

The Oromo Leadership Convention and the Future of Ethiopia: A Reply to Tedla Woldeyohanes's Plea for Clarity

By Ezekiel Gebissa*
October 20, 2016

Questions about Oromo loyalty to Ethiopia persist though they are stale, condescending and meaningless. The sort of questions that Tedla raises have been litigated for nearly three decades. The issue of secession, for instance, was basically settled when federalism was chosen as a solution and secession was enshrined in the Ethiopian Constitution as a right in principle. For those who have remained in the mindset of the ancient regime, however, all Oromo political moves, even a call for a convention, must be scrutinized for some hidden desire for secession. To be sure, no one Ethiopian group has the moral authority to administer the litmus test of loyalty to Ethiopia. It is unfathomable that Oromos have to answer such questions especially in the wake of the sacrifices the young generation of Oromo have been paying to liberate Ethiopia from tyrannical rule. By responding to these questions, I am not respecting them. But I respect the spirit of dialogue in which Tedla Woldeyohannes raised them. He did not indict anyone or besmirch anyone's reputation. His was a plea for clarity. It is the kind of civility that befits the moment and it bodes well for the kind of dialogue we need at this critical point in time in our history. I commend him for his contribution to civil discussion. Let me try as best as I can to respond to his relevant queries.

Question #1: What does "Oromo nationhood" mean? Denying the existence of an Oromo nation was a mission of a succession of Ethiopian ruling elites, including historians of great repute. Under the policy of assimilation of the imperial period, it made sense to deny the existence of the Oromo as a distinct nation. The Oromo of Harer were called Qottuu; the southern Oromo were referred to as the Borana of Sidamo. The Oromo in Shewa were often depicted as Amhara. The Wallaga Oromo were said to have nothing in common with the Arsi. One historian summed it up: "the Oromo don't have corporate history." The conclusion is that the Oromo don't belong to the same ethno-national group.

In addition to dividing along lines of region and lineage, assimilating the Oromo also meant denying the existence of the Oromo as a people. Until 1974, the Oromo were referred to as Galla, not Oromo. The schools foisted this charade on generations of students, including Oromos who were forced to reject their true self-designation fearing cultural alienation and other forms of retribution. So Oromo endured a culture of dehumanization encapsulated in offensive Amharic clichés. Mohammed Hassen summarizes them as follows.

In the eyes of many Ethiopians, as Donald Donham keenly observed, the "Galla were pagans. They were uncivilized. Ye Galla chewa ye gomen choma yellem (it is impossible to find a Galla gentleman as it is to find fat in greens) or again Galla inna shinfilla biyatbutim aytera (even if you wash them, stomach lining and a Galla will never come clean)." In one Amharic expression, Oromos were equated with human feces: "Gallana sagara eyadar yegamal" (Galla and human feces stink more every passing day). In another, even Oromo humanity was questioned: "Saw naw Galla?" (Is it human or Galla?).

The Galla reference was a mechanism of "othering," an instrument of sociocultural denigration and psychological dehumanization of the Oromo. The Oromo nation has survived the onslaught of assimilation and imperial domination. In the last four decades, Oromo has become the accepted designation though only a decade ago someone published a book insisting that Galla is the proper designation. The Oromo believe they have overcome the denial, denigration and dehumanization of the past. The Ethiopian Constitution refers to the Oromo as a nation.

The Oromo nation has always been a nation. It has reclaimed its status today. We just have to get used to it.

Question #2: What does it mean Oromo is a great African nation? Is the Oromo a nation as other African nations? It should not sound strange to state that the Oromo are indeed “a great African nation.” Oromo is great, African and a nation. Implicit in the query is a suspicion that the reference to the Oromo as a nation presages a claim to statehood. To be sure, it takes a great deal of courage to even raise such a patronizing question. Who is more Ethiopian than any other group to administer the test of Ethiopianess?

Oromo has always been a great nation. The French traveler Antoine d'Abbadie, a traveler known for his meticulous mapping of the region from Massawa to Kafa in the 1840s, described the Oromo as “a great African nation” in an article he published in 1882. Martial de Salviac also repeated the same description in his book title: *An ancient people, Great African nation: The Oromo* (1902). In today's parlance, Oromo is a great nation. The young Oromo generation has made a compelling case for the reinstatement of the historic reference.

Where there Oromo state in the past? When Antoine d'Abbadie crossed the Blue Nile in the 1840s, he encountered a gadaa republic at Odaa Buluq in Gudru. As he traveled south, he came across five Oromo kingdoms known as the Gibe States: Limmu, Gera, Gomaa, Guma and Jimma. These were independent kingdoms that governed themselves, later made tributaries and eventually conquered by the Kingdom of Shewa. Other travelers encountered Oromo gadaa republics everywhere in the rest of Oromia, at Odaa Hule, Odaa Robba, Odaa Bultum, Mae Bokku, and Gummi Gayyoo and so on. That is the history of the Oromo kingdoms and republics, and that is how Oromo custodians of knowledge (argaa dhageetii) have documented it orally. Learning this history or argaa dhageetii (what is seen and heard) is part of being socialized into being Oromo. No text book history can erase or falsify this history. Fortunately, young Oromo scholars have also documented this history with competence and finesse. Some people just don't want to believe it.

The writer asks for the locational map of these Oromo entities. On a regular map, the kingdoms emerged in the region that is modern southwestern Ethiopia, to the west of the Gibe and Omo Rivers, and north of the Gojeb. The republics were all over today's Oromia. I surmise that the question about a unified Oromia independent state in the past. This too is a tired question. Oromo historians have documented the unity of the gadaa republics as all paid homage to the Abba Muudaa at Madda Walaabuu every eight years. These historians are loyal to the canons of historiography. Their documentation is no less valid than those who claim an exceptional epistemological authority to judge which history is authentic. History is a matter of interpretation. We can debate any one interpretation endlessly. We must muster the courage disagree on interpretations of Ethiopian history and agree on living in the future.

In the present context, self-governing means that the present Oromia Regional State, nominally self-governing today, will be truly self-governing in the future. Oromo politicians have championed the idea of self-rule regionally and shared rule nationally for quite some time now. Apparently, it never sinks in.

Question # 3: Does national liberation have the same meaning then and now? The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) adopted a political program in 1976 in which the idea of liberation was enunciated. Since then a lot has happened and a lot has changed. It looks like some “analysts” are scrutinizing for ways to find reasons to indict the OLF. At the moment, it is not clear which OLF is still promoting the idea of “total independence.” Over the last half century, the OLF has splintered into several factions. The Oromo Democratic Front (ODF), for instance, has a new political program that doesn't mention total independence.

In raising it again, Tedla has pulled from a time capsule a question that was asked in 1991. It is the same allegation that the TPLF is spewing today to separate and destroy the opposition against it, which is expressed in recent Amhara-Oromo solidarity. Lumping all Oromo political parties and scrutinizing their statements to find a subterranean meaning, a “hidden agenda,” serves no purpose other than stereotyping a whole group as perpetual iconoclasts.

What is inscrutable is the fact that the idea of self-identification, self-reliance and self-rule that the OLF planted among the Oromo has grown to the sentiment of “national liberation” expressed by the #OromoProtests. The

#OromoProtests has been a national drama unfolding before the entire world. Reasonable people know the demands of the present Oromo revolution. They don't torment them with the same question that were asked of their predecessors.

Still the idea that the "old" OLF has always been for nothing but secession is an urban legend that never goes away. The OLF was never wedded to only one avenue of solving the Oromo question. Let me support my case by quoting OLF leaders. First, a [speech delivered by Galasa Dilbo](#), the former Secretary of the OLF, at the Mesqel Square in 1991.

Today this public assembly affirms that the Oromo nation stands for peace and democracy. It shows that the people are committed to this struggle until its goals are achieved. It wouldn't be a misstatement to assert today that, because of the unity and freedom of the mind the people have achieved, the Oromo struggle has moved on to a new phase. For the Oromo Liberation Front, this public assembly attests the Oromo are peaceful people. Moreover, it shows that their demands are similar to those of the other oppressed people of Ethiopia. We express our solidarity with them.

The OLF has a message for the non-Oromo people of Ethiopia. Our struggle is directed against an oppressive system and it has never harbored hatred for any group of people. Whatever it is yesterday and or today, it has never been our intention to harm the non-Oromo people who live in Oromia. We struggle with you hand in hand to make sure that our rights and your rights are respected. Non Oromos among us have nothing to fear from the Oromo people or from the Oromo struggle.

The OLF has a message for the International Community. We need a stable democracy. We are aware that we have formidable challenges. We don't have any time to waste. The OLF and the Oromo people do not backtrack from our commitment from working for achieving reliable peace and durable democracy.

Elsewhere I have written about the issue of the OLF and the charge of secession as follows: In a testimony of April 8, 1992 before the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, Taha A. Abdi, member of the OLF Central Committee, asserted that the fall of the Derg created "an opportunity to democratize, transform and create a new Ethiopia in which the equal enjoyment of civil, economic and political rights of all the people are assured, where freedom of expression and religion are guaranteed and above all in which the supremacy of the rule of law will be established. ... There is no alternative to the democratization of Ethiopia." Leenco Lata, former deputy secretary general of the OLF, has written a whole book explaining why democratization is the only viable recourse for both the Oromo and other peoples of Ethiopia. In *The Ethiopian State at the Crossroads: Decolonization & Democratization or Disintegration* he asserts that, without genuine democratization and federalization, the Ethiopian state cannot escape another round of bloodbath and likely disintegration.

This position is not a matter of politicians seeking expediency. In his "Ethiopia: Missed Opportunities for Peaceful Democratic Process," Mohammed Hassen had stated: "As an optimist who believes in the unity of free people in a free country, I have an undying dream that one day the Oromo, the Amhara, and Tigray, and other peoples of Ethiopia will be able to establish a democratic federal system. To me only a genuine federal arrangement offers a better prospect for the future of Ethiopia." Mohammed also states that only democratization could transform the Ethiopian state from one dominated by one ethnic group into a state of all citizens. (Full article <http://addisstandard.com/oromo-dilemma-national-question-democratic-transition/>)

It is clear that even OLF isn't wedded to the idea of secession. In my assessment, the OLF won that battle in 1995. It is OLF's opponents who are committed to pinning the tag of secession on the OLF. In the last year, the #OromoProtests have demanded and died for their citizens' rights to be respected. If the blood they spilled to defend democracy, genuine federalism and constitutional rule isn't sufficient to allay the fear of Oromo imputed secessionism, my purely didactic presentation will not change any mind. But I have offered it for what it's worth.

Question # 4. Who colonized Oromo nation and how does Oromo relate to the colonizer? The question of internal colonialism has been a subject of academic debates since the mid-1980s. In Ethiopian studies, the pertinent

themes were outlined and discussed in several essays in *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia* edited Donald Donham first published in 1986. The eminent sociologist Donald Levine describes the two sides as the “colonialist narrative” and the “nationalist narrative.” These means the debate has ended in interpretive disagreement. A generation of students in Oromia and other regions have up grown up learning the “colonialist narrative” version over the objections of the advocates of the “nationalist narrative.” This is a settled issue to need any explanation. It is even pointless to ask for one. The only remaining issue of interest here is academic curiosity that sometimes has the characteristics of debating the number of angels that can dance on a head of a pin.

It seems that Tedla doesn't have much problem with the intent of the Leadership Convention if it was meant to issue documents that will affirm Oromo unity on the basis of the Oromo gadaa principles and state in broader terms Oromo aspirations. But he finds it difficult to accept idea when he connects several dots in the opening paragraph with the goals of the Convention. The outlines of the documents that the convention hopes to endorse are clear. For now, let's respect the right of Oromos to come together for a conversation on crucial issues that affect our people.

Within the Oromo community, there are different political positions. We would like to arrive at an overall consensus regarding the future of the Oromo nation. Other political communities in Ethiopia should also do the same. For those who despise “ethnic politics,” what the Oromo are trying to do for themselves as a political community is quite deplorable. They view these efforts as an active engagement in breaking up Ethiopia. On that issue, we disagree. Oromos have always been affirmative builders. That is the next level of consensus that Ethiopians need to have.

The writer, Ezekiel Gebissa, is professor of history at Kettering University, Flint, MI