

Memorandum

Submitted to

Dr. DestaYebassa

Chairman, Board of Oromo Community Organization in Washington,

D. C,

RE: OCO Workshop on *Oromummaa*

By

Hamdesa Tusso, Ph. D.

Winnipeg, Canada

Revised: 8/30/12

I. Introduction:

First, I would like to thank you for the invitation extended to me by you and the Elders' Committee to participate in the upcoming workshop. I would also like to congratulate the OCO and its leadership for remaining calm and for adhering to the policies stipulating that Oromo community organizations should stay away from partisan Oromo politics. Other Oromo community organizations were not so lucky. Further, I would like to congratulate OCO and its leadership for purchasing its own center. The fact that OCO has a committee of elders in addition to the normal administrative structure is commendable. The Oromo community organization, which started this tradition, was the Oromo community in Toronto, Canada. I am so pleased that the OCO has adopted this model of running the organization.

II. My Concerns:

As I have explained to you over the phone I have four major concerns about the workshop that I have been invited to participate in. Below are brief summary the issues I am concerned about.

(1) The Message:

I am concerned about the theme of focus for deliberation at the workshop - *Oromummaa*. Here I wish to make three points. First, the Oromo people have never forgotten their Oromo identity. To be sure, to some extent, Oromo identity was localized prior to 1960s due to the separation caused by successive regimes.

Second, the basic elements of group identity include: culture, language, defined

territory, psychological make-up, shared experience – past and present (history), and life style. The Oromo's, although colonized never lost these elements. Although there are some Oromo's who became urbanized and adopted some aspects of Abyssinian culture, this segment is very small in general. In 1986, I wrote a paper titled, the *Survival of Oromo Nationalism*. I used that paper as the key note address for the first OSA conference in Minneapolis. In the paper I concluded that Oromo nationalism was not a new phenomenon. I further argued that Oromo nationalism survived due to certain factors. In the paper I discussed those factors. (My paper on the subject is attached for your convenience). My thesis was based on historical facts, social science theories and practical observations. Third, over the last five decades three significant organizations emerged in the Oromo struggle for independence. The Bale resistance movement demonstrated that the Oromo can fight against the mighty army of Ethiopia. The Matacha Tulama Association was the first Pan-Oromo organization to show that, we, the Oromo can galvanize our resources to mount meaningful resistance against the oppressive system in the Ethiopian Empire. Both of these organizations were destroyed by the regime of Emperor Haile Sellassie. The OLF was formed from the remnants of these two organizations. These three organizations greatly enhanced the cause of the Oromo national movement. It is however fundamentally wrong to suggest that they gave the Oromo nation *Oromummaa*. To the contrary, the leadership of these organizations was inspired by the already existing vibrant *Oromummaa*. For example, the Bale resistance movement was formed essentially by a cadre of local

leaders – they did not have access to the professionals who were more endowed by modern education; however, they were blessed by rich sense of *Oromummaa*.

Matcha Tulama was originally established for two primary purposes. First, it was designed to provide a forum for social gathering for the Oromo's in urban areas. Second, it was created to support rural community development. The nature of the organization dramatically changed as members interacted with Oromo's in rural areas like Shoa, Arssie and other regions. Oromo's in those areas provided overwhelming support for the organization, and challenged the leadership to embrace the idea of a national movement for liberation. As a result of such a demonstration of Oromo national identity, the regime of Emperor Haile Sellassie became threatened, and took decisive action to destroy it. When the OLF was formed it received the same kind of support from the Oromo people.

In 1991, the OLF went back to Oromia empty handed, so to speak – there were not records of military achievements, and there was no membership in Oromia. As a matter of fact the leadership did not even have a specific plan to recruit members when entered Oromia. The Oromos expected the OLF to enter Finfinne with a gallant military victory as the Eritreans did when they entered Asmara, and as TPLF did when it took over Finfinne in May 1991. It was, however, the Oromo's from all walks of life who embraced OLF and saved the face of the beleaguered organization. In particular, the performance of Oromo elders was spectacular; they rose from the ashes of *Dergue*, and after over 100 years of separation, organized themselves as the Oromo Nations Association of Oromo Elders. After the fraudulent elections of June 1992, Oromo elders met in Nagampt and advised OLF leaders to

pursue armed resistance. Their efforts were, however, sabotaged due to internal division within the OLF leadership. By any measure, the performance of Oromo elders during that short historic period is unparalleled in the history of modern national movements for self-determination.

When the tragic conflict started within OLF leadership in 2001 the primary target of the two conflicting groups was to control OLF fighters in the Southern Zone located in Borana territory. There was also a special interest to control an ammunition depot located somewhere in the region. The Oromo Borana elders rose to the occasion; they took two significant steps to deal with the dangerous situation. First, they took over the ammunition depot and arranged for neutral local persons to protect it until the conflict at hand was resolved. Second, they conducted a marathon of peacemaking sessions for 30 days to resolve the conflict. When they understood that the conflict was driven from the top leadership, and that local fighters were being used as pawns, the elders made one plea to OLF leadership, that is, they should not spill Oromo blood on Borana sacred soil. Tragically, their plea was not heeded and violence ensued. The Top leadership on both sides of the conflict organized fighters along clan lines and had them fight each other. The triggering event was the struggle to control the ammunition depot. During a night the *Shanee* group, in the absence of night keepers at the depot, took over the ammunition depot by force. Subsequently, Obbo Dhugassaa, the leader of the *qema cumsa* group, ordered his followers to start fighting. Eventually, the *Shanee* group won the fight on this particular round of violent confrontation. The leaders of the fighting force under the *qema cumsa* group surrendered to the TPLF government,

with some valuable weapons. What is a tragedy! The heroic positive actions by the local community elders were a manifestation of true *Oromummaa*. Now, who should be responsible for the blood that was shed on sacred Borana country? What about Oromo intellectuals who fueled the conflict from the two ends (this includes some of your invited guests)?

There was another historic event that cemented my faith in the Oromo people and their belief in their *Oromummaa*. Between 2001 and 2004, I was privileged to serve on the *Shanachaa Jaarsmumaa* Peace Mission. As the Chairman of the *Shanachaa*, I was exposed to various views expressed by the Oromo people around the world. Other members also had their contacts too. At the end of the process we made three fundamental observations. First, the Oromo people believe in unity. Second, the Oromo people support the OLF. Third, the Oromo people want to support the goal of self-determination (independence). This is true manifestation of *Oromummaa*.

The issue relating to Oromo national identity has been resolved at political level. The regime of Emperor Haile Sellassie wanted to destroy Oromo national identity through the process of *Amharanization*. It did not work. The *Dergue* wanted to transform Oromo national identity to *Ethiopianism* through socialism. Forced *villigazation* was introduced to achieve this goal; it failed. The TPLF introduced “ethnic based democracy” for its own interest. Also, it was in recognition of the fact that the national identity of groups in the Empire could not be suppressed any longer. Now, Oromo’s learning their language; their territory has been identified with legal demarcation. In light of the above evidence, what is that the new prophets

of *Oromummaa* want to teach Oromo's in the 21st Century? How come the OCO leadership succumbed to this new round of propaganda by this cadre of elite group?

(2) The Rationale Behind the Theme for Workshop

The theme of the workshop suggests an assumption that postulates that The current crisis in the Oromo national movement is as a result of the Oromo forgetting their *Oromummaa*. It seems the corollary assumption is that if some 'illustrious' Oromo intellectuals give lectures on *Oromummaa* at the upcoming workshop, the problems we are currently facing will melt away. At best, such assumption is too simplistic especially with regard to complicated problems that led to the current crisis. At worst, this is a sinister ploy by some intellectuals to control the stage (stay in the limelight of the Oromo national movement). In brief, I have seen this movie before. In my view, to be blunt, the current problems in the Oromo national movement are due to malignant leadership that has destroyed the organization completely. Unfortunately, some of your invited intellectual guests contributed to this tragedy, in some decisive manners (will discuss about this later). To be sure, we Oromo's should confront this unfortunate situation that we currently find ourselves in. Indeed, there are some specific techniques that may help us move forward. In my view, certainly, the *Oromummaa* slogan is not the appropriate way.

3. The Messenger(s)

In the foregoing paragraph, I have discussed about the message. I have argued that the *Oromummaa* theme is not an appropriate frame to galvanize Oromo's for peace and reconciliation in the 21st Century. In this section I wish to address the issues pertaining to the messenger(s). This is going to be the most difficult part of this communication. I feel deeply sad that I have to do this. However, this has to be done. In my observation, Oromo's have avoided confronting some of the ugly deeds among our national community members; as a result, such behaviors have been tolerated for so long that the consistent evil deeds by some have led us to complete darkness and the turmoil that the Oromo community is currently experiencing.

I wish to construct the context for the following discussion. Whenever, a society or group has gone through such a traumatic conflict, you always start with those members who had not been directly or indirectly involved in that particular conflict. If the actors in the conflict show change and transformation and positive posture with respect to the issues at hand and the interests of the other parties, you include them in the new relationship, preferably later on. This has to be done with great care. In the case of some of your guests such processes have not taken place. They directly participated in the conflict within OLF leadership so much so that their direct participation in the conflict became a triggering event in the conflict. Also, such direct participation made it very difficult to resolve the conflict. In the following paragraphs I wish to provide direct evidence for these conclusions.

(a) The last time OLF leadership had a meeting (as an OLF organization) Was in the summer of 2001. During that year the Central Committee put together a smaller committee to plan the National Congress. The Chairman of the committee was Obbo Abbiya Roba and the Secretary was Obbo Abiyu Geleta. According to the information I received from some committee members, the committee agreed on almost everything except one thing: the scholars to be invited to attend the National Congress. The Obbo Dawud Ibsa wing wanted to invite Drs. Mohammed Hassen, Asefa Jaleta. The Obbo Dhugassa wing wanted to invite Drs. Bichka Fayssa and Makuria Bultcha. Since the committee could not agree on this regard, the meeting ended in frustration, and subsequently Obbo Abiyu left Asmara for North America. That particular episode marked the separation of the two groups within OLF leadership. (I got the information relative to the above described episode from reliable source).

(b) In 2004 a conference was convened in Berger, Norway. The conference Was sponsored by Norway, Germany and the U. S. The main goal was to persuade the OLF to renounce armed struggle and go back to Ethiopia to work for democratic reform. The Executive Committee of OLF (popularly referred to as the *Shanee* group) was invited. Subsequently, the *Shanee* group invited scholars who supported their political agenda. Two of your guests (Drs. Asefa Jalata and Mohammed Hassen) were among the invited guests to participate at the Bergen Conference. Conspicuously missing from the invitee list were those scholars who took the side of the qema cumsa group (Drs. Makuria Bulcha and Bichaka Fayissa) in the conflict

within OLF leadership. The *Qema cumsa* group mounted a vigorous campaign, claiming that the *Shanee* group was going to abandon the OLF *Kayyoo* and renounce armed struggle and go back to Ethiopia. Incidentally, Obbo Dawud Ibsa actually rejected the proposal of the sponsors of the conference presented, and *Shanee* still has not gone back to Ethiopia up to now. In my view, the toxic rhetoric propagated by the *qemacumsa* group, led by Oromo scholars such Dr. Makuria Bulcha, over the internet undermined the peace process led by *Shanachaa Jaarsumaa*. As a matter of fact, one member of the *Shanachaa* was so much influenced by this round of toxic rhetoric that he defected to the *Qema cumsa* group camp. Of course, the mistake was made by the *Shanee* group for inviting scholars on one side of the conflict only, and naturally, those scholars who were excluded from the Bergen Conference went wild in their opposition to the conference. More fundamentally, why did Oromo scholars allow themselves to be divided by OLF leadership in the first place? (Incidentally, I was invited to the Bergen Conference, but declined to attend because I believed it would be divisive and indeed it was).

After OSA was over taken *coup d'état* in 1992 by the members among your intellectual guests, I wrote the OSA Report to educate the Oromo public about the conflict. In the report I warned the Oromo society about the danger of partisan politics played by Oromo scholars (Please, pages 65-76). Also, I pleaded with OLF leadership not to divide Oromo scholars. In addition, I pleaded with the concerned scholars not to drag OSA into partisan politics. Incidentally, one of the scholars, the architect of the *coup d'état*, privately told me that I was making too much fuss over

OSA conflict; this was stupid Oromo politics and I should give up the struggle to resolve the OSA crisis (that was Dr. Mohammed Hassan).

(c) In the Fall of 2001, after the conflict within OLF leadership was Exposed, the Shaneegroup convened a conference in Asmara to deal with the volatile situation within the OLF leadership. I paid my own money for the ticket to attend the conference. I went there to promote the idea of a peaceful resolution of the conflict. At the opening program of the conference, Obbo Dawud gave a detailed report about the history and the issues relative to the dispute at hand(his presentation took an hour and half). He then called for a resolution condemning the *Qema cumsa* group, to be passed by the attendees. I then took a risk and argued against such a resolution; instead, I proposed the idea of a peacemaking approach to resolve the raging conflict. Luckily, Dr. Tadesse Oba, a veteran in the OLF movement, supported my proposal and this effort eventually led to the formation of the *Shanachaa*. When I arrived there, I met Dr. Asefa Jalata. The next day of the conference I pleaded with him for us to work together to resolve the conflict at hand. He gave me a cold shoulder and left the next day for the U. S.

(d) After the *Shanachaa* was formed, we desperately needed funds to cover Travel expenses. We, the members took the initiative to approach different Oromo groups in the Diaspora. Dr. Tilahun Gamta took the responsibility to raise funds from Oromo scholars. When he approached Dr. Asefa, he urged the *Shanachaa*, through Dr. Tilahun, that the *Shanachaa* consider/incorporate Obbo Lencho Letta's

idea regarding democratization of Ethiopia. Of course, the *Shanachaa* did not consider his suggestion.

(e) In 2006, these individuals and their cohorts fought over the OSA Service Award given to Obbo Lencho Letta. The issue of dispute was that Lencho was awarded illegally (the OSA Board did not approve the award). Once again, your intellectual guests were on the opposite sides of the dispute. As a result of this particular crisis, some of the most able Oromo intellectuals such as Dr. Bahiru Gamachu, Obbo Abraham Mosisa left OSA. (Please see their report posted on www.oromiaonline.org.)

It seems to me the ultimate game of these intellectuals was to capture the greatest trophy in the Oromo national movement, which was to control and influence OLF leadership for their own popularity. Thus, they engaged in the destructive conflict that has destroyed OLF itself. Now that that precious trophy is gone, they still want to control the public stage in the Oromo national movement. The new front of the game is the appearance of peacemaking. Thus, they have cleverly repackaged themselves under the rubric theme of *Oromummaa*. As in the past, they use their regional surrogates to sustain their propaganda. Legitimate criticisms against them are drowned by their regional surrogates. What a travesty!

To conclude this section, I have argued that there are some serious concerns with the messengers (the proponents of *Oromummaa*). My arguments are based on internationally accepted, long - standing principles relative to the conduct of behavior for intellectuals – the cardinal principle is that *Thou shall do No Harm!* As

demonstrated above, the conduct of behavior manifested by your intellectual guests does not meet this standard.

After the OSA crisis in 1992, I took some time to study the role of intellectuals in society, particularly those of oppressed groups. I incorporated the relevant principles in the OSA Report. I also articulated the implications of the OSA conflict. These discussions can be found on pages 65-80.

During my graduate training at Michigan State University, I took time study the experience of other oppressed groups (e.g. African Americans, Jews in Europe, Palestinians, South Africans, etc.) Based on these significant learning, I organized OSA essentially to cultivate a new cadre of Oromo intellectuals. These ideas were incorporated in the preamble of the original OSA constitution (Please, see OSA Report, p. 108; Also, see pp. 87-91 regarding the proposal to establish OSA).

4. In Appropriateness of the Forum

I was asked to make a presentation about conflict resolution. While the idea has Validity, I feel that the forum of the upcoming workshop will not be suitable. In my View, first, the basic idea regarding Conflict resolution is not new to the Oromo audience. Therefore, it is not appropriate for me to come there and give some abstract lecture on the subject. However, what is needed is a well-planned workshop or a series of workshops where the principles and specific processes with respect to indigenous Oromo system of peacemaking can be discussed, possibly with the help of an Oromo audience and then, introduce the emerging theoretical concepts within social sciences relative to social conflict. This approach will take

more than 40 or 60 minutes. Perhaps, what should be considered is to develop a module, which can be used for presentation at different places. Therefore, I do not believe that my presentation and presence will be useful for the cause of peace in the current environment.

III. **Way Forward:** In some respects the problems the Oromo society is currently facing is similar to the situation that was prevalent in the 1980s. The conflict between the Jaraa group and the OLF was tearing apart the Oromo community, particularly in the Diaspora community. The OLF under leadership of Obbo Letta refused to open the OLF office in Washington; D. C. There was no one person/group who could speak for the Oromo cause in the halls of powers in North America. The Oromo's just like the present time were divided and deeply depressed. Similar to the situation now, the *Dergue* was also brutally oppressing the Oromo's back home as the TPLF regime is doing at the present time.

I arrived in Washington, D.C. in 1982 (that is exactly 30 years ago). With the help of some great Oromo's, such as Mitiku Firissa, Sana Argo (he passed away in 1992), Brook Girsha, Bekele Gutta, Lenjisso Horo and others, we started building new frontiers for our cause. In 1983, we formed the Oromo Committee for Immigration and Refugees (OCIR) (that project was terminated in 1988 as a result of UONA/OLF politics); we created OSA in 1986; we consolidated Oromo community organizations, commencing in 1988 in Washington, D. C. (I used that model to spread the tradition to other locations, such as Atlanta, Minneapolis, Toronto, Berlin, Australia). Between 1991 and 1992, we finally compelled the OLF to open an office

in Washington, D. C. The arrival of Obbo Abiyu Geleta in Washington, D. C. strengthened our hand immensely in the consolidation of this effort. The UONA group however opposed all these efforts. Your intellectual guests, who were the members of UONA and those whose allegiance was with UONA also opposed these humble efforts. (The history of these efforts have recorded in OSA Report pp. 7-29)

There was an interesting, dramatic event in 1996. When Obbo Abbiyu finalized his plans to consolidate the functions of the OLF to represent the mission of Oromo movement in North America and beyond, the UONA group opposed it – UONA wanted to remain the primary representing organization for the OLF. The Oromo scholars who captured OSA via a coup (your intellectual guests were included in this move) also, decided to join with UONA in opposition to Obbo Abiyu's reform agenda. The OLF was leadership concerned about the combination of these two elements – OSA and UONA. Obbo Abiyu took a dramatic step and split the OSA group. Indeed, he was an able man, with strong convictions. He did it by plucking out Dr. Bichaka out of the pack and persuaded him to hold the OSA conference in Minneapolis, in conjunction with, the OLF annual convention. This was done in the context that the UONA group had decided to hold the annual Congress in Washington D. C. in 1997. While the drama regarding this matter was going on; the group (OSA leaders) sent a delegation, led by Dr. Mohammed to Obbo Abiyu. According the sources that shared the information with me, there were two issues on the agenda for the meeting. During the discussion they urged Obbo Abiyu not to separate OSA and UONA. Secondly, they urged Obbo Abiyu not to listen to Hamdesa Tusu, because he was an elitist and anti-OLF. (incidentally, when I was

working with *Shanachaa* between 2001 and 2004, some of the OLF were even surprised that I was working so hard to resolve crisis within the OLF leadership; the story they had heard about me was that I was un-redeemably regionalist and anti-OLF). Of course, Obbo Abiyu did not accept their plea and OSA and UONA separated and subsequently, UONA died a natural death. (UONA was surviving under cocktail of OSA. Indeed, the main goal of the coup in 1992 was to keep OSA and UONA together. Please read OSA Report pp. 92-104).

However, the conflict that emerged within the OLF in 2001 destroyed almost everything we had worked for: the OLF office has been closed; the Oromo community organizations have been penetrated by the conflicting parties (e.g. Minneapolis, Winnipeg, Norway), causing these precious organizations to divide Oromo's, etc. Currently, there is no organized body with a unified voice to serve vital Oromo interests at the international stage. The hostility among Oromo's along identity lines is dangerously high – the highest I have ever seen in three decades.

As it did in the 1980s, I believe OCO can lead the way in the new efforts to increase and consolidate Oromo unity – more importantly to have faith in the just cause of the people. Briefly, I suggest the following approaches to be considered by the OCO leadership in order to move forward:

(a) **Broaden the Base:** Whenever one deals with such a situation (as described Above), the leadership for transformation should look for news faces (new messengers). There are highly competent persons of integrity who can assist in such efforts. The following Oromo scholars have such qualities:

- (1) Dr. Bahiru Gamatchu,
- (2) Dr. Abbas H. Gnamo (University of Toronto),
- (3) Obbo Abraham Mosisa,
- (4) Dr. Abraham Dalu
- (5) Dr. Isaias W. Georgis
- (6) Dr. Safaw Gullo
- (7) Obbo Edeo Boru (an attorney)

Here elders should be recruited too. For example, Obbo Abdalla Sulle is a great person and a very able elder. There are other scholars/professionals, and elders who can help in this effort. Also, there is a new graduating crop of Oromo scholars that could be tapped.

(b) **The Message (s):** It is always important to have a clear vision regarding the Desired goals and activities for change. Such a vision should be translated to specific messages. This requires developing some skills in programming and communication.

(c) **Reach Out to Other Oromo Community Organizations:** Perhaps people may be tired of the divisive Oromo politics and may be amenable to the suggestion of cleaning up division within Oromo community organizations.

(d) **Begin having conversations about ethics and morality as exposed in Oromo word view:** One of the critical functions of community elders is to advocate and maintain morality. In my view, one of the major problems in Oromo politics has been the absence of ethics and morality. It is dominated by a culture of intrigue and machinations. I believe that it is this destructive culture that has led to the destruction of the OLF itself.

(e) **Address the issue of leadership:** The notion that the current crisis in the Oromo national movement is due to the lack of *Oromummaa* is totally absurd. Equally the proposition that the current problems in Oromo national movement are due to low consciousness is unfortunate and dangerous. Let us be clear: the current crisis came from above – from the Oromo elite within the movement, not from the grassroots.

(f) **Establish a Forum for Communication (e.g. Website):** A modern Medium of communication such as website can help to facilitate the exchange of ideas. (Maybe, such forms of communication already exist).

(g) Give yourself sufficient time: Transformation from the current negative situation to more positive direction will require more time and deliberate planning and deliberate activities.

Conclusion: After 30 years of involvement in the Oromo national movement, jumping from one organization to another, hustling from one conflict to another, this is not a memo I wanted to write to an Oromo community organization leader. It is painful and disheartening to see the Oromo cause being abused and misused. I could have simply said to you that I could not come due to some other obligations or something like that (some Oromo professionals advised me to do just that).

However, I chose to write this long memo for several reasons. First, I have a great respect for OCO and its leadership. Second, I care deeply about the Oromo people and their just cause. Third, in the tradition of intellectuals, one (i.e. an intellectual) is supposed to advise the community and nation about difficult issues – must tell the society the inconvenient truth regarding the pressing issues at hand. This approach *may not be politically correct sometimes*. This is the way I have conducted myself during the last three decades in the Oromo national movement.

In this memo, I went through the past history regarding some issues. In the field of conflict analysis and resolution, we say that *conflict a child of history* – no conflict takes place in a social vacuum; conflict always takes place in a particular social context. If one desires to resolve a particular conflict, one has to study the history of the conflict in some detail. It is for this reason that cited certain episodes

from the OSA conflict. Of course, one cannot separate OSA conflict from OLF conflict –they were intertwined in some demonstrable ways. Indeed, the OLF leadership (Obbo Abiyu, Obbo Galassa and Obbo Taha Abdi) told me pride that OSA is theirs, and I should give the idea of reforming OSA.

I do hope that you will find it possible to share this memo and the two attached documents with the Elders' Committee members and the Board members. As I indicated to you over the phone, I will be in Washington, D. C for a week (August 20-25); maybe we can meet over coffee and exchange ideas relative to some issues I have raised in the memo. Also, we can revisit some of the ideas I have suggested the OCO leadership.

Respectfully,

Hamdesa Tusso

Cc: Obbo Tsegaye E. Gelgelu, Exe. Director

Members of Elders' Committee/OCO

Members of the Board/OCO

