

The Imperative of Paying Attention: in Solidarity with the Oromo Protest

(Remarks prepared for delivery at the '*Awareness Afternoon*', Melbourne)

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1. Introduction

Thanks Bareetu for that warm introduction. I am honoured to be here.

Hi Everyone.

Good afternoon again, and thank you for making time and for being here.

My name is Tsegaye Ararssa. I am an Oromo from Ethiopia. I grew up and lived in Addis. I believe I have an intimate understanding of the areas affected by the Master Plan that provoked the Oromo protest. Unlike most of you, I cannot call myself an Australian Oromo or an Oromo Australian. But I think I will speak for all of you when I say 'WE STAND IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE OROMO PROTESTS.'

I came to Australia four years ago as an international student benefitting from the Melbourne International Research Scholarship. I came here to do a legal study that leads to a PhD in constitutional law, theory and history. At the time, I saw the extension of the scholarship as a huge gesture of human solidarity. At the time, for me and my young family, the scholarship was a life line to help me exit Ethiopia, a country where one is exiled while at 'home'. The scholarship I sought was a mode of self-estrangement, a narrow escape for me and my little child, Noah, from persecution by a state that is paranoid in the face of dissent, even that of a merely aspiring

legal academic with a degree of independence of mind. Six months after my arrival here, much to my relief, my family joined me in Melbourne to start life anew, sharing a poorer but, surely, safer life with me here. At the time, I had heard that there are numerous Oromos living in Australia. But little did I know that they do come together like this to perform home in exile.

Soon, I found a book by Greg Gow entitled *THE OROMO IN EXILE: FROM THE HORN OF AFRICA TO THE SUBURBS OF AUSTRALIA* (2002). The book tells the story of the Oromo in Australia. It tells the story of how the Oromo in Melbourne perform home in exile. Gow does an ethnographic documentation of how at every meeting (casual or otherwise), at every gathering, at every holiday, and even when listening to music from home, the Oromo express lamentation of their loss (past) and longing for freedom (future). Having seen how they were on exile when they were at 'home,' they were using their new found freedom as a site of performing home.

I hardly knew that I will one day join them (join you guys in this audience) in this act of performing home.

2. Performing Home in Exile: in Solidarity with the Oromo Protests

Of course, the idea of performing home in exile is not entirely new to Oromos. Being the constitutive outside of the Ethiopian state, the Oromo has always lived a life of estrangement from 'home'.

As you all know, the Oromo in Ethiopia are internal to the territory but external to the polity. They are the absent presence, or the present-absence.

The alienation, discrimination, and misrecognition they experienced since the moment of violent 'incorporation' into the Ethiopian empire has forced them to be in exile at 'home'. As Kuwee Kumsa (2007) reminded us, 'home' became exile to them. Ironically, to those of you who went on exile, exile became home. It became a site of performing home. Lucky you, you have at least the relative freedom with which you perform home in exile. Just like many of the freedom fighters find home in the struggle--in that moment of agonic mixture of hope and despair--most of the Oromo diaspora find home in exile.

Those of us who are here today are happy to call Australia home. Some of us are Australian Oromos. Some of us are Oromo Australians depending on your choice or where you were born.

All of us alike, even someone like me, who is neither of the above, finds in Australia a site at which to perform home: to struggle against the oppression at home, to mourn our dead, to lament our loss, to celebrate our lives (dead and surviving), to express our longing for the freedom yet to come, the longing for the other 'home' (that was no home, or the home that never was).

It is in this vein, in this mode of performing home in exile, that we meet here today. We meet here today to express our solidarity with the Oromo protests. We meet today to call ourselves and our communities to a moment of silence, a moment of reflection, *a moment to give attention to what is happening to fellow humans, fellow Oromos, somewhere else.*

But then,... what does solidarity mean?

That is to say, in saying that we stand in solidarity, what exactly are we expected to do?

3. Solidarity: Three Deeds

To stand in solidarity is to share the concerns of those whose interests, objectives, passions, values, and aspirations are like our own.

It is to identify with another whose message we seek to carry, whose pain we seek to take part in, whose agony we seek to reduce somehow.

To stand in solidarity is an act of courage, an act of sacrifice. It is more than sympathy. It is an act of being there for those others who are fighting for a just cause.

Solidarity springs from the fundamental sense of justice one feels. It is an aspiration to see justice done.

In standing in solidarity with the Oromo Protests today, we are making a gesture in three directions, namely in the direction of resistance, remembrance, and reaffirmation.

3.1. Resistance: We *Resist* what they resist; we say NO!

In standing with the Oromo Protests, we resist what they resist. We oppose what they oppose. We say No to what they are saying NO to.

‘Didne!!!’ (to say, “Enough is enough!” “We said NO!”) is their motto.

We appropriate their moto, we inherit it. We make it our own. We own it. With them, like them, we say “Didne!!!” Yes, we say NO! We say ‘Enough is enough!’

By adopting it as our own, we embrace it. By embracing it, we embrace them. By embracing them, we reject the repression they

languish under. We reject the brutality they stood in defiance of. We denounce the atrocity some of them perished under.

We reject the re-enactment of historic violence meant to be unleashed through the Master Plan. We reject the dispossession of land, the dislocation of life, and the displacement of peoples.

We reject an intentional production of human suffering, Oromo suffering in this case.

In resistance, we negate the powers that render our image invisible, that make our voice inaudible, that make our aspirations implausible, and that render our perspectives unpalatable.

3.2. Remembrance: *We Remember, We bear Witness, we Assist*

In standing in solidarity with the Oromo protests, we remember the students, the farmers, and the other residents taking part in the protest. We do remembrance as a mode of valorising their demands, as a mode of celebrating their struggle.

Above all, we remember the loss. We *re-member* the dead and the disappeared. We bring them back to membership in the polis. We mourn the loss. We celebrate their life. We honour the potency of their sacrifice in the light of the freedom to come.

In remembering, we re-member them, we bring them back to our midst. We ensconce them in the Oromo body politic. We bring them back to the polity yet to come, even to the Ethiopia yet to come. We bring them back to the democracy yet to come—yes even in Ethiopia. Because of their sacrifice, we now know that freedom is imaginable. Democracy is imaginable.

In remembering them, we tell their story. We become a persistent voice of memory. We remember. We honour. We bear witness. To

bear witness, as Tzvetan Todorov in his 'Right to intervene or Duty to Assist?' (2003) says, is a form of assistance.

And we call Australia to join us in remembering, in bearing witness, and in assisting.

3.3. Reaffirmation: We *Re-Affirm* and validate the Protest

In standing in solidarity with them, we affirm and re-affirm their struggle. We validate their aspiration. We lend a hand in all the ways we can. We support them. We echo their voices. We extend a gesture of alliance, a message of hope, a message that says to them "You are not alone. We hear you. The world hears you. Your scream is not a cry for help in a dream."

In this vein, we engage the conscience of humanity. We engage with the better selves of the international community. We get the word out. We call all people everywhere to act in defence of justice. In defence of the Oromo people's aspirations for freedom, for dignity, for equality, for democracy, for human rights.

This act is an affirmation of our own principles in our own context. It is a validation of our own humanity. It is here that through gestures of solidarity, we reaffirm our common humanity.

In a way, it is also a conversation with oneself. For Australia and Australians, it offers a moment of reflection about the darker side of their own history, the deficit of injustice they live with, especially in relation to the first nations of this country.

Seen in this light, our solidarity here is also a form of 'enlightened self-interest'.

4. So, what now?

Today, we stand in solidarity with the Oromo protests. In so doing, we act as a voice of resistance, as a voice of remembrance, and as a voice of reaffirmation.

As a voice of resistance, we stand to counter-act the state description of the Oromo as anti-development. We resist the narration of our story as the story of 'terrorists and anti-peace elements.'

We resist the re-enactment of the discursive violence on the Oromo to call them 'savages and barbarians' who hesitate to make way for progress into the 'Ethiopian renaissance'. We reject the tradition of othering the Oromo. We reject a historiography that writes the Oromo as the 'savage', the 'primitive', and the 'narrow nationalist' other.

We also resist the savagery of state terrorism. We call for civility in the behaviour of the government forces. We call for a deeper conversation among the peoples of Ethiopia to transform the state and to work towards the democracy to come, the Ethiopia yet to come.

We stand as a voice of memory. We stand as a voice of human rights, as a 'voice of suffering'. After all, legal scholar, Uppendra Baxi was right in suggesting that the most important value of the contemporary human rights discourse is to serve as a voice of suffering (Baxi, 'Voices of Suffering and the Future of Human Rights,'1998). We stand as a voice of justice. We stand as a voice seeking a hearing, and a fair hearing at that.

5. The Imperative of Paying Attention: Conclusion

As we do, we call on the international community *to pay attention to* what is happening in Oromia today. We call on everyone to reckon with what may become—in the words of Save the Children (January 29)--“the second worst humanitarian crisis in the world today (second only to Syria).”

After all, Simone Weil (in her *Gravity and Grace*, 1952) had reminded us that “attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.” Solidarity as a virtuous act is the extension of generosity.

Attention, she insists, “is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love.” In not paying attention, she asserts, “there is a lack of grace”.

It is in that spirit that, today, we call Australia to stand in solidarity with the Oromo protests.

The Australia that showed me a gesture of solidarity in my time of need, the Australia that wants to believe that it is a country of a ‘fair go,’ this Australia, I believe, will pay attention. This Australia, which has become an adopted home to most of you here, I hope, will extend the same gesture of solidarity to our people. Fully imbued with that belief and hope, and as we take moments to express solidarity with the Oromo Protests, we appeal to Australia to dare to be on the right side of history, once more, by standing with Oromos in Ethiopia and beyond.

Thank you. Galatoomaa! Ulfaadhaa!