Transitional period, which openly proclaimed the 'right to self determination, including and up to secession' to the country's diverse communities was approved and an 87-Seat Council of Representatives (COR) was formed to oversee the transitional process. The executive was elected out of the COR and it was also empowered to act as a law-making body for the transitional period. Although the seats of the independent Oromo movements were limited to seventeen, much less compared to the size of the Oromo people, additional ten seats were given to the TPLF surrogate Oromo organization, the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), which was created by the TPLF at the eve of its victory to penetrate the Oromo areas. Some ministerial posts were also given to the OLF, which was considered to be a junior partner in the TPLF/EPRDF dominated T.G.E.

Officially, in what said to be a response to the nationalists' demands for self-rule, a linguistic/ethnic-based fourteen administrative units (twelve regional states and two special regions of Addis Ababa and Harar) were formed in early 1992. In the new set up, the Oromo region has begun to loom large stretching from South to North, East to West, across much of the Ethiopian landmass. Here, it is important to note that the OLF, the biggest Oromo organization of the time willy or nilly gave its blessings to the new political engineering by the TPLF leaders, including the controversial Charter, the composition of the T.G.E. and the regionalization policy that followed, some of which later turned out to be a grave miscalculation on the part of the OLF leaders (Merera, 2002).

The unholy alliance between the victorious TPLF and the OLF was neither a partnership of equals nor could hold for long. What created a serious tension between the TPLF and the OLF, among others, were the contradictory aspirations of the two organizations, i.e. the former's hegemonic aspiration to recreate Ethiopia around the centrality of the Tigrayan elite and the latter's aspiration to share power comparable to the size of the Oromo people. The intoxication of the TPLF leaders by the impressive military victory they achieved in the battlefield left no room for political sobriety while the rising tide of Oromo nationalism forced the OLF not to moderate its demands. Furthermore, the TPLF leaders thought they could easily destroy the OLF on a one hand, and redirect and control Oromo nationalism under the leadership

of the OPDO on the other. The OLF leadership on its part appears to have calculated, that it can easily mobilize the giant Oromo population against the TPLF-led minority regime. It seems, the expectations of both have not been materialized to date. The TPLF leaders have weakened the OLF, but they could not win the heart of the Oromos and captivate Oromo nationalism through a captive organization, the OPDO whose leaders are considered dependent at best and ex-prisoners of war in the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) and TPLF hands at worst.

As expected, the total rapture between the TPLF and OLF came in 1992, and since then the OLF has been engaged in a low intensity conflict. Another Oromo organization, the Oromo National Congress (ONC), was created in April 1996 with a stated objective of seeking to resolve the Oromo question within a framework of greater Ethiopia in a context of real self-rule and shared-rule. But, despite its relative success in boldly articulating the right to self-determination to be defined as genuine self-rule and real autonomy by advancing the democratic principle of ‘one man, one vote’, it has faced stubborn resistance from both from the organized Oromo movements and/or the Oromo intelligentsia. And, misunderstanding from friends and serious obstruction from the dictatorial regime virtually paralyzed its activities until the May 2005 elections, after which it is able to emerge as one of the major political force in the country – now holding by far the largest Oromo opposition seats in the country’s Parliament.

To sum up, the forcing out of the OLF from the legal political process in 1992 and the continued foundering of the Ethiopian democratization, have led the Oromos to a new type of political and economic marginalization. The OPDO, true to its creation by the TPLF itself - could not move beyond the structural limits and opportunities given to it by its creators, and hence has become an instrument of indirect rule, a classic case of controlling the fate and resources of other peoples. (8) And, as the OPDO appears to lack both the legitimacy to represent the Oromo people and the educational skill to run a transparent and accountable administration, there are a lot of compounded problems in the Oromo areas. As a result, human rights violations have been high, elections were seriously flawed, economic development seems to be lagging in Oromo areas seen in light of their potential for development and contribution to the national treasury.

Since the local and regional elections of June 1992, several national and regional elections were held in 1994, 1995, 2000 and 2001. The 1994 elections were for a Constituent Assembly, whose role was limited to the rubber-stamping of the TPLF authored National Constitution. The 1995 elections were to bring to a close, the long-delayed transition period and to manufacture public support and legitimacy to the new regime through “popular” elections as promised in the 1991 Charter. The 2000 national and regional elections and the local election that followed them in 2001 were all aimed at further consolidation of power by the TPLF/EPRDF.

VI. Problems Associated with the Way Forward

The central problem in the Oromo question has always been lack of broader consensus on the way ahead. To be sure, the controversy regarding which way forward has continued to haunt organized Oromo movements, although much is clearer now than the late 1970s and the 1990s. The problem goes back to the very

origin of modern Oromo nationalism, which was coincided with and influenced by two competing currents: the country-wide nationalist currents aimed at reforming as well as remaking the Ethiopian State as a whole and the sub-nationalists currents, which adheres to the 'right to self-determination' – with the ultimate goal creating separate state of ones own. Unfortunately, the younger generation Oromo intelligentsias who have assumed the leadership of Oromo nationalism have been operating under the influence of the opposing currents. And, before the debate over the all important question: which way forward has been matured either way, the task creating political organizations started. First came MEISON, which was able to attract the leading Oromo intellectuals of that generation. It was followed by Ethiopian National Liberation Front (ENLF), the former an all Ethiopian movement with the project of a socialist revolution and the latter an Oromo movement with the objective liberating all the peoples of Ethiopia as a whole. The Ethiopian revolution of 1974 not only caught many by surprise, but has further complicated the right way to salvation.

Firstly, it led to the general awakening among the Oromos, especially among the Oromo intellectuals as well as the youth by heralding the possibility of change. Secondly, it led to mushrooming of Oromo political groups: OLF, Echat, Bilsuma, Oromia, ONDM, etc; most of which later merged with the OLF. Sadly, the mushrooming of Oromo political organizations – instead of leading to a real and honest debate over the critical issue of which way forward – “the mentality of I know better than you; I am more authentic Oromo nationalists than you; I am more genuine for the cause than you; my road is the only road to heaven; I am holier than you, etc;” made genuine debate nearly impossible. Far worse, emotions carried the day as the battle-line was drawn along “Red Gobenas” and “narrow nationalists” lines. Especially, the type of Cold War politics between members of MEISON and ECHAT had frustrated all attempts to forge unity around a common cause, for a common goal. Consequently, more energy and resources were spent to undermine each other than fighting the common enemy until most of us found ourselves behind iron bars. Surprisingly, although detent was generally observed, the Cold War politics among members of MEISON and ECHAT did not fully stopped even in prison cells. And hence, partly because of our futile exercise and partly because of the equally bad turmoil in the country's wider political environment a cream of one generation was decimated, thousands herded to prisons and tortured while others fled into exile. Sadly, the opportunity created by the popular democratic upsurge of 1974 to remake the Ethiopian empire in the manner that ensures the fundamental rights of our people by creating a nation-state of unequal had been lost.

It appears; those of us who survived the ordeal of years of prison solitude, hardships in the bush or exile life - despite our reflection over our failure of achieving the necessary Oromo unity to make a great leap forward, the lessons of the past have not been fully grasped. To be sure, even the OLF, which came out of the crisis precipitated by the bloody military interlude of the 1970s and 1980s as a major political force in Oromo politics neither could fully overcame the legacy of the years of division nor could have fully convinced its followers regarding the future direction of the struggle when it joined the TPLF-led TGE in 1991. Here, although I am not opposing the judgment of the OLF leadership in joining the TGE – as it undoubtedly came out of that political venture as a much larger potent political force – I still think, it has not drawn enough lessons from the similar venture of the MEISON leadership a decade and half earlier. Still worse, the many of the Oromo political movements,

which share the political philosophy of the OLF, i.e. the right to self-determination, could not go beyond critiquing the OLF leadership for its real as well as imagined mistakes.

The ONC, which was created in 1996 to advocate a third-line as a way forward has been caught between the capitulatist line represented by the OPDO and a radical line advocated by many Oromo political groups still fighting for survival – as indicated earlier despite its emergence as the largest independent Oromo Voice in the Country’s Parliament.

Today, as the popular struggles for real autonomy and democracy have continued across Oromia by the independent Oromo movements, the OPDO, which has been assigned to play a devil’s role in Oromo politics, has continued to create road-blocks against the aspiration of our people for self-rule. Far worse, with a sense of failure it is turning the Oromo region into ‘a big prison house’, where citizens live in fear and frustration.

What should be underlined here is that as the popular struggle for real autonomy and self-rule has continued, so also is the division and/or confusion among the Oromo movements regarding the way forward. The Cold War type politics, which has been with us is taking a new turn with the OLF recent bold move at a critical moment in our history where the crisis of the Ethiopian state appears to have created both the opportunity and possibility of achieving self-rule and shared-rule for Oromos as well as the rest of Ethiopian peoples as a whole. And, by continuing to fight our endless Cold War and as the result of our failure to devise a realistic common agenda with others, we could not galvanize our forces for the ultimate goal of remaking Ethiopia as a democratic common home. In the meantime because of our folly thousands of Oromo youth are languishing in prison while millions are daily facing the unmitigated measures of the repressive regime. Therefore, it is time that this generation of Oromos stops its endless Cold War type politics and assumes the leadership of the remaking of the Ethiopian state so as to create a nation state of equals by ending centuries of authoritarian rule.

VII. Concluding Remarks

This paper has argued that the incorporation of the bulk of the Oromo people into the expanding empire state of Ethiopia in the second half of the 19th century on un-equal terms and the Oromos own historic expansion in the earlier centuries across the vast land - today known as Ethiopia, have created a complex dual history which in turn has complicated the Oromo people’s quest for the right to self-determination and democracy. The paper also has further argued that if the debate - which way forward - that has lived with us for a generation is to be answered by our generation, the complex reality regarding the dual history of the Oromo nation as well as the existing global politics should be taken into consideration, and hence the struggle of our people should be focused on how to achieve both ‘self-rule’ and ‘shared-rule.’

Consequently, this in turn needs a formulation of a common rallying agenda for all Oromo democratic forces and the people at large. Put differently, in the formulation and articulation of a common agenda for our people: two historic compromises have

to be made – i.e. the coming of independent Oromo movements to the middle road as well as the courage to link up the Oromo people’s struggle for ‘self-rule’ with the Ethiopian peoples struggle for ‘shared-rule’ based on a universally accepted democratic principle of ‘one man, one vote’. Such historic compromises can only be made through a readiness to build a democratic common home. Today, the most serious challenge for Oromo movements is the courage to leave behind the historical injustice done to our people - without necessarily forgetting it, and devise a political strategy that ensures majority-rule.

Here as I have always argued, if history had given the Amharas the opportunity of leading the making of modern Ethiopia on unequal terms in the second half of the 19th century, there is no reason why the same history can’t now avail the Oromo people the opportunity of playing a leading role in the remaking of Ethiopia on equal terms in the 21st century. As such the challenge to all of us is the challenge either to accept and lead the common struggle for democracy or reject it and elongates the misery of millions of our people. It is the belief of this writer that both geography and demography support the Oromo movements to lead the struggle for democracy in the country by paying less cost while their shying away from assuming such a historical role is what has undoubtedly elongated the birth pang of democratic Ethiopia and the misery of our people. The central question now is: are we ready to assume such a role?

In conclusion, what should be emphasized in light of our preceding discussion is the urgent need for rethinking by the organized Oromo movements and the intelligentsia so as to devise a common agenda with others for the democratization of the Ethiopian state as a whole in all honesty. This could help us to overcome our chronic problem of fragmentation and frustrate the divide and rule policy of the ruling-party, which in turn help us to galvanize public support at home and international solidarity abroad so as to exert enough pressure on the power that be to the legitimate demands of the diverse peoples of Ethiopia for peace, democratic governance and meaningful economic development. Finally, even if it is out of fashion to quote Karl Marx in the capitalist world heartland, I say don’t forget his immortal words: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please..”. **Eighteenth Brumaire**

Endnotes

1. Ethiopia with its existing boundaries took its present shape in the last quarter of the 19th century in the process of the expansion of the Ethiopian State.
2. Most of the current political problems of Ethiopia took root in the process of the creation of the modern empire-state in the last quarter of the 19th century. For instance, highland Eritrea was detached from Tigray and became an Italian colony from 1890 to 1896 when Menelik willy-nilly abandoned it to the Italians. The Tigrayan élite began to feel dominated when they were reduced to second-class status following the death of Yohannes in 1889 while a larger part of the Oromo and the rest of the southern peoples population were brought under the Ethiopian state during this period on unequal terms. Hence, the current political crisis in the country is linked to these events of the 19th century one way or another.
3. The introduction of the firearms into Shewa in abundance had decisively shifted the balance of force in favour of the conquering army of Menelik. In fact, the resistance of most of the indigenous peoples of the South became futile mainly because of the superior firearms employed by Menelik's invading army.
4. Most of the old southern Ethiopian towns were products of the garrison settlements created for political as well as military control of the various parts of the South. They soon developed both as administrative and commercial centres of the respective areas.
5. Many observers of Ethiopian politics make a distinction between North and South Ethiopia in many major respects: the political institutions, the land-ownership system and other instruments of oppression. See for instance, Markakis (1974) and Addis Hiwot (1975), the extent to which the people of the South suffered dual oppression - markedly different from the North.
6. This conference was the first time that Oromo organizations negotiated and participated in formation of Ethiopian government in the name of Oromos. For the OLF version of the story, see Leenco Lata (1998; 1999).
7. According to many observers of Ethiopian politics, the OPDO was created out of the ex-prisoners of war in the hands of both TPLF and EPLF. (See Young, 1997: 166; Pausewang, S. *et al* 2002: 14; Leenco, 1999).

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