

The Oromo Generation That Could - and Did

(Those who had the most to gain by walking away sometimes make history by staying - and fighting.)

Today, I reflect on and honor an Oromo generation that could—and did. Their legacy is both profound and enduring. This is the generation that gave us the Macha and Tulama Association, the Oromo Liberation Front, and laid the foundation for much of what has followed. We owe an immense debt to this generation for the remarkable progress of the Oromo cause over the last half-century.

My conversations with some of its members over the past few weeks have been deeply humbling and have taught me a great deal about that generation.

They were the generation that could have chosen comfort. They could have pursued successful careers and embraced the luxuries afforded by education, global exposure, wealth, and even cooperation with the regime. They stood at the crossroads of personal prosperity and collective responsibility. Against all odds, they chose the harder path.

At a time when education was a rare privilege, they earned it - not just for themselves, but for their people. Some were university students who passed the highly competitive Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate exams, securing one of the few coveted spots at the country's limited universities. They were bright, driven, and full of promise. Others were already professionals with established careers, steadily climbing to the top of their fields while raising families.

Yet they chose to forgo comfort and opportunity in order to fight for the rights of their people.

They made these choices fully aware that their involvement would not advance their careers, increase their wealth, boost their influence, or ensure their safety. Some were officers in the imperial army, poised for promotion. Others were wealthy businessmen, traditional leaders, or government-appointed officials - people with much to lose. Yet none of these privileges deterred them. They were willing to risk it all rather than remain silent as their language, culture, and people were suppressed.

Those who were scholars - or on the path to becoming scholars - knew that dedicating their work to Oromo studies would not bring fame or academic prestige. Writing and speaking about the Oromo cause often led to ridicule or rejection from Ethiopianist historians and others who clung to exclusionary narratives. Still, they persisted. They wrote articles and books, presented at conferences, and challenged dominant discourses - all in a determined effort to correct historical distortions and silences. They walked into lecture halls and libraries not to distance themselves from the people's struggles, but to understand them more deeply.

Where others might have used education and influence as a ladder to escape, this generation built a bridge back to their communities.

They were the first to organize - not out of desperation, but out of conviction. They studied philosophies of resistance, histories of injustice, and blueprints for liberation. They debated, planned, and mobilized - not for personal gain, but to restore dignity to their people.

They had options. They could have built businesses, lived comfortably in cities, and traveled the world. Instead, they chose a path of service, sacrifice, and struggle. They believed that freedom is not a gift to be received, but a right to be claimed - and they pursued it with discipline and vision.

Their resistance was not chaotic or reactionary, as it may appear today. It was principled. It was strategic. It was organized. They understood that liberation could not emerge from fragmented outbursts, but only from cohesive, values-driven movements. And so they led - not just with passion, but with purpose.

For their principles, many paid a heavy price. Some gave their lives out of love for their people. Their sacrifice leaves us with a debt we can never fully repay. Others endured great suffering - not only they, but their families as well. Some families lost their breadwinners in a traditional society where women had few opportunities to work or earn a living. As a result, many faced starvation, homelessness, and in some cases, the collapse of the family unit. Children were forced to grow up without fathers, mothers, or both. Elderly parents were left without support as their children went into exile, disappeared into the jungles of Oromia, or languished in prisons. Still others endured the isolation of exile, yet they built vibrant, independent Oromo institutions in the diaspora.

Across prisons, forests, and foreign lands, they carried their cause with unwavering resolve.

What sets them apart is not only what they fought against, but what they stood for: justice, equity, and the unshakable belief in the worth of every human being. They remind us that those with the most to gain by walking away sometimes make history by staying - and fighting.

Today, I honor them not only for their courage, but for their choice - the choice to give up what they could have had for what their people truly needed. They were not the generation that waited for change. They were the generation that made it.

They were the generation that could—and did.

Are we worthy of their sacrifice? Only time will tell.

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